

Iconoclasm and strategic thought: Islamic State and cultural heritage in Iraq and Syria

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The destruction of cultural heritage in Syria and Iraq by the group calling itself Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (Islamic State) is neither random collateral damage nor necessarily an exercise in barbarism. It is targeted and ideologically explainable. It represents a core feature of Islamic State's strategic design. Strategy, in this context, refers to the 'use of available resources to gain any objective'.¹ In conditions of armed conflict, strategy denotes how actions affect one's enemy. This understanding provides a foundation upon which outcomes in war may be evaluated. However, not all outcomes in war are defined solely in relation to the enemy combatant. In circumstances where the objective is to influence a different or wider audience, 'strategy must adjust to the audience rather than assume that the application of force will be universally understood in terms of its effect against the enemy'.² This study will show how the destruction of cultural artefacts aims at a much broader target than the heritage itself.

In assessing the strategic intent of Islamic State's approach to cultural heritage sites, it is necessary to locate this analysis within the strategic literature. In this context, iconoclasm, as a strategy, represents a logical and instrumental means of employing violence to achieve political ends. The first section of this article therefore identifies the independent variables necessary to effect the application of strategy to cultural heritage and to achieve the objectives of Islamic State. To illuminate key questions surrounding the destruction of heritage in order to achieve political objectives, the analysis applies principles first enunciated in the early nineteenth century by Carl von Clausewitz in *On war*. The argument here is that the practice of iconoclasm provides a framework within which to understand a strategy of cultural destruction. The article further contends that strategic iconoclasm is manifested when three independent variables are present and interconnected: namely, the degradation and delegitimization of the existing social and cultural fabric; the removal of all reference to a previous society or culture; and an attempt to reconstruct society in keeping with a new totalitarian vision or ideology.

We shall accordingly examine whether Islamic State's treatment of cultural heritage exhibits this trinity of factors. To test for the presence of these variables,

¹ Michael Howard, *The causes of wars* (London: Counterpoint, 1983), p. 36.

² Emile Simpson, *War from the ground up: twenty-first-century combat as politics* (London: Hurst, 2012), p. 4.

three case-studies will be assessed: the destruction of the ancient city of Palmyra; the demolition of Sufi, Shi'a and Sunni shrines generally; and the destruction of sites in the city of Mosul. The analysis reveals that the manner in which Islamic State addresses cultural heritage exhibits one of two tendencies: *pragmatism* in order to extract the most political value out of heritage sites; or *dogmatism* in accordance with its political, religious and ideological perspective. The final sections evaluate the case-study evidence through the lens of strategic theory. The resulting analysis shows whether the trinity is manifest in the cases studied and the utility of such a strategy for those seeking to implement the Islamic State vision.

Clausewitz and culture

For western and many non-western observers, the destruction of cultural heritage in conflict zones is ethically and politically unjustifiable. Francesco Rutelli, former Italian Minister of Culture and Tourism, argued that the designation of places such as Palmyra as World Heritage Sites by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) represented 'a victory of the culture of the West ... until the rude awakening at the hands of the ISIS cutthroats. The cutthroats who reinvented, within the framework of a profound conflict within Islam, systematic iconoclasm.'³ The identification and denunciation of cultural barbarism, however, provide only a partial explanation of the phenomenon. Strategic theory illustrates how 'iconoclasm' operates as a functional tool that explains *why* heritage is targeted in conflict zones.

In *On war*, Clausewitz noted: 'Even the ultimate outcome of war is not always to be regarded as final. The defeated state often considers the outcome merely as a transitory evil, for which a remedy may still be found in political conditions at some later date.'⁴ Taking this observation to its theoretical extreme, Clausewitz argues that there is no definitive end to war, for there is always the possibility of conflict resuming when political conditions change. Indeed, the potential for a resumption of hostilities is inherent in any resistance to a new political order.⁵ Similarly, a singular act of will against the new political order, which may be as seemingly insignificant as an unarmed demonstrator's defiance of an oncoming tank, or the throwing of stones at soldiers of occupation, exhibits an intrinsic political meaning.⁶ Such acts of resistance, no matter how minor, may be harbingers of more organized violence. From these reflections, two questions arise: what gives resistance its capacity to become active in the first place? And is it conceivable, theoretically, that resistance can be completely suppressed? To answer the

³ Francesco Rutelli, 'The return of iconoclasm: barbarian ideology and destruction by ISIS as a challenge, not only for Islam', in Noah Charney, ed., *Art crime: terrorists, tomb raiders, forgers and thieves* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), p. 45; Elliott Colla, 'On the iconoclasm of ISIS', 5 March 2015, <http://www.elliottcolla.com/blog/2015/3/5/on-the-iconoclasm-of-isis>. (Unless otherwise noted at point of citation, all URLs cited in this article were accessible on 2 Aug. 2017.)

⁴ Carl von Clausewitz, *On war*, trans. and ed. Michael Howard and Peter Paret (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984), p. 80.

⁵ M. L. R. Smith, 'Quantum strategy: the interior world of war', *Infinity Journal* 3: 1, 2012, pp. 10–13.

⁶ Smith, 'Quantum strategy', pp. 10–13.

first question requires insight into the individual mind of the rebel; to answer the second requires determining whether it is possible to change, or conquer, the mind of every individual who might conceivably adopt an adversarial stance.⁷ It is within this context, as we shall show, that a strategy of iconoclasm functions.

The widespread destruction of buildings in Bosnia in the 1990s affords a relatively recent example of the attempt to wage war on the opponent's mind. Martin Coward suggests that the assault on the built environment constituted an attack on the identities of the communities that owned or shared them.⁸ Embodying community values over time, the built environment becomes a logical target in the context of ethno-nationalist wars, symbolizing the culture to be eliminated.⁹ Thus, targeting the physical space represents the endeavour to change the nature of a community in order to 'erase its existence and/or prevent the possibility of its (continued) existence'.¹⁰

From this perspective, the fighting in Bosnia during Yugoslavia's wars of dissolution witnessed Croatian forces attempting to alter the existing social fabric by removing all reference to its former political condition. For example, Mostar's 500-year-old bridge, Stari Most, long connected the ethnic Croat and Bosnian Muslim parts of the town. A significant heritage artefact, it symbolized the broader ethno-religious plurality of Bosnia prior to the wars of dissolution. First constructed in the sixteenth century, the bridge was pivotal to trade and transport across the Ottoman empire. The passage of different peoples through Mostar gave rise over time to a distinctive, syncretic, ethno-cultural Bosnian identity conducive to the peaceful cohabitation of heterogeneous communities. The bridge symbolized this pluralist culture.¹¹ Therefore, the destruction of the bridge represented the rejection of a heterogeneous identity, delegitimizing what had gone before, while simultaneously authenticating the message of ethnic exclusivity promulgated by the Croatian leadership. As Riedlmayer observes, by 1993 the bridge served no strategic value, having already been damaged beyond use, but its obliteration served to eradicate the 'collective memory' of what the bridge signified.¹² Yet in November that year the Bosnian Croat Army shelled what remained of the structure until it collapsed into the River Neretva.¹³ The act of destruction was entirely symbolic. The then President of Croatia, Franjo Tudjman, advocated the creation of the statelet of 'Herceg-Bosna' as a home for Bosnian Croats, with Mostar as its capital. For this to happen Tudjman wanted the town 'cleansed' of non-Croats.¹⁴ The consequence of Tudjman's ethno-nationalist vision was the

⁷ Smith, 'Quantum strategy', pp. 10–13.

⁸ Martin Coward, *Urbicide: the politics of urban destruction* (Oxford: Routledge, 2009).

⁹ Samuel Andrew Hardy, 'Maintained in very good condition or virtually rebuilt? Destruction of cultural property and narration of violent histories', *Papers from the Institute of Archaeology* 23: 1, 2013, pp. 1–9.

¹⁰ Coward, *Urbicide*, p. 1.

¹¹ Martin Sells, *The bridge betrayed: religion and genocide in Bosnia* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996).

¹² András Riedlmayer, 'Killing memory: the targeting of Bosnia's cultural heritage', testimony presented at a hearing of the Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe, US Congress, 4 April 1995, <https://www.ischool.utexas.edu/~archweek/2002/killingmemory.doc>.

¹³ Robert Block and Christopher Bellamy, 'Croats destroy Mostar's historic bridge', *Independent*, 10 Nov. 1993, <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/croats-destroy-mostars-historic-bridge-1503338.html>.

¹⁴ See Ian Traynor, 'Bosnian Croat leaders convicted of ethnic cleansing in Yugoslavia break up', *Guardian*, 29

forced flight of Bosnian Muslims from western Mostar into the ghettoized east, which the Croats then subjected to siege and bombardment.¹⁵

The destruction of the Stari Most represents what Rambelli and Reinders call a concerted attempt at ‘total obliteration’.¹⁶ Riedlmayer’s account of the broader campaign of destruction in Bosnia estimates that over 1,000 mosques,

hundreds of Catholic churches and scores of Orthodox churches, monasteries, private and public libraries, archives, and museums were shelled, burned, and dynamited, and in many cases even the ruins were removed by nationalist extremists in order to complete the cultural and religious ‘cleansing’ of the land they had seized.¹⁷

Presenting data from the Institute for Protection of Cultural, Historical and Natural Heritage of Bosnia Herzegovina, he demonstrated that between 1992 and 1995 over 80 per cent of congressional mosques, 46 per cent of small local mosques, 48 per cent of shrines and mausolea, and 30 per cent of buildings erected through religious endowments had been attacked.¹⁸ Consequently,

by burning the documents, by razing houses of worship and bulldozing graveyards, the nationalists who overran and ‘cleansed’ hundreds of towns and villages in Bosnia were trying to insure themselves against the possibility that the people expelled and dispossessed might one day return to reclaim their homes and properties.¹⁹

Any attempt to change people’s minds, forcibly or otherwise, requires a process of escalation. As Clausewitz observed, ‘if the enemy is to be coerced you must place him in a situation that is even more unpleasant than the sacrifice you call on him to make. The hardships of that situation must of course not be transient—at least not in appearance.’²⁰ Yet simply placing an enemy in an unpleasant situation is not to conquer, or even to change the opponent’s mind. The potential for dissent and resistance remains inherent in any situation that does not result in the absolute obliteration of every facet of the enemy. The escalatory tendency in war always pushes in this direction.

