Smash the Old World to Pieces: Cultural Destruction as a Strategy of Political Revolution in the Islamic State

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Cultural Destruction as a Strategy of Political Revolution in the Islamic State

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of the
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in Political Science
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here straddle the fine line between cutting edge, well-connected research and careful, individualized attention, but they accomplish both with exceptional acuity. I cannot speak highly enough about the phenomenal instruction that I have received as a Wellesley student.

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Content Note

This thesis references the following topics:

Graphic descriptions of violence, extreme cruelty, homophobia, hateful language against religious groups, murder, terrorism, blood, racism, sexism, abuse, and death.

I want to acknowledge that civilians and victims of this brutal insurgency were never given the choice to opt-out of any of the above.
Translation Note

The priority of this thesis is to provide an accessible political analysis of the Islamic State. To that end, I have opted to use common spellings of Arabic terms rather than literal transliterations. For instance, Da’esh rather than Da’ish or Shari’a rather than Sari’ah. In citing quotations from other authors, I have preserved their spellings.

I refer to the Islamic State as IS or Da’esh throughout this thesis. I chose IS as opposed to ISIS or ISIL, which are more common, in part to highlight the group’s current territorial holdings.

In writing about radicalism, I use the terms “Islamism” or “Islamist” to denote extremist interpretations of the religion. I refer to regular followers as “Muslims” who practice “Islam.”
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Introduction

In 2015, the group calling itself al-dawlah al-Islamiyya (the Islamic State, known commonly as IS or Da’esh) destroyed the archaeological remains of Palmyra, an oasis town regarded in antiquity for its glorious wealth and monumental architecture. Photographs released by the organization depicted explosions at the Temples of Baalshamin and Baal, both well-preserved structures from the 1st century AD. In a macabre addition, IS fighters staged a public execution at the site’s Roman theater, coupling gruesome murders with verses from the Quran. Months later, soldiers beheaded Syrian archaeologist Khaled al-Asaad, who was accused of protecting idols and mixing with infidels abroad. His mangled body was displayed as an example of apostasy.

Palmyra’s devastation was shared by other ancient landscapes: Hatra, Nimrud, and Nineveh are the most recognizable to Western audiences. In each case, the Islamic State’s literature defended its actions, claiming that its soldiers were eradicating the symbols of idolatry. At times, fighters asserted that they were instructed to demolish all of the monuments that existed outside of the Sunni Islamic historical narrative. This argument has accounted for the destruction of Christian churches, Shi’a mosques, and Yazidi temples. The oldest monasteries in Iraq, the leaning minarets of Mosul, and the shrines of Sinjar became the spoils of a brutal religious conflict.

In another well-publicized incident, fighters demolished one of Iraq’s most iconic monuments: the Tomb of Jonah.1 The structure was revered by Jews, Christians, and Muslims alike. In 2014, IS militants rigged the site with explosives and watched as the edifice crumbled. Iraqi civilians would mourn the destruction of one of the most efficacious spaces in Mosul.

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which had once embodied the interconnectedness of the country’s diverse religious populations.\textsuperscript{2} Dura-Europos, a Roman outpost, home of the world’s best-preserved synagogue, and one of the earliest Christian churches, was wrecked and pillaged by Islamic State militants.\textsuperscript{3} The Bronze age city of Mari, which flourished between 3000 and 1600 BC, was systematically looted. The Islamic State has managed one of the most sophisticated and strategic cultural destruction programs in history. Figure 1 shows the variety of sites damaged by IS soldiers.

In 2014, the jihadist Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi had declared a caliphate, carved out of territory from Iraq and Syria. Factional violence had plagued the area since the American invasion in 2003, so the formation of a consolidated terrorist cell was not unexpected. An audio recording released at the time called for all Muslims to flock to the state so that they could “…conquer Rome and own the world…”\textsuperscript{4} For al-Baghdadi, Rome was a synonym for the West, due to European and American cultural associations with the eternal city (figure 2). From 2016-2017, the Islamic State’s propaganda magazine was titled \textit{Rumiyah}, the Arabic word for Rome. Articles from the periodical and its predecessor \textit{Dabiq} reveal that IS assumes a close relationship between cultural heritage and identity. Religious doctrine forbids worshipping idols or images in Islam. In that sense, historical heritage is both intrinsically linked to the non-Islamic world and identifies those practitioners. As such, a core aspect of Da’esh’s grand strategy has been the destruction of cultural property.

As with any strategy of war, cultural destruction requires inordinate amounts of economic and military resources. The central question that guides this thesis is why an insurgency group

\textsuperscript{2} Samuel, Farhan, and Lawandow, “ISIS Destroyed Jonah’s Tomb, but Not Its Message.”
like the Islamic State would dedicate exceptional amounts of firepower to this endeavor. What does IS accomplish through cultural destruction and to what extent does this action further the movement’s overall goals? My core argument is that the Islamic State is a revolutionary group and that cultural destruction is a key strategy of its rebellious undertaking. Through the eradication of historical heritage, the Islamic State is able to coerce its civilian population into following its mandates, and it can recruit and inspire its soldiers. This tactic, in turn, ensures the longevity of the group and the potential success of its revolution.

**Significance**

At stake is the incredible wealth of cultural material housed in the Middle East and Northern Africa (MENA). The Cultural Heritage Initiatives, a cooperative program between the U.S. Department of State (DOS) and the American Schools of Oriental Research (ASOR) reported well above 1,000 incidents of damage in Syria alone. Rapid cultural destruction has been a concern for many international organizations, including the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization, the International Center for the Study of the Conservation and Restoration of Cultural Property, and the International Council of Museums. Along with the DOS Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs, each of these bodies has released reports about endangered historical heritage in the MENA region. While there is no exact estimate for the amount of cultural material destroyed by IS, thousands of artifacts have been trafficked and hundreds of sites publicly demolished.

Whether or not cultural heritage has inherent value is a topic of much philosophical debate. Some scholars argue that art bears intrinsic worth, which necessitates its protection.

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Others suggest that while art is not an end-in-itself; it enables humans to gain other intrinsically valuable goods, namely a flourishing life. As such, there exists an obligation to protect artifacts and monuments. This thesis, however, does not rely on either assumption. Rather, it is rooted in Critical Heritage Studies, an interdisciplinary field which draws from political science, art history, philosophy, and anthropology to contend that “…heritage is something that is done, rather than simply something that is possessed and managed…a turn to analysing (sic) heritage as a cultural phenomenon…” Culture is a performative tool, oftentimes wielded by political actors to define a national identity through memories and symbols. Art, therefore, can be conceptualized in terms of its sociopolitical value. The nation-state relies on culture and language to transform an ethnic abstraction into a realized identity. The body of law that regulates cultural property demonstrates its importance in state formation by emphasizing the interconnectedness of the two. The Preamble to the Convention on the Means of Prohibiting and Preventing the Illicit Import, Export, and Transfer of Ownership of Cultural Property even states that historical patrimony “…constitutes one of the basic elements of civilisation and national culture.” Therefore, the value of cultural property is defined by its relationship to national identity.

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This conclusion draws from literature on state-building, nationalism, and collective memory. For decades, political scientists have mused on the connection between national narratives and state-formation. Benedict Anderson, for instance, hypothesizes in his chapter on “The Origins of National Consciousness” that shared written languages and histories are key to the invention and consolidation of “imagined communities.” People are linked by intangible bonds that form a unified entity. As he notes, these “imagined communities” serve as the basis for the modern nation-state. Eric Hobsbawm develops Anderson’s theory further: he asserts that the bonds of loyalty are rooted in deliberately created “political traditions.”

Compliance can then be demanded from a consolidated group. Monuments are important to Hobsbawm, who notes that these structures were mass produced in Germany and France to assert power: “[monuments] may be regarded as the visible links between the voters and the nation.” For both authors, a national myth serves as a narrative of power, thereby enabling a regime to control its citizens. By using symbols and rhetoric, the state can define itself and encourage the commitment and service of civilians in its territory.

Both Hobsbawm and Anderson assume that a form of nationalism will emerge when a state declares its identity. Anthropologist Clifford Geertz agrees, suggesting that states are based on shared customs, known as civic ties. He considers race, ethnicity, religion, etc. to be “primordial” connections, which can undermine the nation’s legitimacy. Ancient theorists conceptualized states in the same way. The philosopher and orator Cicero, for instance, hypothesized that states were built on shared values, morals, and a common commitment to the

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law.\textsuperscript{15} In both cases, the writers understood the power of national narratives and historical ties. The state can demand loyalty by creating an identity for itself and its citizens. In the ancient world, as Michael Mann claims in the \textit{Sources of Social Power}, the most successful empires were those that forced the assimilation of conquered peoples, demanding that the literature and language of the colonizing state be dominant in the region. Sargon of Akkad, for example, captured native peoples and began to “‘educate’ them…into [his] culture.”\textsuperscript{16} In doing so, he cultivated loyalty and avoided skepticism from the local populations.

The above authors all touch on the concept of collective memory as a state building process. Each one demonstrates that the past is constructed and modified over time. The French sociologist Maurice Halbwachs asserted that every group develops a memory of its past that highlights its unique identity.\textsuperscript{17} He further noted that the commemoration of a physical space or a monument could contribute to the lasting identity of a culture. In his discussion of collective memory, Halbwachs concluded that remembrances are artificial and imbued with modern meanings and values.

Jewish Studies Professor Yael Zerubavel, building on the work of Halbwachs, argues that collective memory is crucial to identity: “These reconstructed images provide the group with an account of its origin and development and thus allow it to recognize itself through time.”\textsuperscript{18} As her study demonstrates, an impression of the mythic past can define the singularity of the collective. The lens through which the group perceives itself and its future, therefore, can mold

its social and political needs. In that sense, “…collective memory can transform historical events into political myths.”\textsuperscript{19} Art and symbols are mediums through which memories are often disseminated. As philosopher Laurajane Smith asserts, “…heritage is a cultural performance, in which the meaning of the past for the present is continually recreated and reinterpreted to address the political and social needs and problems of the present.”\textsuperscript{20} The prominent cultural critic Edward Said emphasized “…the extraordinary influence of today’s anxieties and agendas on the pure (even purged) images we construct of a privileged, genealogically useful past, a past in which we exclude unwanted elements, vestiges, narratives.”\textsuperscript{21} Both authors note that the historical past is often co-opted by modern interests. In essence, they conclude that there are no authentic recollections of history but instead, every memory has been tinged by social values that rewrite and redefine the meanings of such remembrances. For Smith and Said, these fabricated narratives are the foundations of the nation-state.

Art and architecture serve as tangible manifestations of collective memory. Monuments and museums negotiate modern identities by providing physical representations of events from the past. This connection between individual identity and cultural property is recorded in the conventions of most international organizations. The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) writes that “Cultural heritage is the legacy of physical artefacts and intangible attributes of a group or society that are inherited from past generations, maintained in the present and bestowed for the benefit of future generations.”\textsuperscript{22} Here, the connection between tradition and identity is laid out. The UNESCO mandate emphasizes that social development is often practiced through cultural heritage. Claire L. Lyons asserts that

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{19} Zerubavel, \textit{Recovered Roots: Collective Memory and the Making of the Israeli National Tradition}, 9.
  \item \textsuperscript{20} Smith, “Heritage, Identity and Power,” 16.
\end{itemize}
archaeological monuments are “…physical evidence of individual and collective pasts…that locate [a community’s] historical identity in its material expressions.”23 Anderson identified museums and archaeological services as mediators of group identities that support the creation of imagined communities. Hobsbawm, in a recent interview, expressed disdain for the commemoration of new museums and heritage sites, since together they served to reinvent history.

Control over a national narrative is a powerful tool for validation and legitimation. Many leaders have attempted to link their regimes to the remote past in order to legitimize their power. For instance, the former Syrian President Hafez al-Assad had his face superimposed onto an image of Saladin reconquering Jerusalem, with the caption “from Hittin to Tishrin.”24 By connecting himself to the medieval Kurdish hero, the President likened his territorial gains in the 1973 October War (also known as the Yom Kippur War, the Ramadan War, or the 1973 Arab-Israeli War) to that of the crusade-era Battle of Hattin. In this sense, he legitimized his regime by co-opting an ancient symbol.

In the 1980s, Iraqi dictator Saddam Hussein and his Ba’ath regime used ancient Mesopotamia to further a specific political agenda. The party sought to foster an Iraqi nationalism that connected the contemporary government to the glorious ones of the remote past. For instance, to celebrate the Iraqi invasion of Iran, the Deputy President introduced the slogan “Yesterday Nebuchadnezzar, Today Saddam Hussein.”25 The dictator rebuilt the façade and lowest level of the Great Ziggurat of Ur, a Neo-Sumerian temple. In doing so, he again implied that his Baathist party was the direct continuation of an ancient empire. He was, in a sense,

restoring the Sumerian kingdom, creating a new discourse about modern Iraqi identity. Monuments have served as a vehicle for collective memorialization and nationalism.

Art is a powerful negotiator of identity. Columbia University art historian Zainab Bahrani writes that the visual discourse of power was a tool employed by colonialists to develop notions of civilization.26 “Culture” was then transported to occupied territories in order to remind indigenous populations that history was born in the imperial center.27 Aesthetics were a tactic of control for invading populations, indicating that visual images have the potential to create collective political memories that communicate national ideals. As the examples above suggest, the artistic enterprise of a nation-state can consolidate power, or forge a cult of personality around a leader. Symbols force obedience through various mechanisms: they may threaten violence, display the power of the state, or exemplify the legitimacy of the nation, among other things. By connecting civilians with something tangible and meaningful, visual images can legitimate the state or its ruler. Commemorative monuments in ancient Rome, for instance, shared with civilians the glories of conquest and courage. When decorated, arches and columns could even express the political and economic viability of the imperial center. Many actors, from those involved in the imperial apparatus to those on the periphery, were engaged in this state-building process.28 State commissioned edifices created norms of commemoration, both in terms of hierarchy and reciprocity. In this sense, curated images both mobilized political fervor for the state, but also forced the obedience of those who viewed the monuments.

The destruction of art is therefore a direct threat to human rights. In fact, the act often precedes a mass genocide, as was the case in the Bosnian War of 1992-1995. The massive

obliteration of religious heritage, particularly the Ottoman and Islamic inheritance, was widespread.\textsuperscript{29} Bosnian Serbs destroyed the country’s Muslim patrimony, thus denying the Bosniak population its cultural memory. By 1995, thousands of mosques had been damaged by Serb and Croat extremists. This extreme ethnic cleansing culminated in massacres at Srebrenica and Zepa. By the end of the war, both the population and its cultural patrimony had been almost entirely eradicated. The Human Rights Council has emphasized the relationship between historical heritage and human rights. In a 2011 report, the committee noted that “…the need to preserve/ safeguard cultural heritage is a human rights issue. Cultural heritage is important… in relation to its human dimension, in particular its significance for individuals and communities and their identity and development processes.”\textsuperscript{30} Cultural rights are a significant security concern. The Islamic State’s practices are similar to those of Serb and Croat extremists: IS has attempted to erase any trace of religious tolerance by destroying Christian, Jewish, Sufi, Sunni and Shi’a sites. These attacks threaten the religious minorities that use these spaces, while also eradicating memories of religious coexistence in Iraq and Syria.\textsuperscript{31}

Renewed inquiry into the Islamic State’s cultural destruction practices will allow scholars to characterize this group’s organization and identity. Although a number of tactical offensives have depleted the State’s territorial gains, there remain many affiliates of the original caliphate. As of February 27, 2018, the U.S. Department of State has identified three major terrorist organizations: ISIS-West Africa, ISIS-Philippines, and ISIS-Bangladesh. There are other entities that have declared allegiance to the Islamic State as well, including ISIS-Somalia, Jund al-Khilafah-Tunisia, Boko Haram, and ISIS-Egypt. There is another key reason to study cultural


\textsuperscript{30} Turku, \textit{The Destruction of Cultural Property as a Weapon of War: ISIS in Syria and Iraq}, 5.

\textsuperscript{31} Turku, \textit{The Destruction of Cultural Property as a Weapon of War: ISIS in Syria and Iraq}, 11.
destruction: what type of political actor Da’esh is remains a point of debate. A reconceptualization of IS’ political character can prevent its resurgence in Iraq and Syria and hinder the growth of its affiliates.

**Conventional Wisdom**

Conventional wisdom has always focused on cultural destruction as a religious undertaking. This section is an exploration into the literature on religious legitimation, which has been IS’ publicized goal. This theory is consistent with the Islamic State’s own signaling, which has emphasized that the Quran and Muslim history do not allow for idol-worship in any form. In 2015, IS published an article in *Dabiq* 10, declaring to its followers that ending idolatry was a religious mandate: “If you are truthful in your claim that you are upon the religion of Islam and are the followers of the Messenger, then demolish all those idols and flatten them to the ground, and repent to Allah from all shirk [idolatry] and bid’ah [heresy].”

The directive was accompanied by figure 3, which shows the removal of a cross from a church in Mosul. Although the Islamic State has attributed its destruction to religion, the tangible results of its actions have been its ability to coerce civilians and to humiliate existing nation-states, as I explain in the later chapters of this thesis.

Journalists have tended to agree with the religious legitimation thesis. A 2015 article from National Geographic concludes that IS invokes religious history to “…establish their legitimacy as the proper heirs of the legacy of earlier ‘destroyers of idols,’ including the prophets

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32 The Islamic State, “The Laws of Allah,” *Dabiq* 10, July 13, 2015, 59, http://clarionproject.org/wp-content/uploads/islamic-state-magazine-dabiq-fifteen-breaking-the-cross.pdf. I cite the Clarion Project throughout this thesis because this think tank made every issue of the Islamic State’s magazines available. However, the Clarion Project has been described as a known anti-Muslim group that engages in Islamophobic conspiracy theories. I want to clarify that I only used the primary source documents made available through the Clarion Project and that my use of these resources does not indicate any support or endorsement of their views or political beliefs.
Abraham and Muhammed…”33 The propaganda videos that so often accompany these destructive acts are meant to immortalize that sentiment in the foreign ethos: that the Islamic State is carrying out a divine mandate.34 In doing so, the group links itself to the Prophet and the the ancient Caliphates, particularly the four established in the years immediately following Muhammad’s death. In its own publications, IS offers anecdotes of the early Muslims destroying cultural heritage:

Imam Ibn Taymiyyah said, “The Muslims have taken many churches from them – in lands taken by force, after the presence of the churches were previously agreed to, during the khilafah [Caliphate] of ‘Umar Ibn ‘Abdil-‘Aziz and others from among the khulafa [Caliphs], and there was no one from among the Muslims who condemned that. Therefore, it was known that demolishing churches in lands taken by force is permissible if it does not lead to harm befalling the Muslims.35

Cultural destruction, a tactic once practiced by the early Caliphs, has become central to the Islamic State’s legitimation. The act proves the validity of IS’ interpretation and execution of the Shari’a, connecting the group with the original and most pure of Muslim actors: the Prophet, his companions, and the four Caliphates established after his death.

The insurgents also claim to be targeting any symbols which exist outside of the Salafist Sunni tradition.36 Some scholars have suggested that IS has been destroying pre-caliphate monuments in order to create a specific historical narrative for itself. Chiara De Cesari, for

instance, argues that the Islamic State aims “…to present itself as a radical new order annihilating the sins of the past.” The state’s obliteration of historical memory validates its existence. In this way, cultural destruction is actually a formative process. In videos released by the Islamic State, voiceovers claim that the destruction is motivated by a wish to “remove the symbols of polytheism and spread monotheism.” By claiming that these actions are derived from a divine mandate, IS validates its Caliphate’s religious legitimacy.

This account, however, has not managed to convince all scholars. Many have evaluated the other consequences of cultural destruction to propose new theories relating to economic proliferation, propaganda, and even state building. There is a general consensus among academics that the Islamic State’s actions are not guided by religion alone. In the next section, I explore some of the most common analyses.

**Cultural Destruction as an Economic Endeavor**

Up until the bombing of Palmyra in 2015, the Islamic State’s practice of cultural destruction was underreported. In the academic sphere, scholars have considered the processes through two lenses. Some contend that Da’esh is engaged in a pure economic scheme. By proliferating antiquities across the world, they can profit off of cultural objects while decrying the West’s obsession with idols. Another camp argues that IS’ goals are rooted in state formation theories. In addition to monetary gain, the group is also legitimizing its regime and consolidating its territorial holdings. I evaluate the first of these two theories in this section.

Within the context of civil wars, looting is a common practice. A robust body of literature exists on this topic. Scholars have suggested that highly organized rebel groups can choose to

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loot or tax in order to fund their operations, recruit new soldiers, and to motivate fighting.\textsuperscript{39} This hypothesis focuses on the expenses of sustaining political violence. Looting allows the insurgents to profit from a steady income stream which, in turn, enables them to promise financial support to fighters or to purchase weapons.

The economic benefits of cultural destruction are well attested to. The proliferation of illicit Iraqi and Syrian antiquities has been a steady source of income for the Islamic State, which has managed to loot artifacts on an “industrial scale.”\textsuperscript{40} The black-market trade in ancient art has always been prolific, in part due to the untraceable provenance of most items. In fact, Middle Eastern antiquities have been particularly vulnerable to looting due to instability in the region. Artifacts from archaeological sites have been smuggled out of the country, then distributed all over the world. Often, these pieces are purchased by notable institutions, collectors, or auction houses. W. Andrew Terrill posits that the “…destruction of large and important antiquities is at least partially meant to serve as a smokescreen for the vast network of illegal antiquities sales.”\textsuperscript{41} A steady income is important for insurgent states. In areas where the government fails to provide basic social goods, citizens often turn to terrorist organizations for sustenance and support. As such, promises of personal income can seduce new recruits. As Eli Berman suggests, “…efficient provision of nonviolent club goods, such as health care, mutual insurance or educational services, complements the ability of these same clubs to function as militias.”\textsuperscript{42}

\textsuperscript{41} W. Andrew Terrill, “Antiquities Destruction and Illicit Sales as Sources of ISIS Funding Propaganda,” \textit{The Letort Papers, United States Army War College}, 2017, 27.
public goods and services, insurgency groups are able to promote membership. Therefore, a consistent income source will ensure IS’ longevity.

The act of destruction, in fact, drives illicit antiquities sales up. In 2015, Director Neil MacGregor reported to The Times that the British Museum was trying to protect antiquities removed from conflict zones. He admitted to holding artifacts that had been illegally exported, suggesting that Western institutions had a duty to safeguard objects from war-torn areas.43 Across the channel, Louvre President Jean-Luc Martinez drew up a 50-point plan to protect the historical treasures of the world.44 Former Walters Art Museum Director Gary Vikan predicted that the Islamic State’s “…cultural atrocities ‘will put an end to the excess piety in favor the repatriation model’”45 Spectacular videos of violence and demolition are disseminated for Da’esh’s benefit. The more concerned that the West becomes about cultural destruction, the more antiquities academic museums will purchase, looted or not, fearing the disappearance of “humanity’s shared heritage.” As such, the Islamic State’s films promote strategic interests as well.

This argument, however, falls short given that IS benefits from other, more lucrative funding sources. In fact, the antiquities trade is only a small part of the organization’s overall income. The University of Chicago’s research team MANTIS (Modeling the Antiquities Trade in Iraq and Syria) has worked to estimate the exact value of the sales. Guesses have ranged from $4 million to $7 billion. The most accurate estimates suggest that the Islamic State has earned

several million dollars in profit from its looting program, which is enough to carry out devastating attacks.\footnote{Fiona Rose-Greenland, “How Much Money Has ISIS Made Selling Antiquities? More than Enough to Fund Its Attacks,” \textit{The Washington Post}, accessed April 22, 2019, \url{https://www.washingtonpost.com/posteverything/wp/2016/06/03/how-much-money-has-isis-made-selling-antiquities-more-than-enough-to-fund-its-attacks/?utm_term=.a9b08695bd73}.} However, oil accounts for over $500 million of IS’ income, while farmland is another $200 million.\footnote{Agnès Levallois, Jean-Claude Cousseran, and Lionel Kerrello, “The Financing of the ‘Islamic State’ in Iraq and Syria (ISIS),” 2017, 9.} In that sense, antiquities represent a fraction of a much larger enterprise. The emphasis that the Islamic State has placed on destruction is disproportionate to the amount of income that the looting earns. Moreover, if the aim is to eradicate such icons from Muslim-majority lands, why then does IS send its antiquities to Lebanon, Jordan, Turkey, and Saudi Arabia? Between 2011 and 2016, the Turkish government confiscated 6,800 looted artifacts within its borders.\footnote{Terrill, “Antiquities Destruction and Illicit Sales as Sources of ISIS Funding Propaganda,” 22.} Scholars who suggest that Da’esh is performing a traditional iconoclasm, in which all non-Islamic images are destroyed, fail to appreciate that the symbols are being proliferated rather than eradicated. The tension between earning income from looted materials and eliminating heretical images is irreconcilable.

\textbf{Cultural Destruction as the Erasure of Identity}

Scholars have suggested that IS has used cultural destruction in order to erase religious and ethnic identities. From a theoretical perspective, cultural destruction is often a precursor or tool of genocide. If the aim is to eradicate a people, then erasing that culture’s collective memory is key. The Islamic State, however, has taken this strategy a step further: the insurgents are not only destroying sites of historical significance, but they are also filming these striking demonstrations for distribution. Art historian Omar Harmansah describes IS’ heritage destruction videos as a
“…[hyperreal] reality show that effectively mobilizes the consumerism of visual media.”\textsuperscript{49} This assertion arises from the fact that IS often curates the selection of antiquities that are showcased in its films. For instance, the now-iconic video, which shows the raid of the Mosul Museum featured colossal, recognizable artifacts, as opposed to small, portable objects. This explanation, however, does not account for the many demolished sites which have been unreported. The famed monastary of Dair Mar Elia, an edifice belonging to the ancient Church of the East, was bombed in late 2014. However, because IS did not publicize the incident, the damage was only discovered two years later, thanks to sophisticated satellite imagery. A renewed inquiry might ask how the Islamic State chooses which moments of destruction to showcase. Another question that arises is why Da’esh dedicates resources to low-profile sites if there is no publicity benefit.

The most comprehensive analysis of this topic is contained in Helga Turku’s volume \textit{The Destruction of Cultural Property as a Weapon of War}. Her research on this subject emphasizes the historical precedents that inform attacks on heritage while also offering contingency plans for the future. Turku views IS’ actions as an attempt to “…dismantle the post-Westphalian state and eradicate all traces of cultural diversity.”\textsuperscript{50} The aestheticized footage of cultural destruction is meant to shock viewers in order to disseminate Da’esh’s ideology. In her investigation, the author concludes that the attacks on cultural property are meant to eliminate religious diversity, leaving behind a singular worldview: Salafist Sunni Islam. Second, the act is also meant to erode national identity. Violent assaults on cultural property are meant to reject the ruling regime.

Similar to Turku, Christopher W. Jones views cultural destruction as an anti-nationalist project. Given that the Ba’athist regimes of Iraq and Syria used pre-Islamic monuments to validate their orders, archaeology has become entangled with secular movements. The duty of

the Islamic State is to destroy these idols in a bold show against the nation-state: “Therefore, by destroying ancient artifacts ISIS sees themselves (sic) as attacking the very concept of the modern national-state, re-capitulating a mythical past as they (sic) seek to deconstruct the present political order.” This theatrical violence is a retaliation against Western conceptions of the state, or the perceived immorality of the Arab nations.

The destruction of art and the creation of memory is a classic state building endeavor. As Yael Zerubavel writes, “Nationalist movements typically attempt to create a master commemorative movement that highlights their members’ common past and legitimizes their aspiration for a shared destiny. Indeed, the establishment of such a narrative constitutes one of the most important mechanisms by which a nation constructs a collective identity…” The interplay between the eradication of a false past and the shaping of a new one has been a traditional state-formation tactic.

Each of the above theories develops this conclusion further. However, in doing so, they assume a consolidated state-like identity for Da’esh. There remains an additional puzzle: is al-Dawlah al-Islamiyya a state? The name is, of course, translated into English as “the Islamic State,” which implies national sovereignty. Given that the group has territory and has implemented its own laws within that space, IS might be classified as a nation-state in modern terms. At the same time, most governments have denounced the faction as a known terrorist organization. Most international definitions of terrorism specify that the acts of violence must be committed by non-state actors. The United States of America, for example, specifies

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52 Zerubavel, Recovered Roots: Collective Memory and the Making of the Israeli National Tradition, 214.
“subnational groups” and “clandestine agents” as potential perpetrators. Crimes committed by legitimate governments, however, are usually not considered terrorism, suggesting that the international order does not view IS as a state.

**Theoretical Approach**

Why then has IS engaged in this sophisticated cultural destruction scheme? Renewed inquiry into the Islamic State’s motivations should ask a larger question: is IS even a state, recognized or unrecognized? I argue that the group is a revolution, rather than a terrorist organization or a state. Its rhetoric and actions match the theoretical definitions produced by scholars such as Charles Tilly, Theda Skocpol, Brantly Womack, Isaac Kramnick, and Stephen Walt. I explore this theory in depth in the first chapter.

Even after IS had claimed a caliphate, the organization continued to produce spectacles of sovereignty. From its inception, the Islamic State has always been in violent motion, either by engaging in warfare or landscape devastation. In doing so, IS has managed to terrorize and terrify civilians, forcing obedience. Cultural destruction exhibits the extent of IS’ military arsenal and its reputation as a killing machine. Compliance is a consequence of this display. Fearing brutality at the hands of the Islamic State, people follow its directives without challenge. Violence and destruction then become an art, utilized by the state to assert sovereignty. Frenetic attacks become part of the mechanism of coercion, since they compel civilian submission.

Returning to the question of cultural destruction, all the theories have treated the act of demolition as a means to an end. That is, the violence was part of a greater attempt to instill fear in the West, earn income, or forge a historical narrative. However, perhaps destruction should be

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considered the end in and of itself. As Zainab Bahrani posits, the assault and abduction of cultural artifacts has historically been seen as “…an act of magical and psychological warfare.”\textsuperscript{54}

If we view these aggressions as part of the narrative, then the Islamic State is using devastation to instill terror in its own citizens, forcing compliance.

For Da’esh, cultural destruction has become the art of narrative control. Eliminating historical heritage serves many purposes: first, the Islamic State ensures the longevity of its order by preventing its citizens from sharing a common cultural narrative with anyone outside of its borders. Second, the state’s perpetual motion and fanatic destruction allow the authoritarian regime to thrive, by enabling compliance and recruitment. The success of the movement can be evaluated by its usage of terror as a strategy of political revolution. Destruction then becomes key to Da’esh’s longevity, by enabling the quasi-state to maintain an iron grip over its citizens and to attract more recruits.

Chapters

In the following chapters, I investigate cultural destruction as a strategy of political revolution in the Islamic State. While the literature has focused on this act either a religious pursuit or a barbaric pastime, I propose that Da’esh is engaged in a sophisticated political scheme. Each chapter combines disparate disciplinary approaches to cultural heritage including but not limited to the anthropological, the philosophical, the archaeological, and the political. This undertaking highlights the productive intersections of these fields, with the outcome of producing a unique conclusion regarding IS’ practices. The overarching claim of this thesis is that cultural destruction was a tactic of violence, coercion, humiliation, and recruitment. As such, the

wreckage facilitated IS’ revolutionary goals. Given that attacks on heritage require military and economic resources, the conjecture that more mechanisms must be at play is not far-fetched.

To evaluate this claim, I start by defining the Islamic State. In the first chapter, I conclude that IS is not a terrorist group, which has not been the prevailing sentiment of most governments and international organizations. Instead, I argue that Da’esh is a revolutionary movement. Relying on a combination of political theory and discourse analysis, I claim that the group displays qualities more often associated with revolutions, including expressions of sovereignty, a sophisticated military apparatus, and economic extraction mechanisms. The point here is to characterize IS so that its cultural destruction practices can be situated within a specific political context. The act achieves particular ends that further these revolutionary intentions.

In the second chapter, I embark on a historical analysis of cultural destruction, a sort of prelude to my argument. I begin with a discussion of collective memory and its role in state formation. The theories of the invented tradition and the imagined community supplement this argument. I turn to the built environment as an extension of these practices, by suggesting that regimes often signal their values and intentions through monuments. The destruction of such cultural sites then becomes an attack on the nation-state, its principles, and its heritage. Most actors have assaulted historic spaces, often in the context of war. I demonstrate that cultural destruction is a common act, generalizable across many historic periods and political communities. From there, I turn to revolutionary movements, which have employed this act as a delegitimization tactic. In fact, insurgencies rely on these attacks more often than any other political entities. With this chapter, I aim to contextualize the Islamic State’s exploits within a greater history of revolutionary cultural destruction. In fact, this ambitious strategy should cement IS’ status as a political revolution.
The following chapter is an empirical study of violence in the Islamic State. This chapter signals the transition into my evaluation of political mechanisms. I argue that violence has been a coercive tool in IS territory, forcing the compliance of civilians throughout the area. I base this argument on evidence from the Islamic State’s magazines and from primary source documents, including martyrdom contracts and tax statements. Building on this assertion, I demonstrate that cultural destruction was a continuation of this violent strategy. Where conventional literature treats the physical demolition of historic structures as a means to an end – that end being the eradication of all pre-Islamic history – I contend that the destructive act is an end in and of itself. The visual violence is a form of political spectacle meant to force submission. Cultural destruction has little to do with religion and is, instead, a mechanism of revolution.

In chapter 4, I analyze radical Islamist discourse patterns to argue that cultural destruction is a recruitment strategy. I suggest that in almost every case, extremist groups aim to target young males who are disillusioned with society. Radical discourse exploits narratives of masculinity to attract recruits. In essence, IS’ rhetoric expresses dissatisfaction with the West’s control over the modern world order. This power, the group argues, is undeserved as is being used to oppress Muslims worldwide and particularly in Arab lands. As such, the duty of the Islamic State is to render the West powerless. This dialogue is rooted in narratives of masculinity: IS must emasculate the West and leave it impotent. To render something powerless is to humiliate, which is the chief accomplishment of cultural destruction. Using this theory, I embark on a large analysis of heritage demolition to conclude that the Islamic State is trying to embarrass major powers by destroying precious cultural sites. In doing so, IS renders these humiliated entities powerless or emasculated while showing off the virility of its soldiers. In turn, this act is aimed at increasing recruitment, since young men are attracted to the promise of masculinity and belonging.
I conclude by suggesting that coverage of the Islamic State’s attacks have been an exercise in modern Orientalism. For the most part, the Western media has condemned these actions as “barbaric,” assuming that there was no purpose to them other than to commit savagery. Instead, I explore the historical relationship between Near Eastern cultural destruction and modern Orientalism. I then demonstrate that a contextualized understanding of the Islamic State’s strategy contradicts this argument and proves the strategic usefulness of cultural destruction.

What IS has accomplished, in the few years of its existence, is astounding, though not unprecedented. Although, the systematic destruction of cultural heritage is attested to in the historical record, an explicit program dedicated to the eradication of historic sites is unique. As such, the act of cultural demolition should be the subject of a renewed inquiry, in order to better understand the motivations and outcomes of these actions.
Figure 1. A graph showing the types of sites that the Islamic State targeted between 2015 and 2016. Image from Emma Cunliffe and Luigi Curini, “ISIS and Heritage Destruction: A Sentiment Analysis,” *Antiquity* 92, no. 364 (August 2018): 1099, https://doi.org/10.15184/aqy.2018.134.
Figure 2. This image from one of the Islamic State’s propaganda magazine’s shows off the group’s view that the West is a continuation of the Roman Empire. The call to holy war includes marching on and destroying Rome. Image from The Islamic State, “Reflections on The Final Crusade,” Dabiq 4, October 11, 2014, 37, http://clarionproject.org/wp-content/uploads/islamic-state-magazine-dabiq-fifteen-breaking-the-cross.pdf.
A Revolutionary Definition of the Islamic State

In a 2015 article for *Foreign Affairs*, Audrey Kurth Cronin, then a professor of international security at George Mason University, claimed that the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria resisted characterization as a terrorist group. A historical association between IS and al-Qaeda, she argued, had prompted Washington to assume that both relied on traditional insurgency methods and maintained similar ideological stances.\(^1\) The link between the two entities had been identified as early as 2003, when then-Secretary of State Colin Powell announced to the United Nations Security Council that Iraq was harboring a “…deadly terrorist network headed by Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, an associate and collaborator of Osama bin Laden and his al-Qaeda lieutenants.”\(^2\)

By 2014, the Islamic State had supplanted al-Qaeda as the main jihadist operation in the Middle East. U.S. foreign policy, therefore, directed its formidable counter-insurgency apparatus away from al-Qaeda and toward IS, with the intention of eradicating the new threat in the same manner as the previous one. In a televised speech from September of the same year, U.S. President Barack Obama referred to Da’esh as “…a terrorist organization, pure and simple” that his government would “degrade and ultimately destroy.”\(^3\) This rhetoric did not acknowledge that the self-proclaimed caliph Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi was leading a sophisticated quasi-state with well-funded military operations and a complex leadership hierarchy.

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For Cronin, the unoriginal American response to the Islamic State allowed the group to expand and thrive: “Washington has been slow to adapt its policies in Iraq and Syria to the true nature of the threat from ISIS. In Syria, U.S. counterterrorism has mostly prioritized the bombing of al Qaeda affiliates, which has given an edge to ISIS and has also provided the Assad regime with the opportunity to crush U.S.-allied moderate Syrian rebels.”

Cronin herself considers IS to be a quasi-state led by a conventional army, asserting that a policy of offensive containment would have effectively stalled the insurgency’s growth. President Obama’s 2015 counterterrorism-based approach toward the organization, however, facilitated its rise, which suggests that the Islamic State did not adhere to the traditional norms of non-state violent insurgencies.

Cronin’s assessment of the IS caliphate as a sophisticated quasi-state is correct, though I take her approach a step further: I contend that the group is a revolutionary movement. This chapter examines the identity of the Islamic State based on its rhetoric, goals, and intentions. I maintain that IS is not a terrorist organization but instead a revolutionary entity, which seeks to rewrite the current world order while cultivating a global community of radical Sunni Muslims. The former characterization, adopted by the U.S. security apparatus, does not account for Daesh’s claims to sovereignty, its sophisticated military apparatus, its economic success, its erosion of existing governmental structures, and its status as a quasi-state. Instead, I argue that the group displays the qualities typically associated with a revolutionary body, such as Mao Zedong’s Communist Party of China. Following the establishment of its caliphate in 2014, the Islamic State has adopted rhetoric and policies that delegitimize the governments of Iraq and Syria and the West. At the same time, the organization has established itself as a contending polity in its local territorial space. Building on the theories of Charles Tilly, Theda Skocpol, Isaac Kramnick,

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Stephen Walt, and Brantly Womack, I demonstrate through discourse analysis that the Islamic State is a revolutionary group, interested in overturning existing global structures.

By characterizing the Islamic State as such, I aim to explain its cultural destruction program as a strategy of a revolutionary political movement. That is, the act of eliminating historical sites furthers a revisionist goal and undermines the sovereignty of Iraq and Syria. Cultural destruction allows the Islamic State to attain revolutionary ends by both legitimizing itself and delegitimizing the ruling regimes of these two nation-states. In chapter 3, I explore the political implications of cultural destruction by embarking on a historical analysis of the act. Chapters 4 and 5 explain how the elimination of historical sites furthers coercive tactics and narratives of humiliation. Although the Islamic State’s rhetoric emphasizes that cultural destruction achieves religious ends, the act is a mechanism of violence and recruitment. Therefore, the undertaking should be considered a strategy of a revolutionary political movement.

**Defining Revolutions as a Regime Change**

According to Leon Trotsky, the distinguishing characteristic of a revolutionary situation is the presence of two entities controlling a portion of the state apparatus with distinct success. These dual powers are generally the existing regime and the revolutionary group that has claimed authority. In 1965, he wrote of “twofold sovereignty,” or the notion that an insurgent antagonist has claimed some of the monopolized power of the existing nation-state.\(^5\) For instance, the rebels may provide public goods that the government has not or may control territory. Trotsky experienced these conditions during the 1917 Russian Revolution, so he linked dual power to

\(^5\) Leon Trotsky, "The History of the Russian Revolution (1.11 Dual Power),” accessed April 14, 2019, https://www.marxists.org/archive/trotsky/1930/hrr/ch11.htm. This site was accessed only for the original text of Leon Trotsky’s speech, not for its analysis or web content.
social crises caused by class deterioration. When a social group is deprived of power, the policies of one class will dominate the other. A revolution, then, is the transfer of state control from one group to the another. There should be a broad disruption of government, wherein a new social system has amassed a significant share of the state power. Twofold sovereignty exists when there are two competing claims to social, legal, legislative, and economic dominance in a single political space.