An earlier twentieth-century example evinces this tendency. The Nazi occupation of Warsaw in the Second World War saw, at the outset of hostilities, the Luftwaffe target the city’s historic sites, as the Nazis considered them representative of Jewish and Slavic culture that required obliteration. Following the occupation of the city the Reich deployed the *Verbrennungs- und Vernichtungskommando*—burning and destruction detachments—tasked with enacting the Nazi lawyer Hans Frank’s edict that ‘Warsaw will get what it deserves—complete annihilation’.²¹ The Nazi destruction of Warsaw was neither opportunistic nor simply collateral damage but central to the policy of *Lebensraum*, which envisioned

May 2013, <https://www.theguardian.com/law/2013/may/29/bosnian-croats-convicted-ethnic-yugoslavia>.

¹⁵ Coward, *Urbicide*, p. 2.

¹⁶ Fabio Rambelli and Eric Reinders, *Buddhism and iconoclasm in East Asia: a history* (London: Continuum, 2012), pp. 70, 179, 181.

¹⁷ Riedlmayer, ‘Killing memory’.

¹⁸ Riedlmayer, ‘Killing memory’.

¹⁹ Riedlmayer, ‘Killing memory’.

²⁰ Clausewitz, *On war*, p. 77.

²¹ Quoted in Adolf Ciborowski, *Warsaw: a city destroyed and rebuilt* (Warsaw: Palonia, 1964), p. 48.

a *neue deutsche Stadt Warschau* ('new German city of Warsaw'). In keeping with the Pabst Plan for Warsaw, the intention was to reconstruct the city by replicating the architectural ideals of other German provincial towns according to design principles that determined everything from street cleaning to transport systems in order to rebuild Warsaw as a 'model city'.²²

The subsequent internment of the Jews and other 'decadent' elements of the city's population in ghettos anticipated the final solution with its aim of extinguishing all opposition to Nazi rule. As Einwohner noted, a population that was 'isolated, politically powerless and targeted for extermination by a powerful regime' could not be expected to mount any collective resistance.²³

However, the Jewish ghetto uprising of 1943 demonstrated otherwise. Interestingly, Einwohner argued that the uprising might not have happened if the conditions inside the ghettos had not been so dire. Paradoxically, it was only when the interned realized the hopelessness of their situation that they planned resistance. Moreover, the realization 'facilitated the construction of a motivational frame that equated resistance with honor and dignity'.²⁴

Such resistance intimates that all sides have agency within war. As Clausewitz maintained: 'War is not the action of a living force upon a lifeless mass but always a collision of two living forces.'²⁵ Just because you expect an adversary to conform to your coercion does not necessarily mean they will. The Nazis may well have believed that interning the residents of Warsaw in ghettos and systematically changing the DNA of the urban environment would render any further resistance futile. What they did not anticipate was that people with nothing to lose were not necessarily going to accept the destiny the Nazis had predetermined for them. If the death camps were the residents' ultimate fate, then fighting to die with honour and dignity would be no worse than dying at Treblinka or Auschwitz. The result of this Nazi miscalculation was that the ghetto-dwellers escalated the conflict by revolting. It might be argued that the architects of the uprising also miscalculated by overescalating the conflict against a clearly stronger opponent with little prospect of success. The Nazis were ideologically prepared to exterminate the inhabitants of the ghetto no matter what the cost. Himmler's response to the uprising elucidated the point: 'The city must completely disappear from the surface of the earth and serve only as a transport station for the Wehrmacht. No stone can remain standing. Every stone must be razed to its foundation.'²⁶ In suppressing the uprising the Nazis destroyed the city's major cultural and religious sites, including the Bruhl and Saxon Palaces, the churches of Sts Alexander, John, Mary, Kazimierz, Hyacinth and Martin, and historic collections of Jewish manuscripts. The uprising, however, was the catalyst, not the cause, of the destruction. It prompted

²² James Noyes, *The politics of iconoclasm: religion, violence and the culture of image-breaking in Christianity and Islam* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2013), pp. 132–6.

²³ Rachael Einwohner, 'Opportunity, honor, and action in the Warsaw ghetto uprising of 1943', *American Journal of Sociology* 109: 3, 2003, pp. 650–75.

²⁴ Einwohner, 'Opportunity, honor, and action', p. 652.

²⁵ Clausewitz, *On war*, p. 77.

²⁶ Cited in Irene Tomaszewski, *Inside a Gestapo prison: the letters of Krystyna Wituska, 1922–1944* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2006), p. xxii.

the Germans to escalate a process of cultural obliteration to destroy the city and then remake it on Nazi principles—a policy they already had in mind. The Nazis, in other words, embarked on a deliberate strategy of iconoclasm: cultural destruction. It is to the character of this understanding that we next turn.

Iconoclasm as a strategy

The etymology of the noun ‘iconoclasm’ has enjoyed a complex history, and presents definitional difficulties because the term is essentially contestable.²⁷ Its principal reference is religious. The notion is premised on a contested view of the primacy of the role an image plays in a culture or a religion. This compound of two Greek words, *eikon* and *klasma* (to break), implies that iconoclasm denotes the rejection and destruction of cherished beliefs and images. It does not necessarily connote a negative value judgement. As studies by Patrick Collinson, David Freedberg and Marshall G. Hodgson have demonstrated in different ways, iconoclasm transmogrifies into a form of iconophobia, a distrust of all images that becomes an accepted cultural attitude premised on religious value and the fear of false idols.²⁸ However, the historic practice of iconomachy (hostility to images) within monotheistic religions has in the post-religious West, as Francesco Rutelli’s usage cited above shows, assumed a pejorative connotation. Consequently, UNESCO usage equates iconoclasm with barbarism.

This modern secular usage, nevertheless, is somewhat incoherent. Thus, both the 2001 destruction of the Buddhas of Bamiyan by the Afghan Taliban and the 2003 toppling of Saddam Hussein’s statue in Baghdad’s Firdos Square might be considered explicit acts of iconoclasm. Yet to label them as such does not necessarily imply a moral valuation. To judge one barbaric and the other heroic would constitute a category mistake: that is, confusing things of one kind and presenting them as something else.²⁹ Both acts destroyed icons of a previous idolatrous era, *Jahiliya* (pre-Islamic) and Ba’athist respectively. Without value judgements, there is no difference between the iconoclastic acts.

In this regard, the term ‘iconoclasm’, like ‘terrorism’, has become value-laden. The terms of its historical and etymological emergence contribute a further layer of semantic difficulty. James Noyes, for instance, argues that the term ‘iconoclast’ first entered the European lexicon in 1595 as a result of the spread of Calvinism across the continent.³⁰ Even so, the practice of iconoclasm can be identified in eighth-century Arabia, when, in the wake of the Ummayyad siege of Constantinople (717 CE) by Caliph Suleyman, the Byzantine emperor Leo III first introduced a series of *eikon klasmic* edicts between 726 and 729 CE banning the worship

²⁷ See W. B. Gallie, *Philosophy and the historical understanding* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1964), pp. 157–91; also Stacy Boldrick and Richard Clay, *Iconoclasm: contested objects, contested terms* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2007).

²⁸ Patrick Collinson, *From iconoclasm to iconophobia: the cultural impact of the second English reformation* (Reading, UK: University of Reading Press, 1986); David Freedberg, *The power of images: studies in the history and theory of response* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989); Marshall G. Hodgson, ‘Islam and image’, *History of Religions* 3: 2, 1964, pp. 220–60.

²⁹ See Gilbert Ryle, *The concept of mind* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1949), pp. 13–25.

³⁰ Noyes, *The politics of iconoclasm*.

of images. The application of the same terms to entirely different historical and cultural contexts highlights the need to exercise care when associating universal judgements with particular words, especially as the term 'iconoclasm' does not have an Arabic equivalent.

Despite these semantic caveats the term, parsimoniously applied, does possess explanatory utility. Simply put, iconoclasm is the breaking of images, idols or icons for a political and/or religious purpose. This might entail its use as a particular tactic within a broader campaign of violence. There is, moreover, a further dimension to iconoclasm that transforms it into strategy. Such a strategic appraisal of the practice of iconoclasm requires that the evaluation of the means and ends the iconoclast seeks to use and achieve is not affected by preconceived values.

From this perspective, the Nazi occupation of Warsaw, through systematic heritage destruction, altering the fabric of society by changing the population demographic, and centralization of power, in order to create the *neue deutsche Stadt Warschau*, exhibited all the elements of the *concept* of iconoclasm. Furthermore, all the constituent elements were contingent on one another, but consistent in creating the interlocking effect required to produce a *logic* of iconoclasm. An analogous logic may be identified in the Balkan conflict of the 1990s. The Croat forces destroyed secular and symbolic heritage, and altered the composition of society through segregation and ghettoization, for the purpose of turning Mostar into the capital of a newly formed statelet of Herceg-Bosna. Accordingly, three linked variables must be present for the manifestation of iconoclasm as a strategic logic: first, the degradation and delegitimization of the existing societal fabric; second, the removal of all reference to the previous society; and finally, the reconstruction of society in keeping with a new ideology or political religion. Although not necessarily appearing in a sequential process, all must be present in some form if a coherent strategy of iconoclasm is to be identified.

Jihadism and iconoclasm

Before analysing Islamic State's strategy of iconoclasm it is necessary to consider the logic of iconoclasm within the context of the ideology, or political religion, which Islamic State professes.³¹ This has been the subject of recent scholarly debate.³² Central to this debate is the extent to which Islamic State's thinking represents a form of Salafi jihadism or a distinctively modern formatting of Islam to fashion a distinctively millennial *homo islamicus*.³³ Salafism, as understood by what Olivier Roy somewhat disparagingly terms 'Islamologists',³⁴ represents a distinctive interpretation of Islam which, stripped of later accretions, promul-

³¹ See in this context David Martin Jones and M. L. R. Smith, *Sacred violence: political religion in a secular age* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), pp. 7–22.

³² See e.g. the recent debates between Olivier Roy and Gilles Keppel over the character of Islamic State's religious and irreligious influences: Olivier Roy, *Jihad and death: the global appeal of Islamic State* (London: Hurst, 2017), p. 23; Gilles Keppel, *Terror in France: the rise of jihad in the West* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2017), pp. 18–22.

³³ Roy, *Jihad and death*, p. 26.

³⁴ Roy, *Jihad and death*, p. 56.

gates the strict replication of the life of the Prophet Muhammad and his rightly guided followers, the *Rashidun*, in contemporary practice. Sunni Salafi jihadism may be differentiated from non-violent forms of Salafism, according to Quintan Wiktorowicz, in that it deems the current geopolitical climate to require violent revolutionary jihad in order to restore religious practice to the rightly guided path.³⁵ Crucial to Salafist belief is the notion of *tawhid*, the unity of God. *Tawhid* amalgamates three concepts: *tawhid al-rububiyya*, the oneness of Lordship, or the belief that one God is the creator of all (monotheism as opposed to polytheism); *tawhid al-asma wa-l-sifat*, oneness of names, qualities and attributes, meaning that God is supreme and unique (the rejection of secularism); *tawhid al-uluhiyya*, oneness of worship, meaning that God alone has the right to be worshipped.³⁶

It is the last of these three concepts that transforms Islam into a living ideal—and, in its Salafi jihadist recension, requires action, because ‘god requires affirmative acts to confirm belief and ... this characteristic is what distinguishes a Muslim’.³⁷ Shiraz Maher argues that in simply stating one’s belief in Islam and recognizing God as a unified deity, a Muslim fulfils the requirements only of *tawhid al-rububiyya* and *tawhid al-asma wa-l-sifat*; *tawhid al-uluhiyya* remains unfulfilled because God is not actively worshipped. A Muslim who is ‘passive’ is ‘un-practising’ and thus heterodox. Faith necessitates ‘affirmative action’.³⁸ Drawing on the work of Abdullah Azzam, Maher further claims that positive acts are necessary for *tawhid al-uluhiyya* and can only be sustained through ‘stances taken in life’.³⁹ Gilles Keppel similarly identifies an emerging jihadist dialectic combining the search for ‘an all encompassing conception of Islam inspired by the Salafism of the Arabian peninsula and a fervent consultation of a digital “Islamosphere” full of norms and injunctions breaking with the “infidel” model of the West’.⁴⁰ Contrasting its alternative lifestyle with generalized ‘misbelief’, strict Salafism reserves salvation for an ‘elect alone’.⁴¹ It thus demands affirmative action to prevent *shirk* (idolatry). *Shirk*, moreover, is the basis of Islamic State’s hostility to any idolatrous reverence of the past, particularly of the pre-Islamic *Jahiliya* era.

Notwithstanding these claims, it is evident that Islamic State and its precursor, Al-Qaeda, adopt distinctively heterodox approaches to charismatic leaders, martyrs, venerated personages and apocalyptic violence that sit uneasily with even the strictest readings of orthodox Sunni Salafism. As Faisal Devji shows, ‘the jihad abandons the authorities and the heartlands of Islam by taking to the peripheries assuming there a charismatic, mystical and even heretical countenance that dismembers the old social and religious distinctions of Islam’.⁴² Analogously, Olivier Roy observes, the jihadists find a better translation of their approach to

³⁵ Quintan Wiktorowicz, ‘Anatomy of the Salafi movement’, *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism* 29: 3, 2006, pp. 207–39.

³⁶ Shiraz Maher, *Salafi-jihadism: the history of an idea* (London: Hurst, 2016), p. 146.

³⁷ Maher, *Salafi-jihadism*, p. 149.

³⁸ Maher, *Salafi-jihadism*, pp. 132–3.

³⁹ Maher, *Salafi-jihadism*, p. 149.

⁴⁰ Keppel, *Terror in France*, p. 21.

⁴¹ Keppel, *Terror in France*, p. 70.

⁴² Faisal Devji, *Landscapes of the jihad: militancy, morality and modernity* (London: Hurst, 2017), p. 61.

violence, sex and death in Islamic State's 'religious terms than in Salafism which is more puritanical and less fascinated by violence'.⁴³ The contemporary jihadist, although not necessarily unsympathetic to Salafism, is a distinctly post-modern figure practising a nomadism that leaves the real world behind for a 'jihadi imaginary'.⁴⁴ In this context its cult of martyrdom and violence fits within 'a very modern aesthetics of heroism and violence'.⁴⁵ Significantly, the techniques of reality television inform Islamic State's videos. Indeed, the jihad's world of 'reference is far more connected to the dreams and nightmares of the media than it is to any traditional school of Islamic jurisprudence'.⁴⁶

Moreover, the jihadist's fascination with death and martyrdom is linked to an apocalyptic discourse that is absent from Sunni legalism. Islamic State's conviction 'that the end of the world is near' is both central and new. As a result it assumes that 'there is no other perspective than war and total ... victory'. As Roy remarks, 'this is not utopia, but nihilism'.⁴⁷ Martyrdom is therefore messianic. Consequently, the jihadist endeavour to create a new society from scratch is ultimately both nihilistic and iconoclastic.⁴⁸ From this perspective, 'Islam comes to exist universally in the places where its particularity is destroyed, the presence of its ruins on television screens bearing witness to the Muslim's universality as martyr and militant'.⁴⁹

In this apocalyptic context, Islamic State's online English-language magazine *Dabiq* explains the necessity of thwarting the spread of *shirk*. It argues that the 'conspiracy theories' of polytheism (which can be understood to mean symbols of the *kuffar*,⁵⁰ or non-believers) exaggerate the power of its opponents to such an extent that 'Muslims become paralyzed by analysis of current events and eventually fear the *kuffar* more than they fear Allah'.⁵¹ Belief in a Manichaean battle with polytheism permeates jihadist discourse and justifies recourse to violence to prevent the spread of *shirk*. According to the key Islamic State text by Abu Bakr Naji, *The management of savagery*, 'our battle is a battle of *tauhid* against unbelief and faith against the spread of polytheism'.⁵² This interpretation draws on the life of Muhammad, and emphasizes his destruction of the idols around the *Ka'ba* upon conquering Mecca.

A number of post-Second World War political theorists including Leo Strauss, Albert Camus, Eric Voegelin and Hannah Arendt have notably dissected the modern relationship between liberalism, totalitarianism and nihilism, which sheds

⁴³ Roy, *Jihad and death*, p. 63.

⁴⁴ Roy, *Jihad and death*, p. 47.

⁴⁵ Roy, *Jihad and death*, p. 50.

⁴⁶ Devji, *Landscapes of the jihad*, p. 90.

⁴⁷ Roy, *Jihad and death*, p. 56.

⁴⁸ Roy, *Jihad and death*, p. 26.

⁴⁹ Devji, *Landscapes of the jihad*, p. 94.

⁵⁰ 'Conspiracy theory: shirk', *Dabiq*, no. 9 (c. May 2015), pp. 14–19, <http://www.joshualandis.com/blog/wp-content/uploads/Dabiq-9-They-Plot-and-Allah-Plots-compressed.pdf>.

⁵¹ 'Conspiracy theory: shirk', p. 19.

⁵² Abu Bakr Naji, *The management of savagery: the most critical stage through which the umma will pass*, trans. William McCants (Cambridge, MA: John M. Olin Institute for Strategic Studies, Harvard University, 2006), p. 114, <https://azelin.files.wordpress.com/2010/08/abu-bakr-naji-the-management-of-savagery-the-most-critical-stage-through-which-the-umma-will-pass.pdf>.

an interesting philosophical perspective on the appeal jihadism exerts as a political religion, and the logic of Islamic State's iconoclasm.⁵³ These writers observed that modern liberal, secular societies evinced a relativism which incubated, somewhat paradoxically, two varieties of nihilism.⁵⁴ The first is a brutal nihilism of the kind that led to Nazism and Marxism in Europe. Such activist ideologies seek to destroy all tradition, culture, history and ethics and replace them, as seen in the case of Warsaw, through subjugation and conquest with a new vision of a worldly utopia. The second and more docile alternative merely aspires to an aimless, post-modern, bourgeois, secularism free from serious value commitments.⁵⁵ By comparing this condition with Fred Halliday's reflection that through 'its own universalism ... Islam is a religion without overt ethnic or regional particularism, one that aspires to encompass all of humanity within its compass, and which regards other religions and traditions as, comparatively, inferior',⁵⁶ jihadism may be understood as an illiberal, 'total ideological' panacea, which 'aggregates the entirety of human existence and organization within its system'.⁵⁷ As jihadism considers everything other than authenticity as *bid'a* (heretical innovation), it tends towards brutal nihilism 'with its desire to forcibly replace everything other than itself ... its adherents also recoil at the "permissive egalitarianism" of contemporary societies, seeking a return to more assured—albeit absolutist—times'.⁵⁸

Ultimately, the jihadist world-view constitutes a gnostic, millennial and nihilistic, political religion. Employing the conceptual tools outlined above, it is possible to assess whether Islamic State has employed a consistent logic of iconoclasm. The remainder of this article will therefore consider three case-studies to test the logic of the iconoclasm hypothesis, namely those of Palmyra; Shi'a, Sufi and Sunni heritage; and Mosul. These separate cases will then be compared to establish whether a logic of iconoclasm or iconomachy may be confirmed.

Case-study 1: Palmyra

The city of Palmyra is located north-east of Damascus, in the Homs governorate of Syria, and dates back to the second millennium BCE, being associated primarily with the Palmyrene and Roman empires. UNESCO designated it a World Heritage Site in 1980, and in 2013 placed it on the UNESCO List of World Heritage in Danger, along with the five other UNESCO World Heritage Sites

⁵³ Hannah Arendt, *The origins of totalitarianism* (Cleveland, OH: Meridian, 1962); Albert Camus, *The rebel* (London: Penguin, 1967); Leo Strauss, *The rebirth of classical political rationalism* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1989); Eric Voegelin, *Modernity without restraint: political religions; the new science of politics; and science, politics and gnosticism*, vol. 5 (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2000).

⁵⁴ Maher, *Salafi-jihadism*, pp. 26–7.

⁵⁵ Leo Strauss, *On tyranny*, ed. Victor Gourevitch and Michael S. Roth (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), pp. xvi, 93–100. See also Hannah Arendt, *The promise of politics* (New York: Random House, 1985); Richard Rorty, *Irony, contingency and solidarity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989).

⁵⁶ Fred Halliday, 'Relativism and universalism in human rights: the case of the Islamic Middle East', *Political Studies* 43: 1, 1995, p. 158.

⁵⁷ Maher, *Salafi-jihadism*, p. 26.

⁵⁸ Maher, *Salafi-jihadism*, p. 27.

in Syria.⁵⁹ In mid-2015 Islamic State forces captured Palmyra. Upon entering the ancient city, Islamic State identified the political capital that could be gained from destroying the ancient heritage, given the international chorus of experts calling for the preservation of such culturally important pre-Islamic sites.⁶⁰

The reasoning behind the unanimous condemnation by international experts of the destruction of heritage is complex. Marxists like Stuart Hall argue—somewhat predictably—that there is a relationship between western imperialism and heritage. Heritage, Hall contended, constitutes the material embodiment of the spirit of the nation, a collective representation of ‘tradition’, and hence becomes a pivotal concept in the lexicon of western virtues.⁶¹ Moreover, heritage also implies a symbolic power to ‘order, to rank, classify, and arrange, and thus to give meaning to objects and things through the imposition of interpretative schemas’.⁶² Such a relationship between symbolic power and education means that, ‘though strangers to one another, we form an “imagined community” because we share an *idea* of the nation state and what it stands for [through cultural heritage] ... identity thus depends on cultural heritage, which binds each member individually into the large national story’.⁶³ Henry Cleere further maintains that these notions inhabit a post-Enlightenment paradigm, where the focus moves from a ‘spiritual’ to a ‘cultural’ continuity.⁶⁴ Consequently, the appreciation of the material culture of a secular present overdetermines the heritage of a spiritual or religious past, thereby sustaining European political understandings of nationhood as well as a shared European identity. Whether or not one accepts this characterization of European self-understanding, it nevertheless is plausible to argue that the contingent promulgation of cultural continuity through the preservation of the past secures national, regional and secular identities.