As Charles Tilly has argued, Trotsky places unnecessary restrictions on his description of a revolutionary moment. The sociologist denies that each contending polity must be made up of a single class and that there may only be two of these distinct entities. Rather, there may be many blocs occupying the same public space, creating a condition that he refers to as multiple sovereignty: “A revolutionary situation begins when a government previously under the control of a single, sovereign polity, becomes the object of effective, competing, mutually, exclusive claims on the part of two or more distinct polities.” This feature is achieved when more than one bloc can be regarded as legitimate and sovereign by some of a country’s population. The revolutionary moment is characterized by this competition for power, ending when only one polity remains.

**Defining Revolutions as an Ideological Shift**

In Tilly’s assessment of multiple sovereignty, the population of a nation will be confronted with a choice between the existing government and its competitor. Although previously acquiescent to the whims of the old-regime, they will switch their allegiance. The revolutionary moment arrives when they begin to pay taxes, join the army, support operations, yield resources, and honor the

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7 Tilly, “Revolution and Rebellion,” 7-4.
symbols of a new polity. Brantly Womack offers a microanalysis of multiple sovereignty: he emphasizes that an authoritarian organizational polity will emerge during this period. The body’s policies are constrained by the revolutionary situation to adhere to popular demands, thus earning it the title of “quasi-democratic system.” Structurally, the bloc is authoritarian, but because it encourages a civilian interest in policy, it can be considered democratic. In order to distinguish the quasi-democratic system from regular insurgencies, Womack emphasizes that it must have authority over the political and military life of a population: “A QDS, in order to be a policy-making party rather than simply a propaganda party, must in political and military control of a population. In order for it to appeal to the masses, there must be a considerable disaffection between the masses and the government.” For Womack, a decay in social structures fosters the right environment for a revolutionary situation.

The concept of dominating policy is echoed by Isaac Kramnick, who argues that a revolution refers to “…a change in the fundamental laws or conventional norms of a political system, which change is itself considered illegitimate by the norms it abolishes.” In this sense, the contending polity must have a dominion in which it can create and enforce laws. In doing so, it also subverts the existing legal policies of the old-regime.

There is a distinction between revolutionary situations and revolutionary outcomes. The former may not necessarily result in the latter. For Tilly, the end of a revolution is marked by the dominance of one polity over the others: “The revolutionary outcome is the displacement of one

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8 Tilly, “Revolution and Rebellion,” 7-7.
set of powerholders by another. That simple definition leaves many reference points available: power over the means of production, power over symbols, power over government.\textsuperscript{13}

Revolution therefore ends when the multiple claims to sovereignty have disappeared, leaving only one legitimate assertion of power.

All these scholars emphasize a fundamental change of norms. Revolutions are accomplished when social ideological shifts occur. The principles that govern society are rewritten to usher in a new regime, which the Islamic State has attempted to accomplish in Iraq and Syria.

\textbf{Pre-Conditions for Revolutionary Movements}

Different conditions prompt a multiplication of polities: initially, at the onset of the revolutionary moment, the members of one bloc must try to subvert an existing one.\textsuperscript{14} Structural instabilities in old-regime states often enable this subordination. Theda Skocpol writes that eroding legitimacy and structural contradictions prompt social revolutions: “The political-conflict groups that have figured in social-revolutionary struggles have not merely represented social interests and forces. Rather they have formed as interest groups within and fought about the forms of state structures.”\textsuperscript{15} She defines these “structures” as the set of administrative, policing, and military bodies monitored by an executive authority. As the old-regime loses its capacity to control these groups in a way that serves the population, class-based rebellions will start to emerge.\textsuperscript{16}

\textsuperscript{13} Tilly, “Revolution and Rebellion,” 7-8.
\textsuperscript{14} Tilly, “Revolution and Rebellion,” 7-6.
\textsuperscript{15} Theda Skocpol, States and Social Revolutions: A Comparative Analysis of France, Russia, and China (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1979), 29.
\textsuperscript{16} Skocpol, States and Social Revolutions: A Comparative Analysis of France, Russia, and China, 41.
After this first condition of revolution is fulfilled, Tilly asserts that a second one will occur: the members of the previously subordinate polity will claim sovereignty, often through a rebellion.\textsuperscript{17} Many such revolts will accompany structural breakdowns, but the success of one satisfies constitutes a revolutionary moment. A rebel group may have power over some sort of regional government, thus allowing them to consolidate their role as a quasi-state while delegitimizing the existing regime.

Following the claim of sovereignty, contenders not affiliated with the existing polity will mobilize into a separate bloc that exerts some control over the governmental apparatus.\textsuperscript{18} However, Tilly acknowledges that this condition is rarely met. More often, the dominant entity will often fragment, with two or more blocs exercising control over different parts of the political system.

**Strategies of Revolutionary Movements**

Revolutionary movements often mobilize support by asserting sovereignty to delegitimize a ruling regime. They often occupy spaces that should be controlled by an existing government, including administrative activities, taxes, or basic services. Charles Tilly argues that these claimants benefit from the existing polity’s inability to support and provide for its citizens:

> Two classes of action by governments have a strong tendency to expand commitment to revolutionary claims. The first is the sudden failure of the government to meet specific obligations which members of the subject population regard as well-established and crucial to their own welfare. I have in mind obligations to provide employment, welfare services, protection, access to justice, and the other major services of government.\textsuperscript{19}

\textsuperscript{17} Tilly, “Revolution and Rebellion,” 7-6.
\textsuperscript{18} Tilly, “Revolution and Rebellion,” 7-6.
\textsuperscript{19} Tilly, “Revolution and Rebellion,” 7-25.
As Tilly explains, the breakdown of government opens up space for revolutionary movements and ideologies to take root. Many insurgencies provide services to civilians in order to gain their trust and support.

**Historic Revolutionary Strategies**

I turn to historic examples in order to contextualize my discussion of revolutions. Certain structural disaffection often prompts insurgent movements. This disaffection, of course, is the disintegration of old-regimes discussed by Theda Skocpol in *States and Social Revolutions*. Turning to China as an example, she argues that prior to 1946, rural communities suffered from social cleavages which resulted in a loss of faith in the existing government. Furthermore, extraordinary pressures from imperialist industrial nations threatened the Empire’s sovereignty. These intense foreign interests carved out “spheres of influence,” in an attempt to open China to free trade, tariffs, extraterritorial jurisdiction, missionaries, etc. At that point, Skocpol argues, that the central authorities of the country could have launched projects that would have deflected these incursions on sovereignty. However, weaknesses in the government prevented these reforms from creating effective change, signifying the breakdown of a strong central regime.

Returning to Tilly’s contention, there must be an opportunity for a new bloc to subvert the existing one. In the case of China, this structural decay was accompanied by several peasant-based rebellions. Most of Peking’s resources at the time were drained in combatting these uprisings, which enabled the Revolution of 1911. At that point, various actors attempted to

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20 Skocpol, *States and Social Revolutions: A Comparative Analysis of France, Russia, and China*, 73.
21 Skocpol, *States and Social Revolutions: A Comparative Analysis of France, Russia, and China*, 74.
22 Skocpol, *States and Social Revolutions: A Comparative Analysis of France, Russia, and China*, 75.
define a new national political system to replace the existing Manchu rulers. Although the outcomes of the 1911 uprisings were short-lived, they filled Tilly’s pre-conditions for multiple polities claiming sovereignty. Moreover, the Communist Party would capitalize on structural breakdowns and peasant insurgencies to support its revolution. Between 1946 and 1949, the Communists reorganized local peasant communities in Northern China. In doing so, they mobilized this social class to rebel against its landlords. Skocpol further points out that in China the political leadership of all the revolutionary groups were civilians employed by the state: “…political leaderships in all of our social revolutions came specifically form the ranks of educated marginal elites oriented to state employments and activities.”23 Citizens who worked for or adhered to the ideology of the old-regime splintered off and joined new organizations. This territorial control would later enable the establishment of a sovereign People’s Republic of China and the authority of the Communist Party: “…the Chinese Revolution gave rise through the class and political struggles of the revolutionary interregnum to a much larger, more powerful, and more bureaucratic new political regime.”24 Returning to Kramnick, we can view the influence of the CCP upon the peasant class as a change in the conventional norms of a political system, wherein large groups of people are now following a new ideology. Therefore, this moment of change can be classified as a revolutionary one.

**The Islamic State as an Ideological Revolution**

This chapter aims to characterize the Islamic State as a revolution, rather than as a terrorist group. I argue that based on the definitions provided above, IS can be conceptualized as a quasi-

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23 Skocpol, *States and Social Revolutions: A Comparative Analysis of France, Russia, and China*, 167.
24 Skocpol, *States and Social Revolutions: A Comparative Analysis of France, Russia, and China*, 263.
democratic state that has credibly challenged the sovereignty of Iraq and Syria. As a result, the organization has managed to create a power vacuum in which there are multiple incursions on the legitimate sovereignty of established nations. Owing to structural disintegration in Iraq and Syria, the Islamic State has managed to consolidate territorial control, economic dominance, and an ideological following. At the same time, the group has managed to delegitimize existing polities. This section provides evidence and analysis to substantiate this claim. By examining documents such as identification cards, media directives, and recruitment literature, I establish that the Islamic State is a revolutionary organization, aiming to reject the fundamental premise of the Westphalian sovereign state.

Harvard University professor Stephen M. Walt posited in 2015 that the Islamic State was a revolutionary polity, rather than a terrorist organization. He identifies revolutions as violent struggles in which insurgents proclaim ideologies that justify their extreme methods. In an analysis of their language and signaling, Walt concludes that Da’esh is nothing less than a revolution in progress: “Revolutionary movements typically use a combination of inducement, intimidation, and indoctrination to enforce obedience and encourage sacrifices, just as the Islamic State is doing now. In particular, they purvey ideologies designed to justify extreme methods and convince their followers that their sacrifices will bear fruit.”25 Charles Tilly also identifies this condition in his essay. He notes that statements about the incompatibility of a new ideology with the policies of existing states is the surest sign that a revolution is beginning: “…an outpouring of new thought articulating objectives incompatible with the continuation of the existing polity is probably our single most reliable sign that the first condition of a revolutionary situation is being fulfilled.”26 Walt argues that IS has managed to do this in three

main ways. First, the organization has portrayed its opponents as hostile and incapable of compromise. As a result, the old-regimes must be uprooted. For the Islamic State, this has manifested in the form of extreme vitriol against the West. The group has suggested that the countries like America have an unwavering bias against Arab and Muslim countries; therefore, the two will never be able to co-exist. In an article titled “Why We Hate You & Why We Fight You” from Dabiq, the Islamic State’s recruitment magazine, an anonymous soldier writes the following:

We hate you because your secular, liberal societies permit the very things that Allah has prohibited while banning many of the things He has permitted, a matter that doesn’t concern you because you separate between religion and state, thereby granting supreme authority to your whims and desires via the legislators you vote into power. In doing so, you desire to rob Allah of his right to be obeyed and you wish to usurp that right for yourselves. ‘Legislation is not but for Allah’ (Yusuf 40). Your secular liberalism has led you to tolerate and even support ‘gay rights,’ to allow alcohol, drugs, fornication, gambling, and usury to become widespread, and to encourage the people to mock those who denounce these filthy sins and vices. As such, we wage war against you to stop you from spreading your disbelief and debauchery – your secularism and nationalism, your perverted liberal values, your Christianity and atheism – and all the depravity and corruption they entail. You’ve made it your mission to liberate Muslim societies; we’ve made it our mission to fight off your influence and protect mankind from your misguided concepts and your deviant way of life.27

This passage expresses the extent to which the Islamic State views the West as a fundamental threat to Arab and Muslim life. The writer points to a fundamental irrevocability between the West and the Middle East, arguing that foundational values of Western democracies, such as the separation of church and state, representative government, and secular freedoms, are threatening to Muslims worldwide. The statements reveal an unwillingness to compromise or negotiate with such apostates or infidels, emphasizing that the world order must be replaced with a pure Islamic theocracy. The West is characterized as innately hostile, rendering reform impossible. Therefore,

IS remains the only hope for Arabs and Muslims worldwide. As Tilly argues, “The elaboration of new ideologies, new creeds, new theories of how the world works, is part and parcel of both paths to a revolutionary position: the emergence of brand-new challengers and the turning of existing (sic) contenders.”

**The Crumbling of the Iraqi and Syrian States**

In part, the Islamic State was able to assert its sovereignty because of structural disintegration in the Iraqi and Syrian governments. In addition to the disorder and chaos caused by American troops in the wake of the 2003 invasion, the regime of then-Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki had not managed to consolidate control over the country: Iraq was fast splitting along sectarian and ethnic lines, with Kurds seeking to assert their definitive authority in the north and with a vast majority of Sunnis supporting the revolution, at least for now. The Shia-led government of Nouri al-Maliki, which had long failed to acknowledge the demands of its disaffected Sunni population, was in trouble…

These conditions are similar to those identified by Theda Skocpol in *States and Social Revolutions*, which are discussed above. On the other side of the border, the rise of IS was preceded by the Arab Spring protests, which eroded the Syrian government’s legitimacy. Based on Skocpol’s interpretation, the preconditions for revolution existed in both Iraq and Syria. These structural issues enabled multiple claims to sovereignty in both states. In addition, neither government was able to adequately contain the threat that the Islamic State posed, filling the third cause of multiple sovereignty that Tilly mentions:

“…incapacity or unwillingness of the agents of the government to suppress the alternative

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coalition and/or the commitment to its claims.” The case of Da’esh is a clear example of a revolutionary situation.

**Strategies of the IS Revolution**

Walt continues his assessment of IS by arguing that revolutionary movements often see their spread as natural and unavoidable: “…revolutionary organizations preach that victory is inevitable, provided supporters remain obedient and steadfast…” The Islamic State’s current leader, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, offered a similarly upbeat assessment in November 2014, telling his audience ‘Your state is well and in the best of conditions. Its advance will not cease.” This sentiment is espoused by the Caliphate itself, which boasts the motto “lasting and expanding,” a clear indication that the group views itself as an assured power. In fact, in its publications, fighters emphasize the futility of fighting against the Islamic State, since its mission is “…a divinely-warranted war between the Muslim nation and the nations of disbelief.” From this literature, it is clear the Islamic State considers its victory inevitable, castigating the West for even continuing to fight. The Caliphate’s war is divinely sanctioned, with conquest an assurance rather than a dream.

The group has also emphasized the illegitimacy of the governments of Iraq and Syria, which is a direct challenge to the sovereignty of both nations. In 2014, the Islamic State released a video titled “The End of Sykes-Picot,” referring to the borders drawn by the British in former Ottoman territories. The act of questioning these “lines in the sand,” as they were known at the time, constituted an existential threat to the Middle East’s modern nation-states. As Matt Salyer

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31 Walt, “ISIS as Revolutionary State,” 43.
32 The Islamic State, *Dabiq* 15, 78.
notes, challenges to Sykes-Picot are akin to calling Iraq an “artificial” nation.\textsuperscript{33} This complaint was first made by many British Orientalists, such as the archaeologist Gertrude Bell, who criticized the notion of “…a nation cobbled together from Kurdish, Sunni, and Shia heartlands…”\textsuperscript{34} The Islamic State has also denied the validity of Sykes-Picot and refused to recognize the border between Iraq and Syria, stating that it is a fabrication of the West. In the video, a fighter stands in front of an outdated map of the region, stating that “…it is all one dawlat [country], one umma [community].”\textsuperscript{35} In doing so, he negates the legitimacy of both Iraq and Syria, claiming instead that there is only one Islamic State. This act satisfies Tilly’s second precondition of multiple sovereignty in which an insurgency makes a claim to authority, thus providing a population with a choice to defect from the old-regime and join a contending polity.

\textbf{Strategies of Sovereignty}

The Islamic State has demonstrated additional claims to sovereignty. For instance, the group has issued its own motor vehicle documents and birth certificates. Official documents have been considered an essential expression of the modern nation-state. In a literature review, Sara L. Friedman writes, “In his history of the passport in Western Europe and the United States, John Torpey argues that ‘the emergence of the passport and related controls on movement is an essential aspect of the ‘state-ness’ of states’ (2000, 3). Torpey builds on Max Weber’s theory of state legitimacy, stating that monopolizing ‘the legitimate means of movement’ was critical to

\footnote{\textsuperscript{33} “The End of ‘The End of Sykes-Picot,’” \textit{Modern War Institute} (blog), August 24, 2018, https://mwi.usma.edu/end-end-sykes-picot/.
\textsuperscript{34} “The End of ‘The End of Sykes-Picot.’”
\textsuperscript{35} David Siddhartha Patel, “Repartitioning the Sykes-Picot Middle East? Debunking Three Myths,” \textit{Middle East Brief} 103 (November 2016): 4.}
modern state building.” In this sense, an identification document, such as the passport, was a functional tool of the nation-state and an expression of its authority. She writes about a passport dispute between Taiwan (ROC) and China (PRC), in which Chinese authorities check his ROC documents, but refuse to stamp them, instead only acknowledging the validity of the compatriot pass issued by PRC. In this way, the Chinese government manages to assert its legitimacy while subverting that of Taiwan. The passport document therefore is used to both claim and negate sovereignty. Friedman continues her literature review by noting that quasi-states also need to issue such papers: “As Yael Navaro-Yashin argues, ‘Documents are among the primary paraphernalia of modern states and legal systems: they are its material culture. A wannabe ‘state’ would have to produce documents too, in order to look and act like a state’ (2007, 84).” The Islamic State has adopted a similar policy. The photographs below were collected by journalists and show the sophistication of IS’ documentary apparatus. Figure 2 shows a contract of a car exchange between two members of the Islamic State, an early document from a motor vehicle department that monitored and registered cars. Figure 3 shows a birth certificate issued by the Caliphate. Together, these documents are an expression of sovereignty, since they claim that the Islamic State has power and control over identity, life, death, and marriage. Returning to Tilly, we can view this assertion of legitimacy as a revolutionary situation, since there is a clear statement of authority.

37 Friedman, “Documenting Sovereignty,” 27.
38 Friedman, “Documenting Sovereignty,” 47.
The Islamic State and the Mobilization of Muslims

Walt continues his assessment by claiming that revolutionary movements view their model as universally applicable. Many argue that their insurgencies will liberate millions, drawing in followers from across the world. The Islamic State also has declared that it will consolidate the entire Sunni Muslim community. In July 2014, for instance, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi emphasized that IS would one day unite “…the Caucasian, Indian, Chinese, Shami [Syrian], Iraqi, Yemeni, Egyptian, Maghribi [North African], American, French, German, and Australian.” 39 The group’s usage of social media is indicative of its growth. The Islamic State has sophisticated publications which are intended to recruit followers from around the globe. 40 However, its propaganda speaks to Muslims, chastising them for following the idolatrous ways of the West and encouraging them to join the mujahideen, or holy army. One author writes of how she has discovered the truth of her religion since immigrating to the Islamic State:

Also, unless you’re living here you don’t realize what kind of life you had before. The life here is so much more pure. When you’re in Dar al-Kufr (the lands of disbelief) you’re exposing yourself and your children to so much filth and corruption. You make it easy for Satan to lead you astray. Here you’re living a pure life, and your children are being raised with plenty of good influence around them. They don’t need to be ashamed of their religion. They are free to be proud of it and are given the proper creed right from the start. After four months of us being here, my son was martyred, and this was yet another blessing. Every time I think about it, I wonder to myself, ‘If I had stayed in Dar al-Kufr what kind of end would he have had? What would have happened to him?’ …I advise the Muslims in Dar al-Kufr not to be intimidated by the media, and to instead listen to the words of Allah and His Messenger. Everything is very clear in the Book of Allah and in the Sunnah of the Prophet. And I sincerely advise every Muslim to perform hijrah [pilgrimage]…” 41

This passage demonstrates that the Islamic State is attempting to attract Muslims from around the world to its Caliphate. Using shame as a foundation, the author criticizes all “believers” for

39 Walt, “ISIS as Revolutionary State,” 44.
40 To an extent, the Caliphate has been successful in attracting high-profile soldiers from Western countries. However, Walt contends that that IS has only 30,000 reliable troops, rendering it incapable of long-term success.
41 The Islamic State, Dabiq 15, 39.
living in apostate lands, arguing that if they genuinely followed the words of the prophet, they would have immigrated long ago. She suggests that it is not too late to make the pilgrimage, inviting all Muslims to do so. This rhetoric is a perfect example of Walt’s theory. That is, dialogue which claims that joining the movement will liberate millions, offering contentedness and stability in return. The writer also emphasizes that her son was martyred after moving to IS, which she sees as a pure form of religious expression. She addresses this topic with euphoria, lamenting what would have become of him had they stayed in the West. Again, the theme of liberation is featured prominently in this passage, specifically freedom from “Dar al-Kufr.” Interestingly, although the publication is written in English, this term is one of the few that appears in Arabic. This choice is meant to “other” the West and to prove the superiority of the Islamic State. By using a word that would have been familiar to all Muslims but not to those outside of the religion, Da’esh is signaling that believers are marginalized in their own countries, so they must rejoin the global community that understands them.