This European and subsequently UN-sponsored approach to heritage might therefore be seen as transferring to other parts of the world and their heritage sites a distinctly western approach to the preservation of non-western cultures.⁶⁵ From this perspective, the significance of heritage lies in the value ascribed to it by its stakeholders. Therefore, when Islamic State degrades a cultural artefact like Palmyra, which embodies cultural values applauded by a secular western aesthetic, the assault can be seen as an attack not only on the heritage itself, but on the secular and culturally pluralist values a liberal western cosmopolitanism ascribes to it.

⁵⁹ ‘Syria’s six World Heritage Sites placed on list of World Heritage in Danger’, *United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation News*, 20 June 2013, <http://whc.unesco.org/en/news/1038/>.

⁶⁰ See e.g. Boris Johnson, ‘We must save Palmyra or the maniacs will raze civilisation’, *Daily Telegraph*, 17 May 2015, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/islamic-state/11611500/We-must-save-Palmyra-or-the-maniacs-will-raze-civilisation.html>; Andrew Marszal and Raziye Akkoc, ‘Ancient statues removed from Palmyra as Isil “infiltrates” the city’, *Daily Telegraph*, 20 May 2015, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/world-news/islamic-state/11617909/Isil-seizes-parts-of-ancient-Syrian-city-of-Palmyra-live.html>.

⁶¹ Stuart Hall, ‘Whose heritage? Un-settling “the heritage”, re-imagining the post-nation’, *Third Text* 13: 49, 2005, pp. 23–35.

⁶² Hall, ‘Whose heritage?’, p. 24.

⁶³ Hall, ‘Whose heritage?’, p. 24.

⁶⁴ Henry Cleere, *Archaeological heritage management in the modern world* (London: Routledge, 1989).

⁶⁵ Ioannis Poullos, ‘Moving beyond a values-based approach to heritage conservation’, *Conservation and Management of Archaeological Sites* 12: 2, 2013, pp. 170–85.

Whether Islamic State understands *why* a western aesthetic reveres heritage is not necessarily germane to its logic of destruction. What Islamic State does appreciate, however, is that imbricating cultural heritage destruction within a wider propaganda programme advances its ideology precisely *because* it anathematizes the West's reverence for cultural heritage. Furthermore, the way in which Islamic State leverages territorial advantages obtained through control of cultural sites shows a degree of strategic insight. More precisely, the case of Palmyra exhibits a carefully orchestrated campaign of targeted destruction and performative showmanship.

Targeted destruction in Palmyra and the recourse to media-driven, performative showmanship

Rather than destroying Palmyra in the most efficient way possible, Islamic State almost immediately securitized the ancient ruins through measures including extensive landmining.⁶⁶ The tactical outcome was twofold: demonstrating that the ruins could, if necessary, be destroyed with ease, while also forcing government forces and coalition bombers to avoid engaging Islamic State fighters within the ancient city. Furthermore, these measures provided time and opportunity for Islamic State to conceive of a way to exploit further its already successful media campaign that had begun with the destruction of artefacts from the Mosul museum.

On 26 February 2016, Islamic State posted a video on YouTube showing the destruction of these artefacts.⁶⁷ The video sparked a heated debate on social media about what was being destroyed in the video and why. It was broadcast across the internet; screenshots appeared on the front pages of newspapers around the globe and continued to be recirculated on an unquantifiable number of outlets and platforms.⁶⁸ Harmanşah states that many consumers experienced 'visceral reactions' to the video and continued to disseminate it both to inform others and to declare 'their own cosmopolitan, humanitarian, civilized condemnation of these uncivilized acts against antiquities'.⁶⁹ The denunciation of the acts as 'uncivilized', appearing in a major archaeological journal, from the jihadist perspective merely revealed the secular and *kuffar* value-laden assumptions permeating the reaction to cultural destruction. Crucially, Islamic State's propaganda arm considered the success derived from the widespread propagation of its video, together with the subsequent outpouring of western disgust, a model for future campaigns of heritage destruction.

The concern that Islamic State would upon capturing Palmyra simply flatten the city proved unfounded.⁷⁰ Understanding its success in Mosul, Islamic State

⁶⁶ 'Islamic State crisis: "mines planted in Syria's Palmyra"', BBC News, 21 June 2015, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-33216305>.

⁶⁷ See <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AJ9wvHq3eQ8>.

⁶⁸ Kareem Shaheen, 'Isis fighters destroy ancient artefacts in Mosul museum', *Guardian*, 26 Feb. 2016, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/feb/26/isis-fighters-destroy-ancient-artefacts-mosul-museum-iraq>.

⁶⁹ Ömür Harmanşah, 'ISIS, heritage, and the spectacles of destruction in the global media', *Near Eastern Archaeology* 78: 3, 2015, p. 171.

⁷⁰ 'Isis reaches gates of ancient Syrian city Palmyra, stoking fears of destruction', *Guardian*, 14 May 2015, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/may/14/isis-syria-palmyra-iraq>.

could quantify the propaganda value derived from a careful dissemination of videos. Therefore, rather than destroying large sections of the city, Islamic State slowly but systematically destroyed key heritage features, such as the Arch of Triumph, in stages, in order to maximize the media coverage and propaganda value of its actions.⁷¹ Multiple outputs depicted the destruction of epigraphs and statues, which could have been more easily destroyed with explosives along with larger structures. Instead, Islamic State gained added symbolic value from the performance of destruction. Rather than using explosives and power tools, Islamic State's film unit depicted fighters using their hands to topple statues, or pickaxes and sledgehammers to deface them, symbolically reinforcing the narrative that they were continuing the work of Muhammad in casting out idols after conquering Mecca. *Dabiq* clarified the point thus:

Last month, the soldiers of the Khilāfah, with sledgehammers in hand, revived the Sunnah of their father Ibrāhīm ('alayhis-salām) when they laid waste to the shirkī legacy of a nation that had long passed from the face of the Earth. They entered the ruins of the ancient Assyrians in Wilāyat Ninawā and demolished their statues, sculptures, and engravings of idols and kings. This caused an outcry from the enemies of the Islamic State, who were furious at losing a 'treasured heritage'. The mujāhidīn, however, were not the least bit concerned about the feelings and sentiments of the kuffār, just as Ibrāhīm was not concerned about the feelings and sentiments of his people when he destroyed their idols. With the kuffār up in arms over the large-scale destruction at the hands of the Islamic State, the actions of the mujāhidīn had not only emulated Ibrāhīm's ('alayhis-salām) destruction of the idols of his people and Prophet Muhammad's (sallallāhu 'alayhi wa sallam) destruction of the idols present around the Ka'bah when he conquered Makkah, but had also served to enrage the kuffār, a deed that in itself is beloved to Allah.⁷²

Islamic State's representation of its iconoclastic destruction of Palmyra achieved a number of goals, ranging from the degradation of the existing fabric of society to the propagation of a nihilistic millenarianism actively preventing the spread of *shirk*, all transmitted via a global media platform.

Strategic leveraging

While the focus of discussion about Palmyra was on the damage to the ancient city, it would be remiss to ignore the city's importance for the supply of gas to major Syrian regions to the west. In capturing Palmyra in May 2015, Islamic State also seized a number of local gas fields. A 2016 report by the IMF estimated that 'after ISIL's seizure in early 2015 of the gas fields near Palmyra, production was projected to have fallen to 0.4 billion cubic feet per day', down from 1.1 bcfpd in 2010.⁷³

⁷¹ 'Islamic State destroys 2,000-year-old Arch of Triumph in Palmyra', *Daily Telegraph*, 5 Oct. 2014, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/islamic-state/11911399/Islamic-State-destroys-2000-year-old-Arch-of-Triumph-in-Palmyra.html>.

⁷² 'Erasing the legacy of a ruined nation', *Dabiq*, no. 8 (c. April–May 2015), p. 22, <http://media.clarionproject.org/files/islamic-state/isis-islamic-state-magazine-issue+8-sharia-alone-will-rule-africa.pdf>.

⁷³ Jeanne Gobat and Kristina Kostial, *Syria's conflict economy*, working paper (Washington DC: IMF Middle East and Central Asia Department, 2016), p. 10.

Securing these fields afforded Islamic State significant leverage over the Syrian regime. As Isabelle Duyvesteyn noted, ‘resource considerations are important factors motivating individuals to take up their weapons’.⁷⁴ The Jabal Shaer gas fields, located approximately 150 kilometres north-west of Palmyra, have been embroiled in an almost continuous battle for their control since July 2014.⁷⁵ Other gas fields such as Hail and Arak have also been centres of fighting since Islamic State began contesting control of Palmyra in 2014. The gas fields surrounding Palmyra are critical for the supply of power to key strongholds of the Syrian regime, not least Damascus. Estimates suggest that 90 per cent of Syria’s electricity infrastructure relies on gas extraction. Furthermore, Palmyra acts as a transit point for pipelines carrying gas from north-eastern gas fields in Deir ez-Zor, which at the time of writing were being contested by the then newly formed Jabhat Fateh al-Sham, which has since merged with other groups to form Hay’at Tahrir al-Sham.⁷⁶ Control of these sites therefore put Islamic State in a position to apply leverage on and extract concessions from the Syrian regime. A good example of its exploitation of this leverage was the destruction in 2015 of the Furqlus pipeline, which, again, was critical to the regime’s gas supply.

Before 2016, validating Islamic State’s strategic leveraging of its control over vital resources was a matter of conjecture. However, in May 2016 a document by Foreign Reports Inc., a Washington-based consulting firm focusing on oil and politics in the Middle East, reported that Islamic State was turning gas from Palmyrene oil fields into fuel to be sold to the regime.⁷⁷ Analysis of leaked Islamic State files by Sky News corroborated the claim, demonstrating the existence of formal arrangements between Islamic State and the Syrian regime with regard to the transfer and exchange of resources. Furthermore, the files also suggested that Islamic State leveraged its control of resources to secure the safe withdrawal of weapons from Palmyra before the regime retook the city.⁷⁸

Case-study 2: Shi’a, Sunni and Sufi heritage

Transnational millenarian groups across the Middle East and North Africa favour intentional, ideologically driven destruction as a means of furthering jihad. For example, Ansar al-Din captured Timbuktu in 2012 and commenced a systematic campaign of destruction against heritage sites in the city. The reasoning was clear. The sites were fifteenth-century Sufi mausolea, which jihadist groups considered to be *shirk* as well as symbols of polytheism. Ansar al-Din’s Sanda Ould Boumama

⁷⁴ Isabelle Duyvesteyn, *Clausewitz and African war: politics and strategy in Liberia and Somalia* (London: Frank Cass, 2005), p. ix.