The article is accompanied by the photo in figure 4, showing the joys of living in the Islamic State. Again, the notion of “liberation” is featured. As the author claims, moving to the Caliphate’s territories allowed her children to grow up without being ashamed of their religion. This photo shows two euphoric kids socializing in a meadow. The “purity” of innocence and religion is on full display. Both children are clad in traditional outfits. They are elated and prominently show off their religion, which according to the author, they would not be allowed to do in Western countries. Again, as Walt notes, the revolutionary group is aiming to prove its appeal to the global Muslim community.
Economic Extraction by the Islamic State

As Brantly Womack has argued, revolutions are accompanied by the emergence of an authoritarian polity, which adheres to popular demands, which he refers to as a quasi-democratic state. The QDS must have policy-making control of a portion of the population, rendering it a counter-state within a state.\textsuperscript{42} The polity is subject to the demands of the local population to an extent, depending on the revolutionary situation. In situations of multiple sovereignty, a QDS fulfills the role of the “contending polity.” The presence of one allows civilians to defect from the old-regime and instead to pledge their support to a new group.

To what extent can the Islamic State be considered a QDS? For Cronin, IS has reached an unprecedented level of sophistication for an insurgency: “Holding territory has allowed the group to build a self-sustaining financial model unthinkable for most terrorist groups. Beginning in 2012, ISIS gradually took over key oil assets in eastern Syria...Meanwhile, during its push into Iraq last summer, ISIS also seized seven oil-producing operations in that country.” These advanced economic models indicate the development of a nation-state. The Islamic State has progressed beyond a disorganized terrorist movement. The group has curated multiple sources of income and is managing them carefully. Figure 5 is an example of this evolution. The Islamic State has a tax collection system with clear record-keeping, evidenced by the document below.

Scholars have argued that a sophisticated system of tax management is indicative of a state-building project. Charles Tilly in \textit{War Making and State Making as Organized Crime} argues that power-holders extracted resources from the population in the form of taxes in order to wage war.\textsuperscript{43} Documents from the Islamic State indicate that civilians in Mosul were required

\begin{flushright}
\textsuperscript{42} Womack, “Democracy and the Governing Party,” 492.
\end{flushright}
to pay 5 to 10 percent of their income to the Caliphate. Tilly also recognizes as a condition of state-making. The money was then used to support military operations. Based on this definition, it is clear that the Islamic State fulfills the conditions of a quasi-democratic state given by Womack and Tilly. Because the group had sophisticated organizational models at that time, IS was able to “facilitate the initial seizure of control, spread the news, activate the commitments already made by specific men,” another condition of multiple sovereignty.

Civilians from Iraq and Syria were willing to recognize the authority of IS. In a letter about taxes to the Sheikhs of the Islamic State, a collector notes that “…there are groups of Muslim Youth in the State [TC: Possibly province] of Mosul that are eager to work [for IS], if they are supplied with the war equipments/gear needed, in addition to the [TC: Possibly their as in youth] production expertise in the manufacturing domain!” This fact implies that IS has made a claim to sovereignty which some citizens see as legitimate. Even if not recognized by the international system, the group has managed to cultivate a following from Iraqi and Syrian defectors. Tilly’s conditions for multiple sovereignty are fulfilled again: “The moment at which some people belonging to members of the alternative coalition seize control over some portion of the government, and other people not previously attached to the coalition honor their directives marks the beginning of a revolutionary situation.”

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46 Official of the Islamic State in Mosul and Sheikhs of the Islamic State, “A Report from ISI Official in Mosul to His ‘Sheikhs’ About the Tax Money Collected by ISI in Mosul.”  
Conclusion

The evidence above indicates that the Islamic State can be considered a quasi-democratic state, a contending polity, and a claimant to sovereignty. Based on the definitions provided, we can conclude that Da’esh is not a terrorist group but is, in fact, a revolutionary movement intent on rewriting conventional norms. Kramnick offers this poignant summary: “For the historical event in question to be considered a revolution, more than violence or widespread and total impact is required. There must be a peculiar direction and purposive orientation to the change; a novel structuring of society, a new and millennial order must be sought.” IS’ stated goals and actions have aligned with this definition.

The Islamic State’s cultural destruction program must be considered within this revolutionary context. In chapter 3, I demonstrate that eliminating historical heritage is a traditional tactic of insurgencies, since the act of demolishing a competing polity’s artifacts can delegitimize the ruling regime. Although conventional literature has assumed that IS’ actions have been a form of religious legitimation, the annihilation of symbols achieves revolutionary political ends. Cultural destruction is a form of violent coercive spectacle and a humiliation tactic that supports recruitment efforts. I explore both arguments in chapters 4 and 5.

Figure 1. A screen capture from a video released by the Islamic State demanding the end of Sykes-Picot, a 1916 agreement between the United Kingdom and France which defined their spheres of influence in Ottoman controlled territories. Screen capture from the Islamic State, The End of Sykes-Picot, 2014, https://www.belfasttelegraph.co.uk/video-news/video-islamic-state-media-branch-releases-the-end-of-sykespicot-30397575.html.
Cultural Destruction in the Political Sphere

Culture and heritage have always been fundamental to state-building, sovereignty, and legitimacy. The exact definition of culture, however, is controversial and difficult to pinpoint. The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) uses the following interpretation: “[Culture] is that complex whole which includes knowledge, beliefs, arts, morals, laws, customs, and any other capabilities and habits acquired by [a human] as a member of society.”¹ This schema is based on anthropological explanations of culture. International conventions underscore the relationship between culture and identity. A 2011 report from the Human Rights Council stressed that “Cultural heritage is important not only in itself, but also in relation to its human dimension, in particular its significance for individuals and communities and their identity and development processes.”² In both cases, culture represents a myriad of social structures that impact group identity and growth.

In this chapter, I combine these two interpretations to define culture as a group’s collective memory of its customs, intellectual and artistic achievements, and social institutions. This literature review approaches the relationship between culture and state-building through an interdisciplinary lens, drawing upon concepts such as collective memory, invented traditions, and imagined communities. In turn, I aim to establish the connection between culture and the modern nation-state.

Collective Memory

This chapter focuses on how the past is constructed and modified over time. A discussion of this topic draws on literature about collective memory. Maurice Halbwachs comments that “every group develops the memory of its own past that highlights its unique identity vis-à-vis other groups. These reconstructed images provide the group with an account of its origin and development and thus allow it to recognize itself through time.”

Collective memory therefore is a tool for identity, passed from one generation to the next. Halbwachs emphasized the relationship between material realities, such as places and symbols, and memory. He noted that the commemoration of physical spaces could contribute to the lasting identity of a culture. Although he never addressed the relationship between the nation-state and collective memory, his work has nonetheless become foundational to political theories about communities and traditions.

James E. Young further develops Halbwachs’ understanding. He discusses society’s memories as an aggregation of its members’ multiple and competing remembrances. Since individuals cannot share each other’s thoughts, groups construct values that organize memories into patterns. While individuals retain their unique remembrances, meanings are generated in these recollections by social norms. Collective memories are thus socially constructed assumptions passed from one generation to the next. In this way, traditions and cultural practices assign common meaning to individual remembrances.

For Young, an unmediated recollection of the past is almost impossible, due to society’s interventions. Memories are always imbued with meanings that were not originally present.

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The philosopher Laurajane Smith asserts that heritage is a cultural performance, wherein the past is recreated and adapted to meet the needs of the present. In this sense, collective memory can be seen as something practiced rather than something remembered. The manipulation of remembrance as a social effort is elaborated on in the following section, which explores the relationship between collective memory and state power.

**Collective Memory as a Practice of State-Building**

Modern nation-states have used culture, particularly the built environment, to assert dominance over a social ethos. The next section of this literature review examines the role of heritage in the state.

The sociologist Michael Mann notes that ancient empires often consolidated power through cultural domination. Since at least the time of Sargon, the first ruler of the Akkadian Empire, regimes have forced the cultural assimilation of conquered peoples: “It was possible, however, to acquire more power by adding diffused power to such authoritative processes. This was to take hostages of the children of the native elite and to ‘educate’ them and perhaps also their parents into the culture of the conquerors.” Scholars from a diverse range of disciplines have emphasized the power of culture as a strategy of state formation.

A groundbreaking 1983 publication defined tradition as a function of social governance. Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger conceptualized “invented traditions” as conventions which instill certain beliefs in those who accept them: “‘Invented tradition’ is taken to mean a set of practices, normally governed by overtly or tacitly accepted rules and of a ritual or symbolic

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nature, which seek to inculcate certain values and norms of behavior by repetition, which automatically implies continuity with the past.” The key aspect of Hobsbawm’s definition is that this culture is “invented” to meet the interests of the state. In fact, groups often make use of a historical past with which they have no connection in order to imply continuity. The symbolic practices associated with the “tradition” are co-opted by political regimes to embody certain ideological statements: “They are highly relevant to that comparatively recent historical innovation, the ‘nation’, with its associated phenomena: nationalism, the nation-state, national symbols, histories and the rest. All these rest on exercises in social engineering which are often deliberate and always innovative, if only because the historical novelty implies innovation.”

Hobsbawm argues that culture is a social exercise meant to consolidate power or establish legitimacy. Nation-states acquire identity through such invented traditions. In creating such customs, a political entity can author a narrative of values and authority that manages to rewrite a group’s collective memory:

They seem to belong to three overlapping types: a) those establishing or symbolizing social cohesion or the membership of groups, real or artificial communities, b) those establishing or legitimizing institutions, status or relations of authority, and c) those whose main purpose was socialization, the inculcation of beliefs, value systems and conventions of behaviour. While traditions of types b) and c) were certainly devised (as in those symbolizing submission to authority in British India), it may be tentatively suggested that type a) was prevalent, the other functions being regarded as implicit in or flowing from a sense of identification with a ‘community’ and/or the institutions representing, expressing or symbolizing it such as a ‘nation.’

Political institutions and ideological movements use symbols, rhetoric, and cultural heritage to inculcate values in a population. Hobsbawm emphasizes that culture adds meaning to society and to a social group’s perception of itself. A well-defined narrative of identity is often used for

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nationalist purposes, as Benedict Anderson explained in *Imagined Communities*. In his study of the Protestant Reformation, the author concludes that “…the convergence of capitalism and print technology on the fatal diversity of human language created the possibility of a new form of imagined community, which in its basic morphology set the stage for the modern nation.”\(^{10}\) He refers to this act of identity-building as the origin of national consciousness, positing that people are tied to political communities by these traditions that connect them.

Reflecting on nationalism, Anderson pushes the notion of invented traditions further. He identifies a common language and print-capitalism as two of the most important preconditions for imagined communities, which set the stage for the modern nation-state. The importance of a vernacular tongue rests in its ability to connect people based on a shared aspect of their identity: “In the process, [readers of print and paper] gradually became aware of the hundreds of thousands, even millions, of people in their particular language-field, and at the same time that *only those* hundreds of thousands, or millions, so belonged.”\(^{11}\) Language forms an aspect of identity, much like traditions and customs, and links individuals together into a community. Anderson recognizes the museum as an institution integral to the development of political communities. In fact, he mentions Colonial Archaeological Services as “museumizing” the imagination.\(^{12}\) In an imperial context, artifact museums portrayed the conquerors as the protectors of local cultural heritage, thereby negotiating an identity for the natives and the outsiders. Print-capitalism furthered the spread of this archaeology-based identity: “…a characteristic feature of the instrumentalities of this profane state was infinite reproducibility… (1) massive, technically sophisticated archaeological reports, complete with dozens of

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\(^{11}\) Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, 44.

photographs, recording the process of reconstruction of particular, distinct ruins...”

Archaeology mediated imagined communities, enabling their spread and consolidation. In this way, culture is a political exercise, wherein changes in tradition can signify shifts in ideology.

Yael Zerubavel situates her discussion of collective memory within a framework of political commemoration. She argues that history is a negotiation between records and social agendas. Moments from the past can be exploited to articulate a shared memory of that time. Commemorative rituals, according to Zerubavel, are fundamental to defining these collective remembrances. Together, these form a master narrative, which highlights a group’s historical development, with a particular focus on origins: “The commemoration of beginnings is clearly essential for demarcating the group’s distinct identity vis-à-vis others. The emphasis on a ‘great divide’ between this group and others is used to dispel any denial of the group’s legitimacy.”

Culture serves as a marker of identity. Writing about Israel, Zerubavel points to the Zionist movement’s mobilization of culture. Antiquity, she argues, was rewritten to emphasize the individual spirit of the Jewish people through a process of national commemoration. The Bar Kokhba revolt, the siege of Masada, and the Battle of Tel Hai were taught in schools as metaphors that signaled a commitment to Jewish liberation and Israeli freedom. In this way, collective memory served multiple purposes: first, it created an imagined community by fostering a collective sense of statehood and second, it constructed a narrative of that state. Each event emphasized the resolve of the Jewish people, creating an image of strength in the face of adversity. Cultural creation clarified what it meant to be Jewish and, in this case, an Israeli-Jewish citizen. Thus, in the international system, culture can be an effective state-building tool.

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When mobilized or weaponized, heritage can give identity to a population. The built environment is a manifestation of cultural power.

**The Built Environment as State Power**

In this section, I transition from abstract collective memory to the physical. Art, architecture, and monuments mediate interpretations of the past. This “built environment” is a political exercise: in a 2002 interview, Eric Hobsbawm expressed worry that “history – including tradition – is being invented in vast quantities. In the past 30 years there’s been an explosion of heritage sites and historical museums.”\(^\text{15}\) I explore how the built environment conveys state power and, later, how the destruction of such monuments erodes that authority.

The architectural theorist Hilde Heynen posited that the built environment was one medium through which socially significant memories could be communicated across society. Monuments, therefore, served a commemorative purpose. The art critic John Ruskin characterized buildings as “storehouses of memory,” since they shared state interests with a broad audience. The sociologist Paul Jones adds to this theory in his book *The Sociology of Architecture: Constructing Identities*, writing the following:

The desire of states and other polities to communicate social messages across rapidly expanding nineteenth-century urban citizenry led to the ascription of messages onto the built environment via a whole range of monuments and statues and major public buildings designed to have a memorial function; the countless monuments and plaques that characterize capitals and other large cities the world over are testament to this tendency.\(^\text{16}\)


The communicative potential of architecture provides a symbolic space for creating collective memories. As the nation-state began to develop, so too did ambitious construction projects, including monuments, memorials, and buildings, which materialized narratives of belonging.17 The sociologist Göran Therbon writes that in Europe, capital cities instrumentalized the “ politicization and monumentalization of urban space…a construction and affirmation of national identity by collective national memory.”18 Architecture thus codified state identity.

This manipulation of architecture, however, predates even the nation-state. Mesopotamian Kings, for instance, were known as prolific builders: “The Mesopotamian royal edifice complex attempted to ensure the ruler would be remembered and praised by associating his name with architectural constructions which it was planned would last for years, possibly centuries…”19 Edifices were thus an exercise in sovereignty and memorialization. Sophisticated metropolitan centers with ambitious construction projects could communicate authority. In the Roman Empire, commemorative monuments conveyed power in the city center and throughout the provinces. The Arch of Titus, for instance, contained a relief which narrated the conquest of Judea, offering a Roman audience a glimpse of state power.20 The detailed stonework emphasizes Rome’s penchant for siege and triumph. Other monuments, such as the Columns of Trajan and Marcus Aurelius, conveyed similar narratives. A relief from Trajan’s Column depicts Victory inscribing a shield, again emphasizing Roman success in battle. Such commemorative monuments, when scattered throughout the built environment, promote national power.

Contemporary states used the built environment to justify ideologies. The Soviet Union presents an interesting case study in totalitarian architecture. Design was mobilized by the party in order to unify disparate regions under one political banner. The bloc style, known for its multipurpose, equalizing aesthetic, communicated ideological messages about the Communist philosophy. Given that this political ideology relied on the equal recognition of all peoples, the built environment needed to espouse that same message. In that sense, Soviet architecture can be seen as a representation of the state’s politics: the built environment functions as the collective memory of the regime and state.

In a recent construction effort, India erected a 597-foot tall bronze statue of its first deputy prime minister, Sardar Vallabhai Patel. In remarks about the project, Prime Minister Narendra Modi declared that “This statue is an answer to all those who question India’s power and might.” The massive artwork was to be considered a “symbol of India’s integrity and resolve,” an exercise in demonstrating its power to the world. Cultural heritage and the built environment served, therefore, as a demonstration of state authority, both domestically and internationally.

In the past sections, I have attempted to link state building to cultural heritage, with the built environment as a specific manifestation of cultural power. Just as ambitious construction projects can embody the ideological goals of the state, so too can destructive efforts. In the next two sections, I examine heritage destruction, which has historically been used to delegitimize the state or ruling regime.

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22 Cascone, “India Just Unveiled the World’s Tallest Statue, and It’s Twice as Big as the Statue of Liberty.”
Cultural Destruction in the Ancient Near East

The practice of cultural destruction is well attested to in the historical record. The Old Testament records in Deuteronomy that upon besieging a city, a conqueror should steal all of the spoils, which came in the form of cultural property.\(^{23}\) King Ashurnasirpal II of Assyria adapted this strategy when he overpowered a rival city. In an inscription, he writes “[T]he city I destroyed, I devastated, I burned with fire.”\(^{24}\) This act of demolishing the built environment eradicated any lingering memory of the conquered civilization. Building on the work of Anderson and Hobsbawm, without any written record or constructed edifices, the militants effectively managed to destroy a community. With no practices of commemoration or heritage, the conquered group would not be able to re-establish legitimacy or to consolidate power. In this sense, for Ashurnasirpal II, the destruction of cultural heritage was a tactic of war that obliterated all possibility of another rebellion. Ironically, Islamic State militants destroyed Ashurnasirpal’s citadel, Nimrud, in 2015.

The art historian Zainab Bahrani conceives of cultural destruction as a political iteration of deconstructive criticism. In *Assault and Abduction: the Fate of the Royal Image in the Ancient Near East*, she writes that “Since [deconstructive criticism] is concerned with the conditions and assumptions that frame discourse, deconstruction can be a political approach, setting out to dismantle established hierarchical relations, or methodological givens, on which interpretation depends, and to situate interpretation within its own socio-political sphere.”\(^{25}\) Her interpretation is based on evidence from ancient Near Eastern cities. Nineveh, a capital of the Assyrian Empire, was sacked by the Medes and Babylonians in 612 BC. Reliefs from the two palaces were mutilated. The Southwest Palace, constructed by Sennacherib (704-681 BC), boasted a series of

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shallow carved wall scenes that recounted his siege of the Jewish town Lachish. The Medes and Babylonians gouged out the face of the king and removed an epigraph from above his head with his title and praises. Another relief series showed off Ashurbanipal’s (669-627 BC) defeat of the Elamites at the Battle of Til-Tuba. A soldier’s face was mutilated while the king and queen’s faces were smashed. According to Bahrani, the singling out of particular people implies that specific resources were dedicated to this activity: “The act was not undertaken in the frenzy of battle. Clearly some forethought had to have preceded it. A decision had to be taken, and a scribe or other literate person had to be ordered to identify particularly odious people in the representations.”

Bahrani concludes that this act of destruction fulfilled a political goal: that of undermining the Assyrian kings. In this sense, the mutilation of images delegitimized the regime.

Perhaps the most famous episode of cultural destruction in the ancient world was perpetrated by the Persian king, Xerxes I (518-465 BC). Herodotus writes that the monarch sought to conquer and burn all of Athens, which he managed to do in 497 BC. After reaching the city of the Acropolis, Xerxes and his soldiers plundered and smashed a temple of Apollo, adorned with treasures and offerings. They also damaged the Acropolis structures and carried four statues from Athens to Susa, Xerxes’ capital. In fact, the Persian king had often relied on cultural destruction as a strategy of war: he had attempted to first obliterate the symbols of Babylonian identity. After a battle, his army killed priests and destroyed the Temple of Esagila and the Great Ziggurat. The Persians then removed and melted an 18-foot golden statue of the god Bel Marduk, which damaged Babylonian autonomy: “This was a particularly severe blow to the Babylonians’ identity and legitimacy, because the rightful king of Babylon normally should have clasped hands with the statue on New Year’s Day. By looting Babylon’s great estates and eviscerating their culture, the Persians successfully demolished the theocratic monarchy and the

city lost its independence. Cultural destruction, in this sense, was a strategy of delegitimization.