⁷⁵ Bassem Mroue, ‘Islamic militants seize Syrian gas fields’, *The Star*, 18 July 2014.

⁷⁶ Christian Triebert and Rao Komar, ‘Jabhat Fateh al-Sham’s income and resources’, *Hate Speech International*, 15 Aug. 2016, <https://www.hate-speech.org/jabhat-fateh-al-shams-income-and-resources-an-open-source-investigation/>.

⁷⁷ Matthew M. Reed, ‘Revealed: Assad buys oil from ISIS’, *Daily Beast*, 12 Oct. 2016, <http://www.thedailybeast.com/articles/2015/12/10/isis-is-the-con-ed-of-syria.html>.

⁷⁸ Stuart Ramsey, ‘IS files reveal Assad’s deals with militants’, Sky News, 2 May 2016, <http://news.sky.com/story/is-files-reveal-assads-deals-with-militants-10267238>.

explained the reasoning: 'God is unique. All of this is haram [forbidden in Islamic law].'⁷⁹ Similarly, Ibrahim Suleiman al Rabaish of Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula extolled the destruction of ancient Yemeni tombs, declaring: 'Here are the mujahideen ... reviving their jihad in the cause of Allah ... they are destroying the domes which are being worshipped other than Allah, along with the graves and mausoleums.'⁸⁰ Islamic State's cultural destruction follows this logic closely. While the destruction of famous sites such as those of Palmyra attracts most attention in western media, its campaign of destruction is ubiquitous, and much of it does not make the headlines. This lower-key destruction feeds into the broader aim of cultural obliteration, placing territories in its grasp on a trajectory towards religious homogenization.⁸¹

Since its inception, Islamic State has consistently attacked places of religious and cultural significance across Iraq and Syria. As Sunni Islam considers the Shi'a interpretation of Islam heretical, Islamic State has targeted Shi'a sites with particular ferocity. In 2014 alone, it attacked the following sites: on 24–26 June, it reportedly destroyed several of Tal Afar's Shi'a mosques, including the Shi'a Sheikh Jawad Mosque, Qaddo Mosque, the Mosque of Imam Saad bin Aqeel and the Mosque of the Martyr of Lashkar-e-Mulla; on 5 July, it released photos depicting the demolition of the tomb and shrine of Sheikh Fathih in Mosul, as well as reportedly destroying a further six mosques and three Sunni and Shi'a shrines; on 24 July, a mosque in the al-Muthanna neighbourhood of Mosul was attacked, with the arrest of a number of Shi'a leaders; on 26 July, the Nabi Jarjees shrine and the Qatheed al-Ban shrines in Mosul were destroyed; the following week Islamic State reportedly deployed an improvised explosive device (IED) to destroy a 600-year-old mosque and 30 Shi'a Muslim shrines in Mosul; on 3 August the Shi'a shrine of Sayida Zainab and Saiyed Zakariya in Sinjar were destroyed; on 24 October, Islamic State destroyed the Shoaib Dome, a Shi'a shrine, in the Sal ad-Din province; and in December, the tomb of Sheikh Hamoud al-Hamoud al-Mahmoud and a number of other tombs were destroyed north of Fallujah.

Sunni, Sufi, Christian and secular heritage sites also came under sustained attack from Islamic State forces. In June 2014, Islamic State destroyed parts of the ancient Assyrian city of Nimrud using IEDs and bulldozers. On 5 July, Islamic State was reported to have removed crosses from Chaldean and Orthodox cathedrals and replaced them with Islamic State flags in Muhafazat, Nineveh. On 7 July, Islamic State removed the cross from the dome of the St Ephrem Cathedral in Mosul. Later that month, Islamic State forces destroyed the mosque of the Prophet Yunus (the Old Testament Jonah) at a site that was originally an Assyrian church, and the shrine of the Prophet Sheth in Mosul. In August, having captured the Christian village of Qaraqosh in Iraq, home to approximately 50,000 Chris-

⁷⁹ Quoted in 'Ansar Dine fighters destroy Timbuktu shrines', *Al Jazeera*, 1 July 2012, <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/africa/2012/06/2012630101748795606.html>.

⁸⁰ Quoted in Bill Roggio, 'AQAP destroys tombs in southern Yemen', *FDD's Long War Journal*, 15 June 2012, http://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2012/06/aqap_destroys_shrine.php.

⁸¹ Sam Hardy, 'Desecration and demolition of tombs and temples in Syria under Islamic State', *Conflict Antiquities*, 15 June 2016, <https://conflictantiquities.wordpress.com/2015/06/15/syria-damascus-aleppo-homs-tombs-temples-desecration-demolition/>.

tians, Islamic State turned its churches into firing ranges and destroyed the crosses that sat atop them. The bell from Iraq's largest Christian church, the Church of the Immaculate Conception, which once housed 2,200 seats, was stolen and Christian pilgrimage sites, the Church of St Behnam and St Sarah, were also destroyed, as were two ethnic Yazidi shrines in the town of Sinjar. Islamic State also claimed responsibility for an attack on the Sunni mosque of Musab Bin Uayr in Diyala province on 22 August in which an unspecified number of men were killed. On 12 September Islamic State destroyed an Orthodox church in the al-Muhaniseen area of Mosul. On 25 October an Islamic State IED destroyed the Amerdan shrine, near Mount Sinjar in Iraq. The following day another IED destroyed the Sheikh Mehdi al-Janabi Sufi shrine. In November, the Sufi shrine of Sheikh Saleh, in south Kirkuk, was destroyed by Islamic State militants, and an IED in the city of Tikrit destroyed the tomb of Hussein al Majid, father of the former dictator Saddam Hussein. All this destruction occurred in just the latter part of 2014, and just in Iraq. Nor is this an exhaustive list, even for this short period. This rate of destruction continues to be pervasive across territory held by Islamic State.⁸²

Civil unrest

Despite the concerted effort to erase everything considered *shirk*, and to homogenize the communities under its control by eliminating any resistance, there have nevertheless been instances of civil resistance within Islamic State territories. The most serious occurred in summer 2014 with a Sha'itat tribal uprising in the town of Abu Hamam in the Syrian province of Deir ez-Zor. A 'damage density' map produced through satellite imagery by the UN Institute for Training and Research (UNITAR) suggested that by late 2014 the city had suffered the damage or destruction of 3,112 structures.⁸³ While the map did not specify what had been damaged, anecdotal reports—for example, of Deir ez-Zor's Armenian Genocide Martyrs' Memorial Church being destroyed—made it reasonable to assume that Islamic State had subjected the region to a systematic pattern of violence against cultural heritage.⁸⁴

In the face of such attacks, the Sha'itat tribe, estimated to have between 70,000 and 150,000 members, revolted against Islamic State's rule for reasons including,

⁸² See Christopher Jones, 'Mass destruction of Islamic cultural heritage sites in Iraq', *Gates of Nineveh*, 5 July 2014, <https://gatesofnineveh.wordpress.com/2014/07/05/mass-destruction-of-islamic-cultural-heritage-sites-in-iraq/>; 'ISIS destroys shrines, Shiite mosques in Iraq', *Al-Arabiyyah*, 5 July 2014, <http://english.alarabiya.net/en/News/middle-east/2014/07/05/ISIS-destroys-Shiite-mosques-shrines-in-Iraq.html>; Sam Hardy, 'Islamic State uricide in Iraq: destruction of Shia cultural property and state structures in Bashir (Kirkuk)', *Conflict Antiquities*, 17 July 2014, <https://conflictantiquities.wordpress.com/2014/07/18/syria-iraq-kirkuk-bashir-uricide-destruction-islamic-state/>, accessed 26 Dec. 2016; 'Damage to Syria's heritage', *Heritage for Peace*, 28 Sept. 2014, <http://www.heritageforpeace.org/syria-culture-and-heritage/damage-to-cultural-heritage/previous-damage-newsletters/damage-syrias-heritage-28-september-2014/>.

⁸³ UNITAR, 'Damage density in the cities of Homs, Aleppo, Hama, Deir Ez Zor, Ar Raqqa, and Daraa, Syria', 18 Nov. 2014, http://www.unitar.org/unosat/node/44/2105?utm_source=unosat-unitar&utm_medium=rss&utm_campaign=maps.

⁸⁴ Sam Hardy, 'ISIS have destroyed the Armenian genocide memorial church in Deir ez-Zor', *Conflict Antiquities*, c. Sept. 2016, <https://conflictantiquities.wordpress.com/2014/09/27/iraq-syria-islamic-state-destruction-deir-ez-zor-armenian-genocide-memorial-church/>.

but not limited to, the destruction of villages, the imposition of sectarian rule and economic disputes.⁸⁵ What is particularly relevant in the context of the logic of iconoclasm is the manner in which the dispute escalated. A report in the *Washington Post* noted that as life under Islamic State became more uncompromisingly sectarian, the public whipping of a man for smoking a cigarette brought local discontent to a head.⁸⁶ The incident provoked the man's brother to shoot at a passing Islamic State patrol, killing one fighter, which led to his execution. This in turn caused an 'outpouring of rage' and the expulsion of Islamic State from the village.⁸⁷

Islamic State forces withdrew to a safe distance outside the town to await reinforcements. Once these arrived, Islamic State deployed artillery to shell the town for three consecutive days, causing catastrophic damage to the built environment. Islamic State fighters then recaptured the town, rounded up all males over the age of 15 and executed them, leading to a number of reports of mass graves holding upwards of 200 bodies.⁸⁸ Further reports by the Syrian Network for Human Rights estimated that Islamic State had displaced up to 33,000 people from the town of Abu Hamam, and issued a fatwa (an Islamic legal pronouncement) legitimizing the confiscation and destruction of property. Later it was reported that Islamic State did begin to allow residents to return to the town, but only if they agreed to a stringent list of terms and conditions.⁸⁹

While evidence of the specific destruction and targeting of cultural heritage in the Sha'itat uprising is limited, Islamic State's conduct demonstrates the workings of the strategy of iconoclasm. When viewed from a macro perspective, the intersection of different elements across time and space may be seen to create a coherent logic. Thus, the expulsion of the population, followed by a gradual return under strict terms and conditions, means that those who do return accord with Islamic State's desired demographic outcome. The sustained application of such tactics, in combination with the continual degradation of points of reference to a pre-Islamic/non-Salafi history, facilitates Islamic State's objective of forging homogeneous communities across the regions it controls. In a manner not dissimilar to the Warsaw uprising, civil unrest in places such as Deir ez-Zor illustrates that Islamic State's rule creates the conditions for civil unrest but also, in the course of its suppression, the circumstances through which the goal of cultural obliteration can be further pursued. Understanding this point enables us to arrive at a more complete understanding of the strategy of iconoclasm.

⁸⁵ Shelley Kittleson, 'Tribal massacre victims forced to negotiate with IS', *Al-Monitor*, 22 July 2015, <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2015/07/turkey-der-zor-isis-attack-international-coalition.html>.

⁸⁶ Liz Sly, 'Syria tribal revolt against Islamic State ignored, fueling resentment', *Washington Post*, 29 Oct. 2014, https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/syria-tribal-revolt-against-islamic-state-ignored-fueling-resentment/2014/10/20/25401beb-8de8-49f2-8e64-c1cfbee45232_story.html?utm_term=.c9e80f6056bo.

⁸⁷ Sly, 'Syria tribal revolt'.

⁸⁸ Kittleson, 'Tribal massacre victims forced to negotiate with IS'.

⁸⁹ Syrian Network for Human Rights, 'ISIS tightens its grip and occupies more Syrian lands', 9 July 2015, http://sn4hr.org/wp-content/pdf/english/ISIS_Report_Deir_Al_Zour_en.pdf.

Case-study 3: Mosul

Given the relative youth of Islamic State, and the fact that most cities under its control tend to be embroiled in civil war, there have been limited opportunities for it to exhibit the reconstruction that forms the third element in the strategy of iconoclasm. There are, however, indications of what the movement intended to do, given the opportunity. The Iraqi city of Mosul offers the best example.

After the US invasion of Iraq in 2003, Mosul witnessed anti-coalition and anti-government insurgencies. These were primarily associated with Al-Qaeda in Iraq, which wanted to depose ‘infidels and apostates’ before establishing a shari’a-governed state.⁹⁰ Historically, Mosul was considered a city ‘vibrant with art, culture, coffee shops, and social events. Segregation between men and women was rare, there was no pressure, legal or social, to live according to *shari’ah*-leaning conservatism’⁹¹ and the heritage of the city served as reminders to ‘all Maslawis of the interconnectedness of Iraq’s diverse religious populations’,⁹² while concurrently symbolizing ‘the antithesis of sectarianism’.⁹³ In June 2014, following the large-scale withdrawal of US forces and the decline of the country into another round of internecine strife, Iraqi Army units abandoned the city, leaving Islamic State fighters free to consolidate their control. Initially, the capture of Mosul was thought to be a temporary setback for the Iraqi government, but the efficiency with which Islamic State secured the city saw it turn into a major defeat.⁹⁴

Within five days of Mosul’s capture, Islamic State began to distribute a *wathiqat al-madina*, or charter of the city, to the remaining residents. The charter, which outlined Islamic State’s governance of the city in accordance with shari’a, stipulated *inter alia*:

Our stance on tombs, shirk [polytheistic] shrines, and pagan sites, follows what Prophet Muhammed said: ‘Do not leave a statue but obliterated or a tomb but effaced.’

To the virtuous women: stay in your homes and do not leave them only in cases of necessity. That is guidance of the Mother of the Believers and the dignified female companions, may Allah be content with them.⁹⁵

The *wathiqat al-madina* is significant because it provides an insight into how Islamic State envisages its rule. It addressed the role of Christians living under

⁹⁰ Sinan Adnan and Aaron Reese, *Beyond the Islamic State: Iraq’s Sunni insurgency*, Middle East Security Report no. 24 (Washington DC: Institute for the Study of War, 2014), pp. 18–22.

⁹¹ Rash Al Aqeedi, *Hisba in Mosul: systematic oppression in the name of virtue*, occasional paper (Washington DC: George Washington University, George Washington Program on Extremism, 2016), p. 3.

⁹² Sara Farhan, Atoor Lawandow and Sigal Samuel, ‘ISIS destroyed Jonah’s tomb, but not its message’, *The Atlantic*, 24 July 2017, https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2017/07/tomb-of-jonah-mosul-isis/534414/?utm_source=atlw.

⁹³ Farhan, Lawandow and Samuel, ‘ISIS destroyed Jonah’s tomb, but not its message’.

⁹⁴ Al Aqeedi, *Hisba in Mosul*, p. 3.

⁹⁵ Aaron Zelin, ‘The Islamic State of Iraq and Syria has a consumer protection office: a guide to how the militant group overrunning Iraq wins hearts and minds’, *The Atlantic*, 13 June 2014, <http://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2014/06/the-isis-guide-to-building-an-islamic-state/372769/>; Aaron Zelin, ‘New statement from the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Shām: “Charter of the City”’, *Jihadology*, 12 June 2014, <http://jihadology.net/2014/06/12/new-statement-from-the-islamic-state-of-iraq-and-al-sham-charter-of-the-city/>; Al Aqeedi, *Hisba in Mosul*, p. 5.

Islamic State, who were ordered either to pay a heavy tax or to leave the city. Any remaining Christian heritage sites were turned into marketplaces where fighters could sell their spoils of war, or simply defaced or destroyed.⁹⁶ Islamic State's occupation of Mosul therefore demonstrated a concerted attempt to degrade the existing fabric of society by removing large sections of the population, and by removing and delegitimizing symbols associated with polytheism or Christianity.

While there are many assessments of Islamic State's theocratic new order, its use of 'soft power' and civil engineering strategies, as Aaron Zelin notes, are often overlooked.⁹⁷ Following the attempt to cleanse the city of anything not aligned with Islamic State religiosity, the movement invested in public works in order to win popular support. Although Islamic State did not promote projects to reconstruct the city of Mosul in the way the Nazis did in Warsaw, it did attempt to introduce institutions designed to reinforce a paradigmatic shift in the populace. For example, the *wathiqat al-madina* implemented a system that combined social services with religious indoctrination. This policy was intended to alter irreversibly the population's relationship to its intangible heritage.⁹⁸ The survival of complex cultures rests on a delicate web of factors, which, Kurin argues, include 'the freedom and desire of culture bearers, an adequate environment, a sustaining economic system, [and] a political context within which their very existence is at least tolerated'.⁹⁹ Consequently, introducing a legal system based on shari'a that did not tolerate Mosul's secular history and civic society inexorably degraded the city's existing intangible heritage, and facilitated the population's extraction from *shirk*.

Iconoclasm in practice

The discussion above indicates that Islamic State's approach to cultural heritage can be best understood as a strategy. Furthermore, the evidence of its operation in practice reveals that the strategy serves both pragmatic and dogmatic goals. This dichotomy highlights a paradox within Islamic State's rhetoric. While Islamic State explicitly espouses its intention to prevent the spread of *shirk*, and to realize *tawhid*, its strategy also discloses a degree of pragmatism at odds with this primary goal. If Islamic State were solely concerned with doctrinal purity, its strategy would accord dogmatically with scripture, paying little attention to any

⁹⁶ Nour Malas, 'Iraqi city of Mosul transformed a year after Islamic State capture: beneath a veneer of order, residents live in fear', *Wall Street Journal*, 9 June 2015, <http://www.wsj.com/articles/iraqi-city-of-mosul-transformed-a-year-after-islamic-state-capture-1433888626>.

⁹⁷ Zelin, 'The Islamic State of Iraq and Syria has a consumer protection office'; Zelin, 'New statement from the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Shām: "Charter of the City"'.

⁹⁸ Intangible cultural heritage, according to Kurin, comprises the 'intricate and complex web of meaningful social actions undertaken by individuals, groups and institutions', including 'oral traditions and expressions—such as epics, tales, and stories, performing arts—... music, song, dance, puppetry and theatre, social practices, rituals and festive events, knowledge and practices concerning nature and the universe—for example, folk medicine and folk astronomy, and traditional craftsmanship, as well as the sites and spaces in which culturally significant activities and events occur': Richard Kurin, 'Safeguarding intangible cultural heritage in the 2003 UNESCO Convention: a critical appraisal', *Museum International* 56: 1–2, 2004, pp. 67, 75.

⁹⁹ Kurin, 'Safeguarding intangible cultural heritage', p. 75.

material benefits derived from the control and management of cultural heritage. In this section of the article we address this paradox in the light of the case-studies examined above. Considering Islamic State's strategy in this manner enables us to determine the distinctive form of its iconoclastic logic.

Pragmatism

Clausewitz argued:

History has certainly not guided us to any recurrent forms ... it is plain that circumstances exert an influence that cuts across all general principles ... A critic has no right to rank the various styles and methods that emerge as if they were stages of excellence, subordinating one to the other. They exist side by side, and their use must be judged on its merits in each individual case.¹⁰⁰

His appreciation of strategy is that it needs to be flexible and react meaningfully to the circumstances of the moment. To have utility, strategy has to be pragmatic, because it is 'an attempt [or threat thereof] to make concrete a set of objectives through the application of military force to a particular case'.¹⁰¹ Moreover, taking also into account the observation that war and policy are continuations of one another, it makes sense to comprehend the way in which strategies are pragmatically constructed, and subsequently implemented, to achieve desired ends. Furthermore, Clausewitz maintained that striking at the *Schwerpunkt*, or the 'centre of gravity', provides one of the clearest routes to victory.¹⁰² An enemy's centre of gravity is variable and can be what matters to an opponent, or what you make matter to an opponent, but it is most often associated with the capture of the enemy's capital or the defeat of its main armies in battle. The point is, however, that it is a pragmatic consideration that connects military operations to political outcomes.

Islamic State's targeting of the Syrian regime's perceived centre of gravity demonstrates the pragmatic nature of its strategy. Simpson notes: 'The capture of a fortress, for example, may be of no military significance ... but may be significant as a prize in wars fought for more limited political advantage.'¹⁰³ Palmyra represents just such a pragmatic lever, offering an opportunity to gain a political advantage over an opponent through their centre of gravity. As has been pointed out, the Syrian capital, Damascus, is almost wholly reliant upon either the gas extracted in the fields surrounding Palmyra or the gas piped through the region from Syria's eastern provinces. Moreover, the Syrian regime has been locked in a battle with rebel forces in Damascus since the start of the civil war, drawing on support from Iranian and Hezbollah forces to maintain a degree of control.¹⁰⁴

¹⁰⁰ Clausewitz, *On war*, p. 516.

¹⁰¹ Hew Strachan, *The direction of war: contemporary strategy in historical perspective* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2013), p. 64.