**Cultural Destruction in the Ancient West**

Cultural destruction was not restricted to the ancient Near East. The city of Olynthus in Northern Greece was looted and destroyed by Phillip II in 348 BC. Although remnants of the pillage were left behind, the city itself was never rebuilt, effectively eradicating the collective memory of the civilization. In another event, the Phocians attacked the sanctuary of Delphi and melted down a gold tripod which had been dedicated to Apollo by the Greeks who defeated the Persians at Plataia. The artifact was supported by a column composed of three intertwined snakes, with the names of the communities that had participated inscribed on the coils. The Phocians destroyed the commemorative artwork, asserting dominance over the Greek coalition that had emerged victorious against the Persians years before. As another example, the Agora of Athens still retains a layer of ash from when the Roman general Sulla sacked the city in 86 BC. The debris, filled with architectural fragments, was revenge against the Athenians for siding with Mithradates of Pontus against Rome. In addition to their destructive acts, Sulla’s soldiers stole shields from the Stoa of Zeus, a famous painting by Zeuxis, some columns from the Temple of Zeus Olympios, and volumes from Aristotle’s library.

Polybius asserts that the ancient Romans practiced cultural destruction as well. The general Publius Cornelius Scipio Africanus, following the defeat of Carthago Nova in Spain in

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209 AD, commanded his troops to organize and plunder the city. As Polybius recounts, each soldier had a specific duty related to removing the spoils of war or destroying whatever could not be easily transported. Again, this account proves the commonality of cultural destruction in the ancient world. In each case, this act of violence had a strategic end.\textsuperscript{32} The damage to Carthago Nova mimicked the sack of Carthage, perpetrated by Publius Cornelius Scipio Aemilianus in 146 BC:

After the Romans won the Second Punic War, they feared that Carthage would rise again as it had done before. To avoid any further conflict, they put the city under siege…After plundering valuable items, the Romans leveled the city to the ground and cursed Carthage by throwing salt on the ground so that neither vegetation nor buildings could ever rise again.\textsuperscript{33}

For the Romans, utter destruction was a core strategy of war. The obliteration of any form of collective memory or autonomy would quell uprisings for centuries to come, suffocating the Carthaginian spirit.

\textbf{Cultural Destruction in the Modern Era}

Cultural destruction is generalizable across political communities and historical periods. In the modern era, Napoleon was famous for efforts to confiscate Italian art from private collections, museums, and churches. He commissioned an agency that was tasked with sending exceptional art to Paris for display. This form of cultural destruction is considered assimilation, in which the conqueror co-opts the unique identity of the conquered, undermining its distinctiveness. In May 1796, Napoleon signed treaties that allowed French commanders to steal the paintings, manuscripts, and prints of their choosing. The treasures were paraded in Paris along with the declaration that France was the new Rome.

\textsuperscript{32} Miles, \textit{Art as Plunder: The Ancient Origins of Debate about Cultural Property}, 40.
\textsuperscript{33} Turku, \textit{The Destruction of Cultural Property as a Weapon of War: ISIS in Syria and Iraq}, 33.
German soldiers are credited with beginning the tradition of twentieth-century cultural destruction. On August 25, 1914, during World War 1, they burned the centuries-old university library in Leuven, which held 230,000 volumes, including 750 medieval manuscripts: “The destruction of the centuries-old university library in Leuven heralded the start of the deliberate destruction of libraries and other cultural resources as a strategy of twentieth-century warfare.”

In World War 2, Nazi soldiers continued the same tradition. At Hitler’s command, they seized 250,000 pieces of Western art while destroying libraries, museums, statues, temples, churches, mosques, and other cultural patrimony. A German manual from 1902 states that war should not be conducted against combatants alone; instead, it must destroy “the total material and intellectual resources of the enemy.” German militants often adopted this strategy, demanding the annihilation of both military and cultural power.

In Cambodia, the Khmer Rouge looted and destroyed much of the country’s cultural property. Pol Pot, who commanded the regime, idealized the Angkor Empire and sought to obliterate everything created outside of that time period. This commitment resulted in attacks on Catholic churches, Muslim mosques, Buddhist temples, and statues:

The Khmer Rouge not only built its legitimacy and ideology based on a glorified past, but it also sold antiquities from the temples to raise foreign currency…Under the Khmer Rouge regime, the Dépôt de la Conservation d’Angkor, which housed the largest collection of antiquities from that era, lost a large part of its collection and hundreds of statues were decapitated.

Legitimacy was derived from a constructed past, with an emphasis on a “clean” ancient period, before Cambodia was corrupted by outside forces. This rhetoric about a “pure” period of history

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has also been used by Islamic State militants, who claim to be removing any non-caliphate heritage from the Middle East.

Another contemporary example is the war in the former Yugoslavia. The skirmishes resulted in the destruction of Roman, Byzantine, Renaissance, Islamic, Baroque, and Gothic era art. Cultural property became a tactic of ethnic cleansing efforts: “In order to create an ‘ethnically pure’ state, combatants sought to remove all indications of a multicultural past. As such, places of worship were specifically targeted in this cleansing campaign.” Thousands of cultural institutions were destroyed in a systematic genocide, all to achieve the ultimate goal of creating an “ethnically pure” state. Many UNESCO registered sites suffered intentional damage, including the Old Mostar Bridge and the Library at Sarajevo.

In March 2001, the Taliban announced a political cleansing strategy that involved attacking all non-Islamic cultural property. They destroyed two ancient statues of Buddha, which were carved in sandstone cliffs in Bamiyan, Afghanistan. The Taliban used an edict issued by their supreme leader Mullah Mohammed Omar to defend their acts of plunder. He claimed that all idols are gods of the infidels, and such false images should be removed. The Taliban sacked the Afghanistan National Museum, from which 70,000 pieces have now been reported missing.

Each of these situations demonstrates an attempt to delegitimize a conquered group through pillage and plunder. Patterns of destruction are recognizable across regions, time periods, and political communities. In revolutionary situations, heritage is destroyed in order to erode the cultural power of the ruling regime. I elaborate on this theory in the following section, by exploring the acts from the English Civil War, the Russian Revolution, and the Chinese Cultural Revolution.

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Cultural Destruction in Revolutions

In their early stages, revolutionary movements are not engaged in long-term building projects, since they lack resources and financial support. However, the destruction of a competing polity’s culture can be a tool for delegitimizing a ruling regime. In fact, cultural destruction may be more common in revolutionary and insurgency movements. Tactically, the act is a direct attack on the values and norms of the existing regime. Because cultural heritage is tied to the identities of nation-states, its destruction can support a competing group’s claims to sovereignty: “Smashing hated images and artifacts of the past can serve as a surrogate for angry violence against human representatives of the old order. It can help erase reminders of previous holders of power and majesty. It makes way for the fashioning of new symbols and emblems of the revolutionary order.”

38 In this sense, revolutions often rely on the eradication of history. In the previous chapter, I characterized the Islamic State as a revolutionary movement. Therefore, its cultural destruction efforts should be viewed as part of a longstanding revolutionary tradition.

In 1643, during the first English Civil War, parliamentary agents stole the crowns and coronation robes of England’s monarchs from the Regalia Chamber of Westminster Abbey. The House of Commons voted to melt and sell the silver and gold from these artifacts, decrying the hedonistic emblems of the royal family. Revolutionaries, understanding that surface appearances were important, removed the symbolic aspects of the ruling regime in order to delegitimize its power. This was likely the goal of revisionist Puritans, who sought to annihilate the symbols of the monarchy. The iconoclasm of the English Civil War was a strategic decision, meant to eliminate the symbols of old and replace them with the standards of new.

The Russian Revolution of 1917 was one of the most iconoclastic of all time, according to the historian Richard Stites. A 1921 poster showed a worker destroying the foundations of

buildings and churches. In Petrograd, an insurgency group invaded prisons, courthouses, and arsenals to blow them up. These moments of destruction were multifunctional, serving military and political ends. In removing all images of the Romanov family from the city, the revolutionaries managed to erase the importance of the ruling family. Tsarist emblems, such as coats-of-arms and eagles, were erased from the Mariinsky Theater, gates in the Capital, and storefronts. In this way, they delegitimized the regime, by removing its symbols of power, thus negotiating a new identity for Russia.

The Chinese Cultural Revolution emphasized destruction as fundamental to the movement. The Communists attacked the “Four Olds” as part of an attempt to erase all pre-revolutionary history. The Red Guards mobilized against culture in order to proclaim themselves as the critics of the old world, destroying all imperialist and bourgeois things not in accord with Mao Zedong thought. Bookshops for classical theory were ordered out of business. Images in the City God Temple were smashed, the Jing’an Temple was looted, the Longhua Temple’s scriptures were burned, and the Xujiahui Cathedral’s interior was torched. The Attack on the Four Olds was intended to erase the recent past, with its non-Communist influences. Instead, Mao Zedong wanted to link his “New Democracy” with ancient Chinese culture: “China’s long period of feudal society created a magnificent ancient culture.” The destruction of cultural heritage was therefore an attempt to remove unwanted relics and instead replace them with symbols of a new order.

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41 Ho, “Revolutionizing Antiquity,” 692.
42 Ho, “Revolutionizing Antiquity,” 696.
Conclusion

Cultural destruction is generalizable across many time periods, regions, and political communities. These histories are an attempt to substantiate, by example and argument, my claim that eradicating heritage is a common tactic of war and revolution. As culture is fundamental to both the nation-state and its community, control over heritage facilitates control over a narrative. To be specific, heritage negotiates identity, by enabling both statehood and its political meaning.

In the next two chapters, I embark on an empirical study of the Islamic State. I first examine its usage of violence as a tactic of coercion, arguing that ritual displays of brutality have forced the compliance of civilians within its territory. I claim that cultural destruction is a spectacular display of military strength, aimed at striking fear into the local psyche. Second, I study radical Islamist discourse to propose that cultural destruction functions as a recruitment strategy. IS relies on dialogues of humiliation to attract followers. Eradicating heritage manages to embarrass modern nation-states and international organizations for their failure to preserve cultural property, thus intensifying positive sentiments toward the Islamic State and perhaps increasing recruitment.
Violence and Spectacle in the Islamic State

The central claim that this thesis aims to make is that cultural destruction was a mechanism of terror for the Islamic State. Engaging in the eradication of heritage is to use the politics of spectacle in order to force submission. Cultural destruction is functional violence, aimed at compelling a civilian population into obedience and submission.

This section explores the effects of terrifying violence as a coercive tool inside the Islamic State. I examine both the violence enacted within the caliphate – that is, beheadings and other physical forms of punishment – and those perpetrated in other countries – such as bombings, knife attacks, etc. In turn, I aim to show that violence has a controlling effect, forcing caliphate citizens to self-regulate and to follow the directives of the Islamic State without challenge.

Violence as a Tactic in the Islamic State

The Islamic State’s rise to power has been described as “meteoric” by many scholars. The spring of 2013, when IS declared its caliphate, was marked by extreme violence in Syria. In the capital, revolutionaries were still clamoring for President Bashar al-Assad’s deposition, while in the territory that would become the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria, men were being shot at close range. Video footage of the latter was disseminated throughout the world, accompanied by a recording of the dead Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, who declared that “...the spark has been ignited in

Iraq and its fires shall only get bigger until it burns the Armies of the Cross in Dabiq.”

Since its earliest days, the Islamic State has been characterized by its brutal use of force, which has been integral to its efforts to undermine the ruling regimes of Iraq and Syria. In the first issue of *Dabiq*, writers praised the violence perpetrated by Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, who used force to enable the creation of the Islamic State:

Shaykh Abu Mus’ab (rahimahullah) [Allah have mercy upon him] implemented the strategy and required tactics to achieve the goal of Khilafah [the Caliphate] without hesitation. In short, he strived to create as much chaos as possible with the means permitted by the Shari’ah using attacks sometimes referred to as operations of “nikayah” (injury) that focus on causing the enemy death, injury, and damage. With chaos, he intended to prevent any taghut [infidel] regime from ever achieving a degree of stability that would enable it to reach a status quo similar to that existing in the Muslim lands ruled for decades by tawaghit [infidels]…To achieve maximum chaos, the Shaykh focused on the most effective weapons in the arsenal of the mujahidin [holy army] for creating chaos – vehicle bombs, IEDs, and istishhadiyyin [martyrdom]. He would order to carry out nikayah operations dozens of times in a dozen areas daily, targeting and killing sometimes hundreds of apostates from the police forces and Rafidah [those who reject Allah]. In addition to that, he tried to force every apostate group present in Iraq into an all-out war with Ahlus-Sunnah [Sunni Muslims]. So he targeted the Iraqi apostate forces (army, police, and intelligence), the Rafidah (Shia markets, temples, and militias), and the Kurdish secularists (Barzani and Talabani parisans).

The strategies employed by Zarqawi, who is considered the mastermind behind the Islamic State, which was established following his death, were regulatory mechanisms. The writers of *Dabiq* praise the extreme use of “violence and arms” for the strategic role that they played in the development of the Caliphate. IS’ revolution depended on force for legitimacy and statehood. Violence was needed to undermine and oust the ruling regimes of Iraq and Syria from the territory that would become the Caliphate’s center.

To demonstrate my claim, I turn to literature on the relationship between violence and the following: sovereignty, revolutions, and economic extraction. I rely on the theories of Hobbes,

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Machiavelli, Weber, Thucydides, Marx and Engels, and Tilly to draw conclusions on the historical applications of violence. I then transition into Michel Foucault and Lisa Wedeen’s hypotheses on spectacles in order to argue that the Islamic State’s acts of cultural destruction functioned as regulatory mechanisms, designed to coerce civilians into fearing IS’ military potential.

**Sovereign States and Violence**

Thomas Hobbes contended that “covenants, without the sword, are but words.” Viewing human nature through a cynical lens, he argued that an absolute monarch must claim “…a monopoly of power with minimal regard for moral limits, there being as yet no legal checks.” For Hobbes, the state must maintain a coercive hold on force, rather than be tolerant. He regarded violence as a tool of legitimacy, suggesting that the ruler must wield this power in order to give his directives credence. Otherwise, any orders are hollow promises which fail to accomplish anything. In this sense, violence is a coercive mechanism aimed at compelling a civilian population into pledging allegiance to the state and the ruling regime.

The German sociologist Max Weber provided the most seminal definition of the state as a violent entity in his 1919 lecture *Politics as a Vocation*. Building on Trotsky’s declaration that every state is founded on force, he argued that “…a state is a human community that (successfully) claims the monopoly of legitimate use of physical force within a given territory.”

For Weber, the relationship between the state and violence was inextricable. Legitimacy and, by extension, legitimate violence, are both derived from the consent of the governed. The

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complicity of the populace legitimizes the state’s usage of violence: “…the leaders, through usurpation or election, have attained control over the political staff and the apparatus of material goods; and they deduce their legitimacy – no matter with what right – from the will of the governed.”

**Violent Displays of Sovereignty in the Islamic State**

Within the Islamic State, public displays of brutality are commonplace, with the consequence that all the citizens are coerced into following the regime’s whims. An article from *Dabiq* 15 titled “By the Sword” sheds light on life within the Caliphate. Images of a beheading and stoning captioned “The sword is a part of Allah’s law” and “Killed for the abominable crime of sodomy” accompany the write-up, which cites scripture to indicate that the enforcement of law must be brutal. For instance, the following passage indicates the importance of violence:

> Once the rule of the Lord was established, the sword was not to be put away but rather remain ever-unsheathed to implement the Law. The blasphemer was killed by stoning. “Whoever blasphemes the name of the Lord shall surely be put to death. All the congregation shall stone him” (Leviticus 24:16). As for the apostate who calls to worshipping other gods, then “you shall not yield to him or listen to him, nor shall your eye pity him, nor shall you spare him, nor shall you conceal him. But you shall kill him. Your hand shall be first against him to put him to death” (Deuteronomy 13:8-9).

Likewise, the murderer was executed. “Whoever takes a human life shall surely be put to death” (Leviticus 24:17). And sodomites were slain. “If a man lies with a male as with a woman, both of them have committed an abomination; they shall surely be put to death; their blood is upon them” (Leviticus 24:13). Furthermore, there was retribution (known as “qisas” in the Shari’ah). “If anyone injures his neighbor, as he has done it shall be done to him” (Leviticus 24:19), and “you shall pay life for life, eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot, burn for burn, wound for wound, stripe for stripe” (Exodus 21:23-25). In Psalms, a wisdom behind divinely-ordained killing is mentioned. “When He killed them, they sought Him; they repented and sought God earnestly” (Psalms 78:34), just as elsewhere in the Old Testament, one finds that “cursed is he who keeps back his sword from bloodshed” (Jeremiah 48:10).

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Within the Islamic State, law is enforced with great brutality. As Hobbes suggests, the ruling regime relies on force to ensure that its directives are followed, although violence is not always used in an explicit sense. The consequence for defying the authority of the Caliphate is public and fierce, pressuring civilians to adhere to IS’ principles. Physical coercion thus ensures that the state’s orders are compelling.

**Violence and Revolutions**

Thucydides, writing about the Corcyraean Revolution, discusses the violence that often accompanies insurgent movements. In 427 BC, the citizens of Athens’ ally Corcyra were victims of internal strife. The commoners sought to align themselves with the democratic Athens, while the oligarchs wished to enlist the support of Sparta. Disorder and panic ensued, which transformed into a civil war: “The Corcyraeans…got up on top of the building, and breaking through the roof, threw down the tiles and let fly arrows at them, from which the prisoners sheltered themselves as well as they could. Most of [the prisoners], meanwhile, were engaged in dispatching themselves by thrusting into their throats the arrows shot by enemy, and hanging themselves…” Thucydides illustrates the violence that is often a tactic of civil war and revolution. I explore the connection between violence and revolution further, arguing that the Islamic State has employed this strategy to coerce its population into obedience while also inspiring fear among its enemies.

In his *Discourses on Livy*, the Florentine political philosopher Niccolò Machiavelli argued that violence was fundamental to a revolution. In particular, if a leader wanted to hasten a regime change, then the best way to accomplish this task was by means of force: “For to do this [make new orders and laws], it is not enough to use ordinary terms, since the ordinary modes are

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bad; but it is necessary to go to the extraordinary, such as violence and arms…”\footnote{Niccolò Machiavelli, “Discourses on Livy: Book 1,” accessed April 18, 2019, https://www.constitution.org/mac/disclivy1.htm.} In order for a revolution to be successful, the movement must use force to depose an existing regime, thereby creating space for a new order. If this change is successful, then the new “Prince” must wield violence and kindness in equal parts to consolidate power. Force is therefore integral to the state and its administration.

Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels declared that violence was the driving force of history, arguing that power transitions are the result of physical coercion: [violence] is “the midwife of every old society which is pregnant with a new one.”\footnote{Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, The German Ideology (New York: International Publishers, 1947), 10.} The authors refer to the revolutions of 1848, in which they see bureaucratic institutions as the main hindrances to radical transformations to civil and political society. They argue that the police and military are obstacles to change, since these institutions are more responsive to the elite classes than the common people. Radical transformation, therefore, depends on a change in the forms of coercion.\footnote{Mayer, “Violence,” 77.} If a revolutionary movement managed to accomplish this shift, they could usher in a power transition. The instruments of violence and coercion, therefore, must be centralized in another authority that is answerable to the common people.

Writing about the Russia in 1919, Weber was unsurprised that the provisional government should try to secure control over the usage of violence, so as to demonstrate that “…the state is the ‘sole source of the ‘law.’”\footnote{Mayer, “Violence,” 79.} He further argued that in revolutions, authority was often attributed to charismatic rule, one of the three types he identifies in Politics as a Vocation. Charismatic leadership is creative and unrestrained by customs and laws. This type of authority can be wielded by warlords, demagogues, party leaders, etc.
Violent Displays of Revolution in the Islamic State

The Islamic State boasts its own military and police forces, which citizens see as legitimate. The military, for instance, is portrayed as a force that protects civilians and liberates others from apostate governments: “...the mujahidin of the Islamic State continue to liberate more and more territory, consolidate their gains and win the support of the masses.” IS militants are thus portrayed as a legitimate force, whereas the armies of Iraq and Syria are allied with the West and are no longer representative of Islam or Shariah. Applying Marx and Engels model, coercive power has been moved to a new organization, enabling a power transition. A monopoly on violence legitimizes the Islamic State.

Furthermore, IS forces its fighters to accept its overarching legitimacy by having them sign pledges and contracts which explicitly state that militants will “Listen and obey the orders of [the] Emir, whether [they] agree with them or not.” The state thus manages to compel the governed into accepting it as the only legitimate user of violence. Only the Islamic State’s leadership can decide on the proper usage of force, so the soldiers must follow the orders of their superiors. The state has a monopoly on the legitimate use of physical force. Violence legitimizes the state and coerces its population into submission.

Violence as Economic Extraction

In *War Making and State Making as Organized Crime*, Charles Tilly characterizes the state as a protection racket. The government extracts resources, often in the form of taxes, from the civilian population and, in turn, provides services such as a police force and military to keep the territory safe: “Power holder’s pursuit of war involved them willy-nilly in the extraction of resources for war making from the populations over which they had control and in the promotion of capital accumulation by those who could help them borrow and buy.”\(^{16}\) Tilly argues that the state accomplishes four tasks: war making, or neutralizing rivals outside of its territory; state making, or neutralizing rivals within its territory; protection, or neutralizing the rivals of its clients; and extraction, or acquiring the resources to help it carry out the three aforementioned activities. The state acquires legitimacy through these violent acts. The distinction that Weber makes between “legitimate” and “illegitimate” force is blurred, because the state is legitimized by virtue of performing these tasks.\(^{17}\) The practice of war making and state making has a coercive aspect: as long as the state is eliminating its enemies, both internal and external, the civilian population will support the “protection racket.” Taxes are paid to ensure that the state is both neutralizing its rivals and also not attacking its citizens. In this sense, the potential for violence coerces the civilian population into following the state’s directives.

The Islamic State has followed the model of coercive violence proposed by Tilly. According to a New York Times exposé, the Islamic State earned more in tax revenue than in income from oil sales. The caliphate charged harvest and agriculture taxes, household taxes, fuel and vehicle taxes, school fees for children, cash withdrawal taxes, and a religious tax known as zakat, one of the five pillars of Islam. The mandatory tax was calculated at 2.5% of an

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\(^{17}\) Tilly, “War Making and State Making as Organized Crime,” 171.
individual’s assets and up to 10% for agricultural production. According to a study by the Paris-based Central for the Analysis of Terrorism, the group earned about 800 million dollars in annual tax revenue.

Documents from the Islamic State reveal that massive amounts of this collected income funded military activities, following Tilly’s model. First, Tilly emphasizes that the state must neutralize its external enemies. In the case of the Islamic State, its declared rivals are Western democracies and any Islamic nations who associate with them. In the 10th issue of Dabiq, the Islamic State’s official publication, writers praised Caliphate soldiers for attacks carried out in Kuwait, France, Britain, among others. The Islamic State supplied soldiers with weapons and then paid their families if they died in action, distributing the resources extracted from the population for the purpose of war making. In this sense, they enacted the first of Tilly’s conditions: neutralizing their external enemies and using state-collected resources for that purpose. The Islamic State dedicates most of its income to military operations.

The second criteria that Tilly proposes is that the state must eliminate its enemies within its territory. A report from Dabiq 6 reveals that the Islamic State silences anyone who criticizes its policies: “Following the announcement of the Khilafah’s [Caliphate’s] expansion to new lands, the mujahidin in the new wilayat [Barqah governorate in Libya] stepped up their attacks in

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the fight against the kuffar [nonbelievers] and the murtaddin [apostates].”\textsuperscript{21} IS uses brutal methods to eliminate enemies within its territory, or anyone who resists the Caliphate’s overarching rule. Militants loyal to the Islamic State implemented genocidal policies against the Yazidis in Sinjar. Citing scripture again, the Islamic State defended its brutal practice of cleansing enemies within its territory:

In the remnants of the Torah, it is found that…regarding the Children of Israel going into Palestine – “When the Lord your God brings you into the land that you are entering to take possession of it, and clears away the many nations before you, the Hittites, the Girgashites, the Amorites, the Canaanites, the Perizzites, the Hivites, and the Jebusites, seven nations more numerous and mightier than yourselves, and when the Lord your God gives them over to you, and you defeat them, then you must devote them to complete destruction. You shall make no covenant with them and show no mercy to them” (Deuteronomy 7:1-2). This command of genocide was further stressed: “When you draw near to a city to fight against it, offer terms of peace to it. And if it responds to you peaceably and it opens to you, then all the people who are found in it shall do forced labor for you and shall serve you. But if it makes no peace with you, but makes war against you, then you shall besiege it…”\textsuperscript{22}

This directive from Deuteronomy, cited by the Islamic State in its official publication, demands that rivals within a territory be neutralized. This directive, mandated by the Torah, is the second core criteria of violent state making. IS’ terror tactics and genocidal policies are evident in this passage. In this sense, civilians are presented with a choice: either submit to the Islamic State – that is, be coerced by the threat of force – or perish in a gruesome manner. Violence is therefore a core aspect of Da’esh’s strategy.

Tilly also argues that the state must perform protective duties, by eliminating the enemies of its clients – in this case, taxpaying citizens of the Islamic State. By definition, an “enemy of the client” should be anyone who presents a threat to the way of life ordained by Shariah Law. Earlier, I provided examples of the brutality of life for lawbreakers in the Islamic State.

\textsuperscript{22} The Islamic State, “By the Sword,” 78.
Religious police enforce all aspects of civic life. Again, citing scripture, IS offers an anecdote to sanction punishing those who threaten clients of the state: “As for upholding the Law, then in an apparent move to command virtue and forbid vice, which is chiefly done with physical force, all four ‘gospels’ mention the story of Jesus violently expelling the moneychangers from the temple.” The Islamic State’s police force is thus tasked with protecting its citizens from their rivals, or those who threaten the Shariah based way of life. This Biblical reference encourages the regime to ensure that sanctity is preserved through violent means. This strategy, in turn, coerces civilians into following the state’s directive.

From Physical to Spectacle-Based Violence

The French philosopher Michel Foucault writes about the regulatory politics associated with spectacles of disciplinary power. He argues that in Europe, civilians were subjected to machinations of discipline which forced obedience: “Discipline increases the forces of the body (in economic terms of utility) and diminishes these same forces (in political terms of obedience). In short, it dissociates power from the body…it reverses the course of the energy, the power that might result from it, and turns it into a relation of strict subjection.” Foucault references the carceral state as the mechanism of disciplinary power, arguing that citizens “self-regulate” to avoid being punished by the state. The presence of the prison is a form of biopolitical control: people, believing that their actions are being policed, follow the laws of the state in order to avoid punishment. Obedience is internalized in the psyche and incorporated into daily life. People submit to the will of the state, which asserts power through tacit shows of discipline and punishment. Prison is therefore a spectacle which secures civilian compliance.

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23 The Islamic State, “By the Sword,” 79.
In *Ambiguities of Domination*, Lisa Wedeen builds on the theories of Michel Foucault to provide a comprehensive overview of the coercive nature of disciplinary symbolic power. That is, the connection between violence and self-regulation. While the definition posited in *Discipline and Punishment* is limited to the tacit presence of the carceral, Wedeen argues that public displays of penalty achieve the same results. Writing about Syria, she contends that the state mobilized its citizens to embody its power: “First, orchestrated spectacles discipline the participants and organize them for the physical enactment of ritual gestures, regimenting their bodies into an order that both symbolizes and prepares for political obedience.” For Wedeen, public demonstrations of punishment force obedience by instilling fear in the civilian population. Public executions were rare but practiced in Syria, while disciplinary spectacles were prominent. She writes that the politics of such displays were regulatory and compelled citizens into participating and promoting the regime.

**A Politics of Sensationalized Destruction**

What constitutes a political spectacle? Lisa Wedeen characterizes such public demonstrations as anything which enforces obedience to the regime. In the following passage, she offers contemporary examples from Syria:

> The images of citizens delivering panegyrics to Asad’s rule, collectively forming his face, signing oaths in blood, or simply displaying a picture of him in their shop windows communicate to Syrians throughout the country the impression of Asad’s power independent of his readiness to use it. As James C. Scott notes, “effective display may, by conveying the impression of actual power and the will to see it, economize on the actual use of violence.” To this extent, Asad’s cult is an effective mechanism of power because while economizing on the actual use of force, it also works to generate obedience. Asad is powerful because people treat him as powerful; spectacles are enactments of people treating him as powerful, thereby helping to make him so. In other words, political systems are upheld not only by shared visions, material gains, and punishments, but also

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by unstable, shifting enactments of power and powerlessness, which are no less real for being symbolic. Spectacles not only provide an occasion to enforce obedience, but also represent this enforcement, thereby serving to create a *mentalité* of popular powerlessness that helps produce the regime’s power anew. And the greater the absurdity of the required performance, the more clearly it demonstrates that the regime can make most people obey most of the time.\(^{27}\)

In the Islamic State, spectacles secure compliance since they demonstrate the raw power of the regime’s military arsenal. Without any actual use of violence, performances of force pose an indirect threat the populace. Fear of retaliatory power compels obedience, allowing the regime to gain legitimacy.

**Spectacles in the Islamic State**

Violent displays within the Islamic State served a regulatory function. Many images in *Dabiq* show public beheadings and stonings. A video published by IS titled “Although the Disbelievers Dislike It” shows mass simultaneous beheadings, which are meant to show the consequences of apostasy to citizens in the Caliphate’s territory. In *Dabiq* 6, the Islamic State conducts an interview with a Jordanian pilot, Rabi’ al-Awwal, who was shot down in IS territory. The magazine asks the soldier whether he has seen the aforementioned video and if he knows what will happen to him. The pilot is forced to admit that he knows the Islamic State will kill him. The videos and this published conversation are spectacles meant to achieve political ends. Violence is manipulated by the state to force obedience. Writing about the beheading videos, Roxanne Euben argues that “…the deaths are constituted as ISIS wants them seen, an old-fashioned enactment of ‘sovereignty by exercising a traditional prerogative of the sovereign,’ the cutting off and display of heads of those it designates enemies of the state.”\(^{28}\) The fighters are shown

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“...as hardened men of action rather than ‘soft’ men of words – or as the narrator puts it in another Da’ish video, ‘Although the Disbelievers May Dislike It/ Wa-Law Kariha al-Kafirun,’ ‘hungry lions whose drink is blood and play is carnage.’”

These spectacular displays of violence are part of Wedeen’s theory of self-regulation. That is, the regime dramatizes the state’s power to force the submission of its citizenry. Demonstrations of violence are not only there to gain political ends: they are political in and of themselves. Moreover, they ground the political thinking of the civilian population, by framing the narrative of citizenship.

In their publication *Rumiyah*, the Islamic State’s media team outlined “Just Terror Tactics,” aimed at bringing “...untold misery to the enemies of Allah...” The organization emphasizes brutal, terrifying methods that cause even their perpetrators discomfort. For instance, citing scripture, the authors write that knife attackers should strike “…the necks of the kuffar with their swords, severing limbs and piercing the fleshy meat of those who oppose Islam.” This gruesome and macabre description indicates the importance of violence as a strategy. Arno J. Mayer, writing about the use of violence in revolutions, argues that “…whatever its intention, unauthorized counter-violence is widely perceived as impulsive, random, and erratic, as if moved by blind fury, hatred, and vengeance.”

This imagery is meant to prompt attacks which are grisly and draw attention to the insurgency movement. Any force exercised by the Islamic State, which is not a conventional sovereign entity, is viewed as ugly and terrible, instilling fear into outside onlookers. To subjects of the Islamic State, however, the violence has a coercive effect. Exercises in extreme force are considered in a religious context, as this example shows: “So when you meet those who disbelieve, strike their necks, until, when you have overwhelmed them...

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30 The Islamic State, “Just Terror Tactics,” *Rumiyah* 2, October 4, 2016, 12
Therefore, any usage of violence legitimizes Da’esh’s jihad by connecting its actions to scripture. Believing that the organization is adhering to its principles as a caliphate, its subjects will be more willing to follow its directives: “As the ‘most flagrant manifestation’ and ‘ultimate’ expression of power, violence assumes legitimacy and virtue by reason of being exercised by a state that monopolizes and projects it as the only pure – nonpartisan or neutral – force.” Since civilians have seen the violent potential of the Islamic State, they are coerced into following its orders.

I have aimed to demonstrate that violence is a mechanism of coercion for the Islamic State. By producing public spectacles of punishment and discipline, the Caliphate has forced civilians to declare obedience to the state. Moreover, documents and pledges reveal that citizens are forced to accept the legitimacy of Da’esh’s monopoly on physical force. Returning to the overarching theme of this thesis, I aim to show how cultural destruction fits within the model discussed above. The strategic and sensational expunging of heritage is another spectacle, meant to force the self-regulation of Islamic State citizens while promoting a terrifying image of the organization to the outside world. In this sense, cultural destruction serves a coercive purpose.

In the previous chapter, I wrote about how cultural destruction is a common tactic of revolutionary groups, since the act both legitimizes the insurgency movement while delegitimizing the ruling regime. While the Islamic State published some videos of its heritage destruction on social media and in its magazines, its audiences for these actions were more often local civilians or citizens of the Caliphate. Many acts of destruction went unreported for months, indicating that their consumption was localized and small-scale. Like a public execution, the demolition of prominent local cultural sites was meant to signal the destructive potential of the Islamic State’s military arsenal, its soldiers’ ruthless tactics, and its socio-religious superiority.

32 The Islamic State, “Just Terror Tactics,” 12.
The Threat of Violence

Spectacles display the potential of the state to cause grievous harm to citizens. In *War Making and State Making as Organized Crime*, Charles Tilly writes that people comply with tax and tribute laws so that the state’s military mechanisms do not attack them: “With the other, it evokes the racket in which a local strong man forces merchants to pay tribute in order to avoid damage – damage the strong man himself threatens to deliver.”34 The risk of violent retaliation prompts citizens into paying money to support the regime. To instill this fear, the threat of physical coercion must be credible and can be conveyed by spectacular displays of force. Lisa Wedeen argues that in cases of social control in the realm of the disciplinary-symbolic, “The line of demarcation between ruler and ruled runs: (1) psychologically through each individual; (2) externally or ‘behaviorally’ in each struggle; and (3) contextually: the person who is ‘ruler’ in one skirmish may be ‘ruled’ in the next.”35 In this situation, people are conditioned to regulate their actions and behavior so that they do not challenge the regime. The state has coerced them into doing so with the threat of physical violence, instilling within them a psychological compulsion for compliance.

In its literature and publications, the Islamic State signals its intention to violently purge its territory of all non-compliant apostates: “[The Caliph] also said, ‘O Muslims, Islam was never for a day the religion of peace. Islam is the religion of war. Your prophet (sallahu ‘alayhi wa sallam) [Peace be upon Him] was dispatched with the sword as a mercy to the creation. He was ordered with war until Allah is worshipped alone.”36 For any non-Sunni Muslims who do not

choose to convert and join IS, the threat of physical force is imminent. The destruction of local cultural symbols serves a warning to the surrounding population. That is, the Islamic State’s militants have physical domination over the area and its heritage. Should the population not repent and join, the same violence enacted upon their historical sites can also be perpetrated upon them. In this sense, cultural destruction demonstrates Da’esh’s potential to maim a civilian group in the most brutal fashion. Cultural destruction is an exercise in dominance and the potential of violence.

In Mosul, the Islamic State detonated an explosive device at the Mausoleum of Yahya Abu al-Qasim, which was first constructed in 799 then destroyed and rebuilt in 1239. The shrine was an exemplar of Seljuk architecture, with columns, a mihrab, and conical dome. The rather ostentatious demolition is pictured in figures 1 and 2 below, showing off the Islamic State’s proclivity for public displays of destruction. The brutality of this scene functions as a warning to civilians. The text to the side states that absolute violent annihilation is the consequence for ignorance – that is, non-Sunni Islamic practices. The implicit assertion in this image is that the Islamic State will perpetrate the same violence upon the human population that it does on these historical sites, which promote idolatry and apostasy.

In the nearby province of Tal Afar, the Islamic State attacked the Shrine and Tomb of Ahmed ar-Rifa‘i, the founder of the Rifa‘i Sufi order, shown in figures 3 and 4. All the images of destruction, including those above, reveal the amount of resources dedicated by the Islamic State to this endeavor. The act of destruction is a political end in and of itself, since it creates a spectacular display of violent power. In Tal Afar, like in Mosul, the Islamic State managed to convey to the local population that its soldiers had the means and motivation to enact the same brutality upon the civilians as on the historical sites. The militants also blew up the Northern and Western walls of the Tal Afar Citadel, which was constructed by the Ottoman Empire, along
with other sites in the city. Through all of these spectacles, the soldiers conveyed the imminent violence and breadth of their military arsenal, indicating to civilians the consequences of resisting the directives of the Islamic State. According to Deuteronomy, doctrine holds that the Caliphate must offer people the opportunity to submit. Following scripture’s directives, the Islamic State elected to destroy public sites to show off their raw power, thus coercing people into submission without violating the divine war code.

Valorizing Islamic State Fighters

The published videos of cultural destruction feature IS soldiers attacking idols and historic sites with great vigor. These images serve to hyper-masculinize the fighters, emphasizing their virility while humiliating those cultures defeated by the group. This aggressive machismo serves a two-fold purpose: first, the brutality of IS militants is displayed to the outside world to cause fear; second, young men are exposed to the masculine prowess of the Caliphate’s soldiers, encouraging them to join the group. I discuss the second of these two tactics in the next chapter. In this section, I focus on the first point, which again emphasizes the immediate threat of violence.

In Spectacles of Sovereignty, Roxanne Euben shows that execution videos are designed to valorize IS fighters. In the following passage, she builds on Foucault’s theories of disciplinary symbolism to assert that the films are meant to degrade IS’ victims while vitalizing its fighters:

Instead, they are ritualized displays of disproportionate power over the condemned, whose purpose is to be meticulously, relentlessly reduced to impotence. Once circulated across social media platforms increasingly functioning as virtual public squares, the executions come to constitute the kind of public, ceremonial violence, by which the domination and invincibility of ISIS is performed and produced for the horror and satisfaction not only of a general spectatorship by of two differently situated audiences in particular: American men meant to be humiliated by the public emasculation of their male compatriots, and ‘Sunni Muslim men’ meant to be summoned into existence as a community by vicariously sharing in the reclamation of power the ISIS executioner partly performs in their name. This is precisely why the affective power of these symbolic
enactments and inversions of sovereignty do not require the continuing existence of the particular territorial state they were designed to serve.\textsuperscript{37} IS’ cultural destruction videos also valorize fighters in the same manner. In one film, soldiers hammer and shatter ancient statues in the Mosul Museum, including sculptures from the city of Hatra and artifacts from the Assyrian cities of Nineveh, Khorsabad, and Balawat. Soldiers take basic instruments like power drills, sledgehammers, and even their bare hands to the museum’s art, a display of raw strength.\textsuperscript{38} The rhetorical aim of these videos is to humiliate non-Islamic civilizations and the authorities who failed to protect these images. Those who idealize such artifacts, which exist outside of the Islamic tradition, are now destined to watch them be smashed in with hammers. Thus, the film simultaneously portrays the strength and virility of IS fighters and the utter powerlessness of their enemies.

In another video, Islamic State fighters chop away at sculptures in the Roman city of Hatra. Similar to the images from the Mosul Museum, the militants use picks and sledgehammers in a display of raw power. Hatra was a caravan city that was captured by the Parthian, Sasanian, and Roman Empires at different times. The symbolic imagery is meant to humiliate the once-great powers of Persia and Rome and, by extension, the Shi’as, in modern Iran, and the West, which IS sees as the continuation of the Roman Empire. In all these spectacular demonstrations, the performative rhetoric spells out a narrative of virility and humiliation. The failure of bureaucrats, Iran, and the West to protect their cultural heritage is degrades and inverts these entities, removing them from positions of power and, in turn, mocking them.

\textbf{Conclusion}

\textsuperscript{38} \textit{ISIS Destroys Statues And Sculptures At Mosul Museum, AJ+}, accessed April 18, 2019, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SS9yLgJ4sqo.
In this chapter, I have aimed to show that the Islamic State relies on violence as the cornerstone of its strategy and legitimacy. Physical force allows the regime to coerce civilians into following its doctrine without challenge. Cultural destruction is one mechanism through which the organization is able to demand this compliance. By using spectacular displays of force, the state is able to control and regulate its citizens with the threat of brutal violence. The political spectacles also humiliate IS enemies while valorizing its fighters. Cultural destruction should be viewed as an end in itself, since its rhetoric legitimizes Da’esh and its strategies.
both their religious and social needs are met. For what good is there in liberating a city only to leave its inhabitants steeped in misguidance and misery, suffering from ignorance and disunity, and disconnected from the Book of Allah and the Sunnah of His Messenger (sallallahu 'alayhi wa sallam).

As such, the Islamic State actively works to educate its citizens, preach to and admonish them, enforce their strict adherence to Islamic obligations, judge their disputes, implement the sharī'ahudūd, eradicate all traces of shirk and heresy, incite the people to jihād and call them to unite behind the Khalifah, ʻĪbrāhīm Ibn ʻAwwād Al-Husaynī Al-Qurashi.