¹⁰² Clausewitz, *On war*, p. 596.

¹⁰³ Simpson, *War from the ground up*, p. 148.

¹⁰⁴ Jonathan Spyer, 'Behind the lines: Islamic State comes to Damascus', *Jerusalem Post*, 18 April 2015, <http://www.jpost.com/International/Behind-the-lines-Islamic-State-comes-to-Damascus-398382>.

Clearly, Damascus represents the regime's centre of gravity, and holding it is crucial to its survival.¹⁰⁵ These facts have enabled Islamic State to manipulate the regime by targeting the capital's power supply. Damascus has been hit by continual power outages—reports suggest that Syria as a whole is '83 per cent darker at night than it was before the war'¹⁰⁶—and electricity has become an economic asset to be leveraged or sold for profit. When resources in war become scarce, this is often reflected in the politics and the forms of war adopted, as we have seen with Islamic State's leveraging of the Syrian regime into negotiating concessions for resources.¹⁰⁷

Beyond leveraging the supply of natural resources derived from Palmyra, the way in which Islamic State promulgated the destruction of Palmyra further illustrates its pragmatism. It might be useful here to construct a strategic narrative, which Simpson defines as the explanation of actions identified before, during and after a conflict. 'A policy outcome', he maintains,

is ultimately an impression upon an audience. It can be a physical impression ... [or] a psychological impression, typically defined in terms of an evolution in political alignment, not necessarily by consent. For strategy to connect action to policy it must therefore invest them with a given meaning in relation to its audiences, both prospectively and retrospectively.¹⁰⁸

The questions raised by this analysis are: what meaning did Islamic State hope to invest in the propagation of Palmyra's destruction, and what evolution of political alignment did it hope to achieve? The meaning that Islamic State attributes to its actions is that its members are emulating the life of Muhammad, who was required to 'make *tawhid* known [with] open enmity and disavowal towards *shirk*'.¹⁰⁹ The performative nature of the destruction captured on video at Palmyra appropriates the heritage of the legacy, transmogrifying it into a religious genealogy to enrich

¹⁰⁵ Aymenn Jawad al-Tamimi, 'Liwa dir' al-watan: a new pro-Assad militia in Damascus', *Syria Comment*, 24 Feb. 2016, <http://www.joshualandis.com/blog/liwa-dir-al-watan-a-new-pro-assad-militia-in-damascus/>.

¹⁰⁶ Sergio Pecanha, Jeremy White and K. K. Rebecca Lai, 'Syria after four years of mayhem: a nation going dark', *New York Times*, 12 March 2015, <http://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2015/03/12/world/middleeast/syria-civil-war-after-four-years-map.html>.

¹⁰⁷ The profit motive for Islamic State in the looting and trafficking of antiquities is widely discussed. Beyond debates over exactly how much money Islamic State makes from the illicit sale of cultural artefacts, there is substantial evidence to suggest it does not engage directly in the practice itself. Rather, Islamic State's Diwan al-Rikaz (Department of Precious Resources) issues permits to locals that allow them to excavate sites and sell what is uncovered, with Islamic State levying a tax on the proceeds. Thus, revenue is derived primarily from taxation after sale rather than the selling of artefacts themselves. The picture is further complicated by the fact that Islamic State is only one of many armed groups, including Syrian government forces, that engage in the trafficking of antiquities. See Sophie Cohen, 'JTIC brief: antiquities looting and trafficking spread across armed groups in Syria and Iraq', *Jane's Terrorism and Insurgency Monitor*, 11 March 2016, <https://janes.ihs.com/Janes/Display/jtism6525-jtism-2016>; Andrew Keller, *Documenting ISIL's antiquities trafficking* (Washington DC: US Department of State, Bureau of Economic and Business Affairs, 29 Sept. 2015), https://eca.state.gov/files/bureau/final_presentation_to_met_on_isil_antiquities_trafficking_for_das_keller_9.29.2015_.pdf; Aymenn al-Tamimi, 'Unseen documents from the Islamic State's Diwan al-Rikaz', *Jihadology*, 12 Oct. 2015, <http://jihadology.net/2015/10/12/the-archivist-unseen-documents-from-the-islamic-states-diwan-al-rikaz/>; Stefan Heißner, Peter Neumann, John Holland-McCowan and Rajan Basra, *Caliphate in decline: an estimate of Islamic State's financial fortunes* (London: International Centre for the Study of Radicalisation and Political Violence, 2017), pp. 5–15.

¹⁰⁸ Simpson, *War from the ground up*, p. 196.

¹⁰⁹ Maher, *Salafi-jihadism*, p. 121.

Islamic State's media narrative.¹¹⁰ An iconic act of violence can, in the words of Boal and his colleagues, 'take over the image-machinery for a moment—and a moment, in the timeless echo chamber of the spectacle, may now eternally be all there is'.¹¹¹ The dissemination of the image is designed to mobilize its consumers. The heritage that is chosen for destruction is selected to fit with the historicized re-enactment of idol destruction. The media coverage of these acts is widely publicized as the antithesis of western, secular liberal democracy and constitutes the *raison d'être* for Islamic State's promulgation of this mode of cultural destruction.

In terms, then, of the desired change in political alignment that such propaganda hopes to achieve, it feeds into a general desire to transform ordinary Muslims into 'violent-rejectionists',¹¹² or what are commonly termed 'jihadists' (holy warriors). The construction of a strategic narrative is 'designed to persuade people of something'.¹¹³ Considering that Islamic State broadly considers that 'all tenets of secularism—including nationalism, communism, and Baathism—are a blatant violation of Islam',¹¹⁴ it is logical to conclude that a large part of Islamic State's purpose is to persuade the broader Muslim population to come to the same realization. Maher observes that 'violent-rejectionists are irreconcilably estranged from the state, regarding it as a heretical and artificial unit. The entire notion of the modern nation-state is a heterodox affront to Islam whereby temporal legislation usurps God's sovereignty.' From this perspective, 'the system needs radical overhaul and re-ordering while its agents must be confronted'; and 'armed and violent rebellion against them is an individual duty on every Muslim'.¹¹⁵ Thus, the evolution of political alignment requires the transformation of Muslims from passive onlookers into violent rejectionists, who understand and act upon their obligations to satisfy the tenets of *tawhid* and prevent the spread of *shirk*. Destroying parts of Palmyra, rather than destroying it in its entirety, appears therefore a logical practice to advance this agenda. Maximizing the amount of media coverage gained by gradually increasing the grandeur of destruction over a sustained period of time shows how Islamic State profits through this pragmatism.

Dogmatism

Understanding a dogmatic application of doctrine—theological, military or other—from a strategic perspective is a complex process. While the analysis has thus far sought to demonstrate that Islamic State's iconoclasm is strategic, it is possible to invert such thinking by pointing to a puzzle Simpson identified: namely, that to 'dogmatically ... retain a political aim in conflicts which are [fought for] lower stakes than national survival is potentially to push military activity further than

¹¹⁰ Harmanşah, 'ISIS, heritage, and the spectacles of destruction', p. 171.

¹¹¹ Iain Boal, T. J. Clark, Joseph Matthews and Michael Watts, *Afflicted powers: capital and spectacle in a new age of war* (Chicago: Verso, 2008), p. 28.

¹¹² Maher, *Salafi-jihadism*, p. 10.

¹¹³ Simpson, *War from the ground up*, p. 188.

¹¹⁴ Maher, *Salafi-jihadism*, p. 84.

¹¹⁵ Maher, *Salafi-jihadism*, p. 11.

its political utility'.¹¹⁶ Pursuing a policy for any other reason than the imperative of survival treads a dangerous line between the desire to win via the attainment of realizable goals, and a counterproductive, unyielding approach rooted in a rigid application of orthodoxy for its own sake.

Islamic State's doctrine in relation to cultural heritage has focused on eliminating *shirk* and affirming God's oneness. In a 2007 speech, Abu 'Umar al-Baghdadi quoted a Wahhabi-trained scholar on the purpose of jihad: 'The end to which fighting the unbelievers leads is no idolater (*mushrik*) remaining in the world.'¹¹⁷ In another speech al-Baghdadi emphasized the importance of destroying any 'statues' or 'graves' associated with *shirk*:

We believe in the necessity of destroying and eradicating all manifestations of idolatry and prohibiting those things that lead to it, on account of what the Imam Muslim transmitted in his Sahih on the authority of Abu 'l-Hayaj al-Asadi, who said: 'Ali ibn Abi Talib—may God be pleased with him—said to me: Should I not urge you to do what the Messenger of God—may God bless and save him—urged me to do? That you not leave a statue without obliterating it, or a raised grave without leveling it?'¹¹⁸

However, if we apply Clausewitz's observation that there are no truly hard lessons of war,¹¹⁹ it raises the paradox that every war is unique, yet all doctrine is, in theory, static and immovable.¹²⁰ Ultimately, this paradox is irresolvable. This clash between rigid doctrine and the exceptionality of war comes together in the assault on the al-Askari shrine in the Iraqi city of Samarra.

Shi'a Islam considers the al-Askari shrine one of its holiest sites. Abu Musab al-Zarqawi's Al-Qaeda in Iraq movement bombed the shrine in 2006 in a 'well executed commando-style ... raid of insurgents dressed as Iraqi police'.¹²¹ This act intentionally sparked Iraq's brutal sectarian conflict.¹²² Following the attack, violence by sectarian militias across the country grew exponentially. By 2014, when Islamic State began its northern Iraq offensive, there was great concern among Shi'a communities regarding the safety of the shrine. By June that year the Islamic State offensive had gained considerable ground around Samarra after insurgents

¹¹⁶ Simpson, *War from the ground up*, p. 129.

¹¹⁷ Quoted in Cole Bunzel, *From paper state to caliphate: the ideology of the Islamic State*, Brookings Project on US Relations with the Islamic World 19 (Washington DC: Brookings, 2015), p. 10.

¹¹⁸ Quoted in Bunzel, *From paper state to caliphate*, p. 38.

¹¹⁹ Clausewitz, *On war*, p. 89.

¹²⁰ M. L. R. Smith and David Martin Jones, *The political impossibility of modern counterinsurgency: strategic problems, puzzles and paradoxes* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2015), p. 36.

¹²¹ Bill Roggio, 'Dome of the Golden Mosque destroyed', 22 Feb. 2006, http://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2006/02/dome_of_the_golden_m_i.php.