These pictures are a window into the various hisbah (commanding the good and forbidding the evil) and da’wah related events and activities taking place within the Islamic State.

Figure 5. A screen capture from one of the group’s videos shows a soldier using a sledgehammer to knock an artifact down from a wall. Image captured from *ISIS Destroys Statues And Sculptures At Mosul Museum, AJ+*, accessed April 18, 2019, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SS9yLgJ4sqo.
Figure 6. An image visually similar to the one above, in which an Islamic State fighter knocks down an artifact in the caravan city of Hatra, a metropolis once claimed by the Parthian, Sasanian, and Roman Empires. Image from Kareem Shaheen, “Isis Video Confirms Destruction at Unesco World Heritage Site in Hatra,” The Guardian, April 5, 2015, sec. World news, https://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/apr/05/isis-video-confirms-destruction-at-unesco-world-heritage-site-on-hatra.
Cultural Destruction as Recruitment and Humiliation

In the second issue of *Dabiq*, the Islamic State’s media team included four pages of images showing cultural destruction in the Caliphate’s territory, pictured in figures 1 through 6 below. *Dabiq*, which has been mentioned elsewhere in this thesis, was an online magazine used by IS to radicalize and recruit new militants. The presence of many images of cultural destruction prompts the following question: is this violent act functioning as a recruitment tool for the Islamic State?

This chapter explores the attractiveness of cultural destruction to evaluate whether soldiers are joining the Caliphate because of this undertaking. I argue that Da’esh’s writings about cultural destruction exploit insecure and disillusioned young men, by bolstering stereotypes about masculinity and presenting the Islamic State as a space to consolidate a patriarchal gender identity. Moreover, cultural destruction functions as a form of political theater for Muslims all over the world, by symbolically defeating the forces of the Christian West that have been humiliating Islam for centuries. Through both mechanisms, cultural destruction is meant to compel young Muslims to come to the Islamic State and become mujahideen, or holy soldiers.

I start with an analysis of radical Islamist group recruitment patterns. I argue that in almost every case, the core strategy is to target men who are disillusioned with either modern Western society or a non-Islamic religion. In each case, radical discourse exploits this isolation and promises a sense of belonging in an Islamist movement. I then turn to the theory that explains this phenomenon. That is, that almost all recruitment can be explained by anger over Western power, which extremists perceive as undeserved and dangerous for the global Muslim community. In order to drive this point home and to appeal to disillusioned men, they focus on narratives of masculinity and impotence to argue that the West has emasculated Muslim men and
needs to, in turn, be rendered impotent. This act can be explained as a discourse in humiliation. In the final section of this chapter, I argue that cultural destruction is a humiliation tactic which enables recruitment. I conduct a large analysis using case studies. In particular, I examine the destruction of ancient sites, Christian churches and monasteries, and Shi’a and Sunni mosques. I aim to explain how razing these spaces humiliates different groups. In doing so, I demonstrate that cultural destruction embarrasses the West, Iran, Iraq, Syria, and Saudia Arabia, thereby legitimizing IS and increasing its attractiveness to potential recruits.

Recruiting Soldiers for Radical Islamist Movements

In a research report funded by the Danish Ministry of Justice, Michael Taarnby identifies patterns of radical Islamist recruitment in Europe. He argues that in almost every case, insurgents target disillusioned young Muslim males, often from three demographics: new immigrants, second-generation citizens, and recent converts. A prevailing sentiment among IS recruits is that society has failed them in some way, either by isolating them or not living up to its promises.¹ A cure is suggested for this confusion, which is reintegration with a fundamentalist form of religion: “According to a DST report on the recruitment of young Muslims to Jihad, Islamism represents a vehicle of protest against problems of access to employment and housing, discrimination of various kinds, and the highly negative image of Islam in public opinion.”² This sense of social vilification and dismissal contributes to loneliness. Young Muslim men in this state often seek out answers from others who have joined the global jihad.

² Taarnby, “Recruitment of Islamist Terrorists in Europe: Trends and Perspectives,” 34.
Scholars have posited that exposure to ideology prompts people to join a movement. As more people learn about the goals of an insurgent organization, recruitment numbers will increase. However, Marc Sageman notes that al-Qaeda, for instance, failed to attract members even in areas where its headquarters and training camps were located. Exposure alone, therefore, is not sufficient as a tool of recruitment. Moreover, this theory does not capture the social appeal of joining a terrorist organization: “Revivalist social movements like the global Salafi jihad are vigorous social enterprises. They provide social and emotional rewards of close community and a sense of totality and meaning.”3 As religious organizations, these sectarian groups are often rooted in promises of community and belonging. They thus appeal to young men plagued by thoughts of isolation, who are searching for likeminded companions.

Targeting Disillusioned Western Males for Recruitment

It is important to note here that recruiters do not lurk around European mosques, searching for naïve and passive worshippers to radicalize. Sageman writes that “Joining the jihad is more akin to the process of applying to a highly selective college. Many try to get in but only a few succeed, and the college’s role is evaluation and selection rather than marketing. Candidates are enthusiastic rather than reluctant.”4 Young men who are recruited to jihad from America or Europe tend to be disillusioned with Western society, because of the hostility directed toward Muslims. In Islamist organizations, they find camaraderie and a sense of belonging, since they are joined with other men with similar ideological alignments.

The Islamic State tends to be more aggressive in its recruitment than al-Qaeda. Its magazines, media, and high-profile attacks have enabled a more active publicity strategy.

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4 Sageman, *Understanding Terror Networks*, 122.
Da’esh’s end goal is to unify all Sunni Muslims in a global umma, prompting a more aggressive recruitment strategy. Much of IS’ propaganda exploits the demographics mentioned above: isolated and disillusioned young men. In this chapter, I argue that cultural destruction is key to the Islamic State’s recruitment strategy. Radical Islamist dialogue focuses on narratives of power and powerlessness, which are then projected onto a discourse on masculinity. The power, as of now, has been unrightfully claimed by the West, enabling them to oppress Muslims worldwide. The duty of all Muslims then becomes removing that power, thereby “emasculating” those same Western nations. As power is derived and consolidated through symbols, cultural destruction humiliates and emasculates the West.

Recruitment in the Global South

While the Islamic State has managed to attract recruits from America and Europe, they have also had success in other parts of the world. In each issue of Dabiq, the media team highlights a militant from a different region and with a different story. Many of these narratives can be classified into the groups Sageman identified above. For instance, in Dabiq 15 the Islamic State conducted an interview with Abu Sa’d at-Trinidad, a fighter from Trinidad and Tobago. In their article, the authors highlighted his conversion from Baptist Christianity and the presence of the Islamic State in the Caribbean. Trinidad emphasized his sense of disillusionment with Christianity, which was derived, in large part, from personal anecdotes of witnessing immorality: “…I used to see the pastor – who was married with children – coming next door to commit adultery. I would wonder how this man could lead me when he himself didn’t follow the Bible. I told my mother I didn’t want to go back to church…”5 Trinidad identified what he saw as

fundamental flaws with Christian religious teachings, including the presence of idols in the form of crosses. Sageman argues that oftentimes, the driving force behind radicalization can be extreme anger toward another religion. When people convert to Islam because of perceived fundamental apostasy in another religion, it can drive their desire to practice a strict interpretation, such as the one espoused by the Islamic State: “All things being equal, people who are satisfied with their religion will not seek a new more demanding sect.”

Violence against another religious group is attractive to recruits, who are convinced that such acts fulfill a divine directive.

**Targeting Isolated Males for Recruitment**

Jason Warner, writing about IS affiliates in Sub-Saharan Africa, noted that dissent and isolationism drove members of other terrorist cells to pledge allegiance to the Caliphate: “Feeling physically and increasingly ideologically distanced from al-Shabaab, [Abdulqadir Mumin] pledged *bay’ā* to al-Baghdadi and the Islamic State in October 2015. That same month, he began recruiting soldiers in the Galaga hills area, especially among members of villages who have felt aggrieved by the government of Puntland.” Social media campaigns and ideological exposure are often not enough to prompt declarations of affiliation, but the Islamic State manages to target those who are disillusioned or otherwise separated from a larger group. In this case, we see that Mumin also targeted people who perceived themselves as having incurred social wrongs. Again, radical Islam can be a form of protest against a government and its social promises.

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The Islamic State’s propaganda emphasizes the strength of its fighters and shows off their masculinity and aggressive bravery. The promise to young Muslims is that they too can become men in the Islamic State. Furthermore, IS emphasizes that its tactics humiliate the West, promising a form of revenge against the societies that have wronged and failed its fighters. For the many Muslims that come from the Middle East and Africa, the West represents an enemy, which has perpetually waged war against these regions. Fighting for the Islamic State is an opportunity to take revenge.

The publicity surrounding cultural destruction manages to promote both of these narratives, thus valorizing Islamic State fighters. Moreover, the narratives humiliate the West, Christianity, Shi’a Islam, and the governments of Iraq and Syria by showing off each party’s failure to protect a precious heritage site. In the following section, I aim to prove how cultural destruction accomplishes each of these mechanisms.8

**Recruitment through Hyper-Masculinity and Humiliation**

Much of the Islamic State’s propaganda has relied on bolstering traditional gender roles and encouraging men to join in order to prove themselves in battle. Recruitment material centers on narratives of masculinity and virility. The videos of militants destroying cultural artifacts continue that portrayal, by showing off the raw power and righteousness of the soldiers. This theme of aggression is meant to encourage young boys to consider joining the Caliphate in order to discover their full potential as strong, powerful men.

Roxanne Euben contends that IS propaganda relies on emphasizing the masculinity of its fighters while emasculating the West. The Al-Hayat media team often writes of the cowardice of

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8 A note about terminology: I use the term “Islamic” when referring to a practice of Islam. However, when discussing aspects of the radical Islamism associated with jihadi-based terrorism, I instead say “Islamist.”
American fighters, who use aerial attacks, an indirect method of waging war. In contrast, IS videos show the direct confrontation between its militants and the ground troops of other forces, which Euben explores in the following passage:

As many have noted, it takes a particular kind of hardness to kill at close range and without a gun, where there’s no escape from the pleas and screams of your victim, and far easier to kill at a distance with drones and bombs. ‘Jihadi John’ is in this way constituted as the ideal masculine Islamist militant, the organization he serves constructed as implacable, unstoppable, fearless, hard, dominant – the only Islamic force sufficiently potent to bring America, the standard bearer of Muslim humiliation, to its knees, literally and figuratively.⁹

The idea of direct engagement is exemplified in the Islamic State’s propaganda, which shows off militants shooting at close range or attacking civilians. The cultural destruction videos evoke a similar sentiment, often depicting soldiers knocking down artifacts with raw force. The magazine photographs draw the distinction between explosives rigged by hand and those dropped impersonally by drones. In this sense, the Islamic State’s fighters emphasize the bravery of their act by bombing without the assistance of aircrafts. There is still an aspect of raw power and control.

As mentioned in chapter 4, IS’ videos of cultural destruction hyper-masculinize its fighters, by imbuing them with an aggressive machismo. The raw power of smashing idols off of a wall and knocking down statues is meant to inspire young men to join the group. Roxanne Euben posits that the political mobilization of masculinity is part of a greater Islamist discourse: “…Islamist discourse defines the ‘humiliation of Islam’ as the imposition of impotence on Islam/Muslims by those with greater and underserved power, a condition understood to violate natural gender and sexual norms as well as the divinely given socio-moral hierarchy upon which

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justice depends.”10 She is careful to emphasize that the aim of this essay is not to further perpetuate Orientalist tropes or discourse that links Muslim maleness to misogyny and hypersexuality. Rather, both Euben’s article and this thesis are interested in re-evaluating these connections as an intellectual imperative.

The rhetoric of masculinity is inextricably linked with that of humiliation. For Euben, the West’s perpetual shaming of Muslims is a form of emasculation, wherein the undeserved power of apostate nations has subjugated devout followers of the “true path.” This subjugation upends the divine order, which also includes other aspects of human life, such as gender roles, class, etc. As a function of rhetoric, humiliation is meant in Islamist thought to “…incite men to restore a jeopardized Muslim virility through great deeds that humiliate the male enemy… Saleh al-Oufi, a leader of the Mujahidin of Saudi Arabia, insists that only the violent humiliation of those who humiliate Muslims can recover men’s honor, prestige, and courage – a sentiment echoed in ‘Hadha wa’d Allah’ [This is the promise of Allah], the declaration of a restored caliphate issued by ISIS.”11 The Islamic State’s propaganda emphasizes both masculinity and humiliation.

**Recruitment Literature**

In a report for the International Center for the Study of Violent Extremism, Anne Speckhard examines the Islamic State’s propaganda for trends and patterns. She posits that IS has aimed to bolster traditional gender roles. As a result, the media attracts young men who are insecure about their masculinity. On multiple occasions, the Islamic State used popular video games to suggest that joining the Caliphate would enable boys to become like the men they

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idolized in *Grand Theft Auto* and *Call of Duty* (figures 7 and 8). Speckhard writes the following evaluation:

> Young men often identify strongly with the male role models and the masculine stereotypes promoted in the video games they play and ISIS is well aware of that. They have used both graphic still photos and videos taken from such video games as *Grand Theft Auto* and *Call of Duty* to try to mesh their message with the messages of “maleness” embedded in such games. Likewise they urge young men to get out from behind their video controllers and come join the “real games” in partaking of jihad. In the hijacked video from *Grand Theft Auto*, the ISIS narrator states, “Your games which are producing from you, we do the same actions in the battlefields!”

The images encourage males to prove themselves on the battlefield, fighting for the righteous cause of the Islamic State. Jihad thus presents an opportunity to become a man, creating a depiction of virility that is enticing. Traditional gender roles are fortified and exploited in this propaganda, a practice furthered in videos of cultural destruction. Video games, in particular first-person shooter narratives like *Grand Theft Auto* and *Call of Duty* also emphasize the notion of direct engagement rather than airstrikes from a distance, again valorizing IS fighters.

Complimenting these calls to the battlefield are images of humiliated U.S. troops. In *Rumiyah* 2, the media team published photographs of crying American soldiers, claiming that these “Crusaders could not handle fighting the mujahidin” (figure 9). For the Islamic State, the notion of the United States’ power is unacceptable, given that it has attacked Muslim countries and is founded on Christian principles. The act of humiliating American troops, therefore, is a fundamental restoration of the masculinity of Muslims: “Finally, the legacies of colonialism, longstanding Euro-American support for oppressive regimes, drone strikes, Israeli occupation, the stationing of foreign troops in Muslim lands, capital penetration and cultural hybridization combine to intensify perception of Muslim impotence relative to the so-called West.”

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part, the call to jihad is rooted in rhetoric about regaining a lost masculinity. This discourse, which is thematically centered on proving yourself on the battlefield to humiliate a group that has humiliated you, is aimed at young Muslim men who have been isolated or failed by society in some way.

**Cultural Destruction as a Narrative of Humiliation**

Viewing the destruction of cultural heritage as an exercise in humiliation provides insight into the Islamic State’s site selections. This interpretation explains why IS militants chose “apostate” spaces such as Palmyra and Nimrud, churches, and Shi’a mosques, as well as notable Sunni mosques. In each case, the Islamic State’s goal was to symbolically delegitimize the nation-states that “discovered,” extolled, or protected each monument. In bombing these sites, IS humiliated the governments and organizations that should have been preserving them. In this section, I conduct a large analysis through case studies in cultural destruction to prove that they were meant to humiliate nation-states, either as acts of revenge or as part of a greater religious narrative. To do so, I study each site and interpret the background that would render its destruction humiliating for modern nation-states.

In a 2018 study, Emma Cunliffe and Luigi Curini showed that cultural destruction increases positive sentiment toward the Islamic State. Based on a Twitter sample, they concluded that humiliation was seen as a major positive outcome of cultural destruction (figure 10). Cunliffe and Curini define humiliation as “…both aspects of humiliation, as well as a positive judgment about the desire to attack pre-Islamic culture, as the two are closely interlinked.” Humiliation accounts for a major portion of the positive sentiment. The authors

15 Cunliffe and Curini, “ISIS and Heritage Destruction,” 1104.
offer a description of the empirical effects of cultural destruction. My aim in this thesis is to explain why these particular sites had those exact consequences.

I start by arguing that Palmyra and Nimrud were representative of the colonial humiliation of the Middle East. The West’s obsession with ancient material culture at the expense of Islamic art degraded Muslims. Orientalist archaeological practices further debased the Arab people involved with Western excavations. Therefore, the Islamic State’s destruction of Palmyra, Nimrud, and other ancient sites restored Muslim masculinity and humiliated the West by razing some of its most treasured sites.

I then suggest that the destruction of churches and Shi’a mosques is meant to humiliate the worshippers and leaders of those religions. In the case of churches, the destruction is meant to humiliate Christian nations, particularly in the West and in Asia, as well as the Vatican and the Patriarchs of the Orthodox Church. The bombing of Shi’a mosques is meant to disgrace Iran, which the Islamic State sees as an apostate nation. This act is an insult to the perceived heretical regime.

The destruction of Sunni mosques has been a confounding variable in scholarly discourse about IS’ cultural destruction practices. Why bomb a space which represents the Islamic State’s official religion? Based on this rhetoric of humiliation, we might view the destruction of Sunni cultural heritage as a recruitment tactic: the implicit narrative is that the nation-states of Iraq and Syria have failed to protect their Sunni Muslim civilians. The regimes are thus heretical and should not be in power, rendering the Caliphate as the only legitimate actor in the region. Thus, the razing of Sunni mosques humiliates the Iraqi and Syrian regimes.

**Palmyra as a Symbol of Syrian Humiliation**

In the 1700s, Western archaeologists, under colonial auspices, embarked on numerous excavation projects in the Middle East, searching for evidence of Assyrian and Babylonian ruins
in order to prove the Bible’s many stories true.\textsuperscript{16} What followed was a century of archaeological abuse that humiliated and exoticized the Arab and Muslim locals, who watched as their cultural artifacts were plundered and claimed by European academic museums. Western archaeological practices embarrassed civilians in the Middle East by removing monuments, implying that the art of the Orient was subpar, and suggesting that Islamic heritage did not belong in the artistic canon at all.\textsuperscript{17} Moreover, excavators belittled locals by publishing images that insinuated the Arab people had no conception of culture, since they had not imposed preservation policies on the ruins of Palmyra, Nimrud, Hatra, and Nineveh, among others. Western archaeologists adopted the patronizing “white savior” role, believing that they needed to teach the locals about art and history.\textsuperscript{18}

Palmyra serves as an exceptional case study in Western archaeological practices, providing insight into the motivations that the Islamic State had in selecting its ruins for destruction. The history of the site is one fraught with Orientalist tropes, since European excavators refused to accept its distinct Eastern identity, instead treating the site as Roman and castigating natives for not recognizing its ancient value. In doing so, they embarrassed and humiliated the Arab locals, who instead placed more value on their Islamic cultural heritage.\textsuperscript{19} In 2015, IS demolished the site, incensing Western leaders who mourned the loss of a brilliant Roman city. In doing so, the militants managed to flip a longstanding narrative: where Palmyra

\textsuperscript{17} Bahrani, “Untold Tales of Mesopotamian Discovery,” 128.
had once represented the shame of Muslims in the Middle East, the now-bombed site showed off the failure of the West to protect its precious ruins.

In the ancient world, Palmyra was a crossroads between East and West, a caravan city situated on the periphery of the Roman Empire.\(^{20}\) That Palmyra played an integral role in the socioeconomic development of the Empire is indisputable. However, the extent to which the art of this trading metropolis could be characterized as “Roman” is debated. In terms of their style, Palmyra’s famous funerary reliefs combined elements of both the Western and Eastern aesthetic traditions to create a unique form.\(^{21}\) Nonetheless, French excavators defined distinctive aspects of Palmyrene art as Hellenistic in origin, though no evidence remained to link the two. In addition, artifacts of the area were grouped with those of the broader Mediterranean, rather than afforded their own status. At the expense of the Palmyrene identity, this ancient society was recast as a Roman outpost influenced by the East, which downplayed local traditions and modern Syria’s cultural claims to the region. Inhabitants of Palmyra, in fact, never considered themselves Roman, evidenced by the fact that in 270 AD, the queen Zenobia led a revolt against the Empire, resulting the short-lived Palmyrene Kingdom. The Syrian people, for many years, considered Zenobia a hero and an icon of national independence.\(^{22}\)

A metropolis of the East and West, the prosperous outpost benefitted from global trade.\(^{23}\) As a result, the artistic output of the city combined elements of both regions. Funerary portraits,


\(^{23}\) Thompson, “Legal and Ethical Considerations for Digital Recreations of Cultural Heritage,” 1.
for which Palmyra is famous, evidenced these connections through clothing and iconography: “It is no surprise that, for example, more than fifty different textiles and patterns have been found in the graves of Palmyra, and that the funerary sculpture shows an array of jewelry testifying to the influence from the East as well as from the West…”24 In this way, the cultural identity should be viewed as neither Roman nor Eastern, but as Palmyrene. Based on its unique position, the city embraced varying customs to forge a distinct style while citizens viewed themselves as independent of Rome.25 In terms of their aesthetics, the funerary monuments resemble Greco-Roman art, but incorporate outside elements. For instance, in the “Funerary monument of Aththaia,” (figure 11) now in Boston’s Museum of Fine Arts, the “face and details of carving are thoroughly Eastern.”26 Although her vestiges invoke Greco-Roman clothing, her jewelry betrays Oriental affinities. The inability to place Aththaia in either paradigm reflects Palmyra’s remarkable heritage. However, the Museum of Fine Arts classifies the relief as an exemplar of the Mediterranean West.