¹²² In 2004 a letter from Abu Musab al-Zarqawi was intercepted on its way to the then Al-Qaeda leadership in Afghanistan. Zarqawi explains in the letter his intention to ignite a sectarian conflict by prosecuting a terror campaign against the Shi'a population. The perceived strategic benefit of the destruction of Shi'a religious sites to create such a conflict is implicit throughout. He notes: 'These in our opinion are the key to change. I mean that targeting and hitting them in [their] religious, political, and military depth will provoke them to show the Sunnis their rabies and bare the teeth of the hidden rancor working in their breasts. If we succeed in dragging them into the arena of sectarian war, it will become possible to awaken the inattentive Sunnis as they feel imminent danger and annihilating death at the hands of these Sabeans ... Our fighting against the Shi'a is the way to drag the [Islamic] nation into the battle': 'Zarqawi letter: February 2004 Coalition Provisional Authority English translation of terrorist Musab al Zarqawi letter obtained by United States Government in Iraq', US Department of State Archive, 2 Dec. 2004, <https://2001-2009.state.gov/p/nea/rls/31694.htm>.

armed with rocket-propelled grenades, anti-aircraft weapons, heavy weaponry and armoured vehicles took the districts of Muthanna, al-Jubairiyah, Salaheddine and al-Shuhada, and destroyed the Rasasi bridge leading into Samarra.¹²³ Subsequently, Islamic State announced that it considered the destruction of the al-Askari shrine the primary objective.¹²⁴ However, declaring its primary target in advance of actually being in a position to capture it illustrated the strategic weakness in Islamic State's dogmatism. The announcement gave the Iraqi Army, and Iraqi population more generally, advance warning that the shrine would be destroyed upon capture. This catalysed two events. First, the Iraqi Army conducted a mass offensive to drive Islamic State out of the neighbourhoods it had captured, using artillery shelling and air strikes from newly delivered Russian Sukhoi 25 warplanes, which provided close air support.¹²⁵ Second, Shi'a militiamen mobilized and took up position around the shrine to protect it from Islamic State attacks.¹²⁶ The result was that Islamic State forces deployed to capture the city withdrew (subsequently joining the successful offensive to capture Mosul).¹²⁷ Thus, through doctrinal rigidity Islamic State betrayed its strategic position by not taking account of broader considerations, arguably to the detriment of its own stated goals. If it had done so, it would have concluded, reflecting on the response to al-Zarqawi's bomb attack in 2006, that drawing as little attention as possible to its real target would have provided the best possible chance of success. In reality the threat to destroy the shrine was seen as an escalation of the conflict, resulting in increased preparations on the part of the Iraqi state to thwart Islamic State's objectives.

The logic of Islamic State's strategy of iconoclasm

Returning to the trinity of factors that combine to constitute the logic of iconoclasm, we can now assess whether this logic prevailed in Islamic State's strategy of destruction. First, we contended that for a strategy of iconoclasm to exist it is necessary to degrade and delegitimize the existing fabric of society. The evidence for this exists across each of the case-studies presented. Consider the proclamation of Islamic State commander Abu Leith in Palmyra: 'Concerning the historical city ... what we will do is to pulverise statues that the miscreants used to pray for.'¹²⁸ Also, followers of Sufism are regularly accused of *shirk* and *bid'a*, and of being *kuffars* and polytheists. Islamic State's narrative, reinforced through its actions, consistently dehumanized adherents of other Islamic sects, representing them as

¹²³ 'Sunni insurgent attempts to take over Samarra indicates growing capacity to expand control in north Iraq', *Jane's Intelligence Weekly*, 6 June 2014, <https://janes.ihs.com/Janes/Display/1713867>.

¹²⁴ Imran Khan, 'ISIL threatens Samarra shrine', *Al Jazeera*, 12 June 2014, <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/middleeast/2014/06/isil-threatens-attack-samarra-holy-shrine-201461211041609306.html>.

¹²⁵ 'Iraqi officials: mortars hit near Samarra shrine, wounding several', CBS News, 30 June 2014, <http://www.cbsnews.com/news/iraqi-officials-mortars-hit-near-samarra-shrine-wounding-several/>.

¹²⁶ 'Tensions simmer in Iraq shrine city targeted by ISIL', *The National*, 25 March 2015, <http://www.thenational.ae/world/middle-east/tensions-simmer-in-iraq-shrine-city-targeted-by-isil>.

¹²⁷ Khan, 'ISIL threatens Samarra shrine'.

¹²⁸ Quoted in Gianluca Mezzofiore, 'Palmyra: ISIS vows to destroy statues but preserve ruins in radio statement', *International Business Times*, 27 May 2016, <http://www.ibtimes.co.uk/palmyra-isis-vows-destroy-statues-preserve-ruins-radio-statement-1503165>.

the antithesis of the teachings of the Prophet, accusing them of incompetence in religious matters and denouncing their heritage as idolatrous.

The ideology of Islamic State brings its adherents to a position where the degradation and delegitimization of the symbols of polytheism are not only permissible but also desirable, in order to maintain their confessional authenticity. In this respect, the obligation in Islam to link 'salvation to works rather than just faith alone'¹²⁹ evolved heuristically as a 'series of global effects' after 9/11,¹³⁰ when Osama bin Laden and Ayman al-Zawahiri combined the ideas of *tawhid* with 'revolutionary change which involves the implementation of *shari'a*, political authority for Islam and an end to occupation'. 'The dichotomy between *tawhid* and everything else', Maher contends, 'was absolute ... the practical outcome of this was ... political absolutism ... incapable of accepting compromise.'¹³¹ Islamic State's rhetoric, whether it emanates from commanders at Palmyra or spiritual leaders such as al-Baghdadi, are not isolated speech acts but add up to a unified statement of political intent. Just as Tudjman's statements about Mostar or Himmler's about Warsaw were integral to their understandings of total obliteration, so we must understand Islamic State's pronouncements in the same light.

Second, a strategy of iconoclasm requires the removal of all reference to the previous society. Arguably, this is the most important aspect of iconoclasm, for it acts as the bridge between ideology and practice, and is often exhibited in attempts to destroy the heterogeneity of the population. The ideology of Islamic State maintains that it is not merely acceptable to destroy heritage but that it is positively desirable in order to prevent the spread of unbelief. Islamic State's occupation techniques clearly demonstrate coordinated efforts to destroy pre-existing social structures. This is exemplified in the campaign of cultural destruction seen in the latter part of 2014 in Iraq. These assaults were, on the whole, not undertaken to gain a military advantage. Indeed, the stated intention to attack the al-Askari shrine proved wholly counterproductive from a military perspective. Instead, such attacks were designed to alter the demographic composition of the population and the built environment. Mosul represents a good example. The capture of this formerly pluralistic, secular city saw Islamic State attempting to break down heterogeneous communities, established over generations, by making clear that any lifestyle not in accordance with *shari'a* was repugnant and would be punished.

The final element in the logic of iconoclasm is the attempt to reconstruct society in a manner consistent with the new order. The *wathiqat al-madina* promulgated for Mosul suggests how Islamic State envisioned cities under its control should be governed. In practice, as its occupation of Mosul shows, its sought to push the population towards an ultra-conservative orthodoxy by introducing institutions, such as *shari'a* courts and religious lectures, that reinforce this paradigm shift. The response to the civil uprisings by the Sha'itat tribe in Deir ez-Zor region further

¹²⁹ Maher, *Salafi-jihadism*, p. 150.

¹³⁰ Devji, *Landscapes of the jihad*, p. 15.

¹³¹ Maher, *Salafi-jihadism*, p. 152.

illustrates this intention. The ferocity of Islamic State's reaction to the challenge to its authority not only shocked the tribe into submission but also enabled Islamic State to expel large numbers of people from their homes, allowing the return only of those who agreed to live under a strictly defined code of shari'a. Islamic State's purpose in each case was to recreate society and to align the social and physical environment with its scriptural certitudes.

Conclusion

The destruction of heritage in Iraq and Syria by Islamic State is often interpreted as a challenge to secular western notions of culture and tradition. These actions are in consequence frequently denounced as barbaric. While this response is understandable, the analysis presented here has shown that such denunciations obscure the intent underlying the strategy of Islamic State. The events in Iraq and Syria are, moreover, by no means unprecedented. Rather, they fit within the conceptual boundaries of iconoclasm identified in conflicts such as those of the 1990s in the Balkans and earlier in the Second World War. In this context, Islamic State's iconoclasm is a logical counterpart to its aestheticization of extreme violence. Both are intended to induce a sense of hopelessness in its adversaries, and are recorded in videos and disseminated across the internet.

Even so, it may also be argued that Islamic State's iconoclasm is failing. At the time of writing, the group has lost both territory and fighters.¹³² If—or when—its own 'capital' in Raqqa falls, it may retreat into the shadow world of a clandestine jihadist network instead of functioning as a quasi-political entity with a monopoly on violence in a territorial unit of rule.

Nonetheless, Islamic State's ability to seize and hold territory for several years attests to its effectiveness. No doubt a variety of factors, such as Sunni anger at the Iraqi government's sectarian rule, and the collapse of central authority in Syria following the country's descent into civil war, contributed to its initial success.

Overall, this study has not sought to assess the efficacy of Islamic State's cultural destruction *per se*, but rather to understand its instrumentalization, and to this end has employed the precepts of strategic theory. Clausewitz may seem an unusual figure to introduce into an analysis of cultural heritage, but his thinking remains pertinent. One of his most acute observations is that the outcome of conflict is never final because those who have been defeated often consider their loss transitory. To achieve a final victory, the mind of the opponent must be subjugated. Conquering the mind cannot, however, be achieved purely by military force. Instead, it requires manipulating an opponent into recognizing that any further resistance to the new regime will be futile. This article has demonstrated that attempts to conquer the mind by targeting the built environment are evident in Islamic State's strategic approach.

¹³² See Rick Noak, 'The Islamic State's business model is failing, study says', *Washington Post*, 17 Feb. 2017, https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/worldviews/wp/2017/02/17/the-islamic-states-business-model-is-failing-study-says/?utm_term=.475718d6e2db.

Clausewitz maintained that notions of force could be understood within a trinity: three autonomous elements united in one, arising out of the constant interplay of popular passions, reason and chance.¹³³ In terms of the strategy of iconoclasm, passion relates to the motivation of the iconoclast; chance relates to the opportunities that present themselves through the capture of heritage sites; reason relates to the objectives that can be achieved through either dogmatic or pragmatic management of the captured heritage sites. It has also been demonstrated here that the logic of iconoclasm displays a further trinity that becomes manifest through the combination of independent variables: first, an attempt to degrade and delegitimize the existing fabric of society; second, the removal of references to the previous social order; and third, an attempt to reconstruct society in conformity with a new ideological order. For a strategy of iconoclasm to be confirmed, these three elements need to be present. Whatever the future holds for Islamic State, this article has shown that all three elements were present in the territory it controlled between 2014 and 2017.

¹³³ Clausewitz, *On war*, p. 89.