European excavators encountered Palmyra in the 1700s. The West’s approach to archaeology in the Middle East always focused on the ancient period, because of its Biblical associations. Europeans believed that finding the ruins of the empires mentioned in the Old Testament would prove the veracity of the narratives. In addition, ancient material was valued for its connections and influence on Greco-Roman art, which was seen as foundational to

Western civilization. The monuments, however, were never considered aesthetically meaningful in and of themselves. Rather, they were always seen as inferior to Greco-Roman art, but important because of their connections to that tradition. This bias can be seen in the painting titled “James Dawkins and Robert Wood Discovering the Ruins of Palmyra,” now housed in the National Galleries of Scotland. The image depicts two Englishmen, clad in togas, “discovering” the ruins of Palmyra (figure 12). This painting offers two notable insights into the Western psyche: first, the vestiges imply the “Romanness” of the site, while establishing England as some sort of continuation of the Roman Empire. Dawkins and Wood are portrayed as finding a space that once belonged to them, negating the fact that the ruins are physically located in Syria. Instead, the painting suggests that the West has identified its own cultural roots. Second, the title of the painting suggests “discovery” when, in fact, the site was never lost to the local population, who had never abandoned Palmyra. The city had been continuously occupied since the Roman era (figure 13). The French found these inhabitants unbearable, declaring that they were ruining a valuable heritage site. As such, they expelled everyone from the city in the 1800s. European museums, viewing the site as Roman and thus part of Western cultural heritage, plundered the site for artifacts, removing grave reliefs and other sacred objects. The British Museum and the Louvre have substantial collections from Palmyra today, including a set of reliefs removed from individual graves.

When Palmyra became a United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) World Heritage Site in 1980, the official write-up failed to mention the city’s distinct identity or its importance in Syrian cultural narratives. Instead, officials emphasized the city’s Roman history and its importance in the European ethos: “Recognition of

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27 Bahrani, “Untold Tales of Mesopotamian Discovery,” 128.
the splendor of the ruins of Palmyra by travellers (sic) in the 17th and 18th centuries contributed greatly to the subsequent revival of classical architectural styles and urban design in the West.”

The presence of Palmyrene grave reliefs in Western museums allowed audiences to engage with the site from a purely European perspective.

The “discovery” of Palmyra was an act of erasure, which humiliated locals, portraying them as uncultured and unsophisticated. Artifacts and inhabitants alike were removed from the site in an act of purification. The West’s co-optation of Palmyra reinvented the city with a distinctly Roman identity, negating Syrian cultural claims to the site. The Islamic State’s destruction of the ruins in 2015 flipped the narrative: where the West had once abused and degraded locals, it had now failed to protect the very site that it had claimed to save. While excavators once saw themselves as the saviors of Palmyra, those same “saviors” were now impotent. Euben argues that “Islamist invocations of the ‘humiliation of Islam’ deploy the symbols and rhetoric of emasculation to conjure historical, cultural, and political experiences of powerlessness, and vice-versa.” In a sense, Palmyra’s destruction is a reversal of the roles of the humiliator and humiliated. The Islamic State reclaimed narratives of heritage and value which the West had once controlled.

The destruction of Palmyra can be viewed within the larger context of humiliation. Returning to the question of recruitment, cultural destruction can be an effective tool for showing off the prowess of the Islamic State. Assuming that the audience for this action is young Muslim men reflecting on the wrongs perpetrated upon them by the West, cultural destruction is an opportunity for IS to prove that its soldiers are succeeding in humiliating Europeans, Americans,

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and their international organizations. In *Dabiq* 8, the Islamic State wrote the following regarding the damage of the Iraqi Mosul Museum: “The Kuffar [non-Muslims] had unearthed these statues and ruins in recent generations and attempted to portray them as part of a cultural heritage and identity that the Muslims of Iraq should embrace and be proud of.” In this write-up, there is an aspect of imposition. That is, the West has forced Muslims to accept these artifacts as universal cultural heritage and as part of the glorious history of Iraq. Given that archaeological practices always biased Western attitudes and perceptions of the art historical canon, the notion of being compelled into accepting the value of a site is a form of humiliation, both degrading the religion and implying that natives do not have the intellectual capacity to decide what constitutes value. In fact, “Archaeological Awareness” cards were issued to U.S. army members in 2007, which stated that servicemen and women should “Respect ruins whenever possible. They protect you and your cultural history,” accompanied by an image of an ancient minaret at Samarra (figure 14). This globalizing tendency again perpetuates Western claims to archaeological material along with an imposition upon local populations to accept the value of that cultural site.

Compared to other instances of cultural destruction, Palmyra attracted more attention in both the Arabic online world and in the West. Although there was no statistically significant change in positive sentiment toward IS, there was an increase in publicity. The Islamic State’s ideology was disseminated widely in both the Arab and Western worlds, increasing the audience and reach of Da’esh’s propaganda. Michael Doran posits in *Somebody Else’s Civil War* that the September 11th attack on the Twin Towers was a form of political theater meant to influence Muslims around the world, rather than American citizens: “The decision to target the United States…resonates beyond the small community of committed extremists, however, reaching not

34 Thompson, “Legal and Ethical Considerations for Digital Recreations of Cultural Heritage,” 2.
35 Cunliffe and Curini, “ISIS and Heritage Destruction,” 1103.
just moderate Salafis but, in addition, a broad range of disaffected citizens experiencing poverty, oppression, and powerlessness across the Muslim world.”

Palmyra had a similar impact: the ethos of the destruction reached an audience far beyond the localized Arab world, increasing the possibility of recruitment.

Nimrud as a Symbol of Iraqi Humiliation

Similar to Palmyra, the Assyrian site of Nimrud was an exercise in the humiliation of Iraqi locals. The history of archaeological excavations in the area mirrors those practiced in Syria and other parts of the Middle East. The initial discovery and reception of Nimrud were rooted in dismissive attitudes toward Islamic culture, Orientalist racism, and the purposeful exoticization of Iraqi civilians. The destruction of Nimrud in a Middle Eastern context can be viewed as the expunging of colonial restrictions and dictates imposed on Arabs to “other” them and perpetuate Orientalist tropes.

When British excavators started work in Iraq, they prioritized ancient art at the expense of Islamic material. The artifacts of Mesopotamia and Assyria were viewed as foundational to Western civilization and culture. Given that the art historical canon was centered on Greco-Roman and European productions, antiquity was perceived as worth studying whereas the Islamic era was not valued in the same way. Zainab Bahrani offers the following account:

But nineteenth-century travelers in search of the antique considered their own deeds to be the beginnings of the true scientific spirit in the study of antiquity and thus saw themselves as the first real archaeologists. The issue we have before us in studying the history of archaeology, therefore, is as much one of narrative as one of discovery of taxonomy… In this intellectual climate, Mesopotamian antiquity became a locus in which the west saw its own origins, as the place of the birth of the earliest civilization, a civilization that was passed on to Greece and Rome and from there to its rightful place in Modern Europe. In the nineteenth century, European archaeologists who worked in the

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east saw the acquisition of Near Eastern antiquities, found in lands that were at that time under the control of the Ottoman Empire, as the collection of remains of their own primitive past, a universal past that was the historical turning point from savagery to civilization.37

The art of the ancient world was prioritized over the material from the Islamic era, implying that one was more worth studying than the other. Most excavation projects overseen by Westerners focused on antiquity, while those conducted by Iraqis concentrated on the Islamic period.38 Westerners, however, forced natives to accept the superiority of the ancient material, due to its associations with Greco-Roman culture, which was seen as the pinnacle of classical art. Moreover, images circulated from the period further showed off the trope of the “uneducated” local, juxtaposing images of natives with archaeological treasures to imply that the population was incapable of recognizing the value of the sites around them (figure 15): “In the photographs taken by the Yale-French Academy team of the Syrian workers, bodies, spaces, and times are exposed surveyed and captured; the power dynamic of the relationships between the ‘archaeologist’ and ‘worker’ is demonstrated in the modes of representation…All of this shows that the people doing the actual excavations were never considered archaeologists.”39 The trustees who funded the British excavation to Nimrud would write the following about the indigenous population:

Nor can any thing have a more direct tendency to teach the natives some respect for the remains of the great works of art executed by the early occupiers of their country, than the leading them to believe that Europeans desire to possess these remains not because of any pecuniary value attached to them, but because of their connection with ancient nations and language, and of the hope, which the study of these affords of contributing to the more extended cultivation of learning and taste, and the prevalence of those principles of justice and benevolence, by which only, if by any means, the general concord and prosperity of the human race is to be attained.40

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37 Bahrani, “Untold Tales of Mesopotamian Discovery,” 126.
The Europeans maintained a patronizing attitude toward Iraqis, suggesting that the sheer fact that the Louvre or British Museum wanted to acquire these artifacts should indicate their value. This demand by Western academic institutions was meant to “teach the natives some respect” for the ancient art.\footnote{Malley, “Layard Enterprise,” 636.} As the Islamic State expressed in \textit{Dabiq} \textit{8}, the imposition by Westerners that Muslims should respect a portion of their history that they did not identify with is a direct sign of disdain for religious autonomy. Ironically, after the British “educated” the locals about valuing ancient sites, the U.S. Army’s “Archaeological Awareness” deck emphasized how much such spaces mattered to the Iraqi people (figure 16): “Ancient sites matter to the local community. Showing respect wins hearts and minds.”

All of these examples are meant to explain that Western archaeological practices were humiliating and embarrassing for Iraqis, who were routinely told that they had no conception of culture, sophistication, fine arts, or capabilities of evaluation. Europeans, adopting the veneer of white savior, entered the country to “save” artifacts from further ruin at the hands of the local population. This condescension feeds into Euben’s assessment of Islamist dialogues about the West: an undeserved power allowed excavators to abuse and humiliate locals, their religion, their culture, and their heritage.

The reception of Iraq’s ancient art in the classical canon was even more unkind. Austen Henry Layard, the Englishman in charge of the excavations at Nimrud (which he believed to be Nineveh) travelled to Mosul and, in secret, began digging in a remote town. Within days, Layard’s illegal excavation revealed two separate Assyrian palaces. Upon discovering the famous lamassus of Nimrud (figure 17), Layard was infatuated with the aesthetics of the statues, writing of their spirit, musculature, movement, and execution. Even still, he was clear to
emphasize that even these grand sculptures were “undoubtedly inferior to the most secondary works of Greece and Rome.” The Europeans, who indicated to the locals first that only their ancient art was worth studying and even still was not as sophisticated as Greco-Roman material, managed to further assert the dominance of Western civilization. In a letter from the British Orientalist John Henry Rawlinson to Layard, the former avers against aestheticizing the monuments of Assyria:

I still think the Nineveh [Nimrud] marbles are not valuable as works of art… Can a mere admirer of the beautiful view them with pleasure? Certainly not, and in this respect they are in the same category with the paintings and sculptures of Egypt and India… We have specimens of the very highest art – and anything short of that is, as a work of art… valueless, for it can neither instruct nor enrapture us. I hope you understand this distinction and when I criticise design and execution, will understand I do so merely because your winged God is not the Apollo Belvedere.

The European refusal to consider the artifacts worthwhile except as related to the Bible or Greco-Roman art shows a deep irreverence for Iraqi culture and autonomy. In addition, the ancient material was viewed as more worthwhile than the Islamic art, implying that the latter has no aesthetic or historical worth. Westerners thus enacted a form of religious humiliation upon every Muslim in the region.

Layard furthered Orientalist tropes when he decided to publish a book on the Monuments of Nineveh, which was a collection of images of Nimrud. He most famously painted an image of an Assyrian throne-room which was almost completely fabricated in order to exoticize the East (figure 18). The layout of the room was imagined, while the hole in the ceiling above was meant to mimic an ancient Roman villa. Most notable, however, is the exuberant polychromy present in the image. Although the archaeological evidence for color was questionable at best, British printers felt no pressure to be accurate or to adhere to the norms of classical whiteness that they

so valued in Greco-Roman art. In fact, they wanted to include more color in order to prove the inferiority of ancient Near East art compared to the Greco-Roman canon. Moreover, they subscribed to a fabricated version of history which imagined that people in the Middle East splayed Persian carpet-like aesthetics all over the walls of important buildings, a trope known as the “carpet myth.” Art historians Ada Cohen and Steven Kangas offer the following assessment:

In its exuberant polychromy, Plate 2 consciously participated in the debates of its time and took an early stance against the ‘classical canon’ of whiteness. The belief in ancient polychromy was interlinked with the notion of the carpet’s primacy in the aesthetics of the East, an issue that came to dominate European thought in the middle of the nineteenth century. Owen Jones, for example, full subscribed to the “carpet myth” and, as will become clear, he played a significant role in the plate’s creation, insufficiently acknowledged by Layard’s footnote quoted earlier. Abundant archaeological evidence demonstrated that the Assyrians indeed enjoyed a carpet-like effect on their walls, though it is unclear whether the upper parts of palatial walls were as loaded with painted detail as shown in Plate 2. Furthermore, there was no strong pressure to deny the polychromy of Assyrian art, as it was unencumbered by the aesthetics of whiteness that had long governed the reception of Greek art and architecture. In fact, the question of color seriously troubled nineteenth-century historians of Greek and Roman art for a time, and some bold scholars drew parallels with the arts of other ancient cultures, like the Egyptian, that were more obviously painted and also better preserved.44

The goal of the plate was to exoticize the Near East with inaccurate and otherwise misrepresentative facts. Europeans were insistent on depicting the East as unsophisticated due to its usage of polychromy. On the contrary, within the realm of Greco-Roman art, they were determined to perpetuate the aesthetic of whiteness. The art historian Johann Joachim Winckelmann, who produced two volumes on the history of ancient art, was insistent on celebrating the whiteness of classical statuary, particularly the Apollo Belvedere, which he

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concluded was the quintessence of beauty. While the addition of color in ancient Near Eastern art seems innocuous, the intentions were malicious and sought to “other” the Iraqis.

Despite its inaccuracies, this painting still remains important in the Western consciousness. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, for instance, has based the entrance room of its Near Eastern gallery off of this plate and even displays the image on the first exhibit board for visitors (figure 19). There are no comments on its inaccuracy or Orientalism. The British Museum also boasts the same layout (figure 20).

This humiliation of the Iraqi people by Western archaeologists was answered by IS’ destruction of Nimrud in 2015 (figure 21). However, U.S. interventions in Iraq facilitated this process: “But the Nimrud site itself has suffered since the United States-led invasion in 2003, when it was virtually abandoned as Iraqi state structures collapsed.” For the Islamic State to return and destroy the site engages with Euben’s assessment of Islamist narratives of impotence and emasculation. In essence, an undeserved power asserted dominance and took advantage of a deserving group. The act of destroying the site is a reclamation of that potency. The Islamic State is asserting its masculine control over a space which once humiliated Iraqis: “In this way, Islamist invocations of humiliation…link historically specific experiences of emasculation with the denigration of Islam tout court and, second catalyze such experiences to incite Muslim men to courageous action against male enemies external to the umma and reclaim patriarchal

authority within it." This instance of destruction is a tangible action toward that end: to reclaim a moment of humiliation and thus re-establish patriarchal authority.

**Destruction of Christian Churches**

Churches and monasteries account for only 10% of the sites destroyed by the Islamic State. Spaces of this type are also among the least efficacious, according to statistics published by Cunliffe and Curini (figure 22). These attacks attracted little attention, which seemed to prompt the Islamic State into targeting fewer. Although much of IS’ rhetoric emphasizes cultural destruction as religious legitimacy, the fact that the group altered its strategy based on response suggests that cultural destruction is generally meant as a tactic of violence and recruitment instead. Given that attacks on heritage require military and economic resources, the conjecture that more mechanisms are at play is not far-fetched.

The destruction of churches and monasteries is meant to humiliate Christians around the world who, to use Euben’s phrasing, are perceived to be in an underserved position of power. In this case, powerlessness is a state that Christians imposed upon Muslims worldwide, which according to prevailing norms of masculinity, is akin to being “unmanned.” The goal, therefore, of cultural destruction is to reclaim the power and, in doing so, emasculate Christians. This sentiment is reflected in rhetoric from *Dabiq* and *Rumiyah*, which frequently characterize Christians as deserving only of powerlessness or – to return to Euben’s framing – impotence. Figure 23 shows a priest looking upon his destroyed church in the aftermath of an IS attack. He is shown as powerless, a victim of an onslaught by the Islamic State which has rendered him

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incapable of fighting back. In this sense, the destruction of the church (figure 24) is a tool of humiliation, meant to enact a narrative of impotence.\textsuperscript{50}

The Islamic State regularly includes photographs of Christian leadership in its magazines, with menacing captions about how these men are misleading their flocks. In this case, the attacks are often on prominent figures, but not the religion itself. Although the Islamic State claims religious superiority as its primary goal, the obsession with showing off male figureheads is curious. The act of humiliating priests and other important persons, by destroying their houses of worship, is meant to prove to Muslims what capabilities IS has, encouraging people to join. Figures 25 and 26 are images from the propaganda magazine, which express disdain for the work of Christian leaders. As in the above images, cultural destruction is a tool of humiliation, an act by means of which the powerful is rendered powerless. Given that the smashing of churches receives little attention, the act is nonetheless effective as a recruitment tool.

\textbf{Destruction of Shi’a Mosques}

A similar argument can be made about the destruction of Shi’a mosques. Iran, as the bastion of Shi’a Islam in the Middle East, should be able to protect the members of its extended community and their places of worship. Instead, these spaces are routinely destroyed by the Islamic State. IS’ disdain for the Iranian regime is well-documented (figure 27).

In their writing, the Islamic State emphasizes undeserving nature of Iran’s ruling class. The authors highlight the historical background of the Persian region and explain Shah Isma’il I, the king who first established Shi’a Islam as the dominant religion in the area, as a misguided man with horrific tendencies:

Their first ‘shah’ (Persian king) came to power in 906AH [1500 AD]. He was Isma’il Ibn Haydar, a direct descendant of Safi ad-Din, and was marked by both severe deviance and

\textsuperscript{50} The mosaics on the wall of the church are surprisingly intact, suggesting that the iconoclasm theory does not fully explain IS’ cultural destruction practices.
brutality. Ash-Shawkani said of him, “His following grew until he attacked and vanquished the sultan of Shirvan, whom his army captured. He then ordered them to cook him in a cauldron and eat him” [Al-Badr at-Tali’]. It is not surprising then to hear that when Isma’ils defeated the emir of Merv, he dismembered him – dispatching his limbs across Persia – and covered his skull with gold and gems to use it as a chalice at social events.51

The core aspect of Islamist dialogues about humiliation focus on an undeserving entity abusing his power. The Islamic State portrays Safavid Shah Isma’il I as a voracious monster, with cannibalistic tendencies. The modern Iranian regime is descended from this figure who possessed a power that should have never been his. IS drives this point home: “Just as the Roman Empire never fully fell, but merely adopted new names, the Safawiyyah [Safavid Empire] thrive – based in Iran – with their Rafidi [rejectors] of eradicating Ahlus-Sunnah [Sunni Muslims] and replacing them with a population of apostasy.”52

Thus, an attack on old Shi’a shrines (figure 28), from any era following the Safavid Empire, is a direct offense against the modern Iranian state. Adopting the rhetoric of humiliation again, cultural destruction is an act of rendering an undeserving group powerless. Returning to Euben’s dialogue, this is a performance in masculinity, a moment in which a patriarchal entity can dominate an impotent one.

**Destruction of Sunni Mosques**

Based on the explanations above about other religious sites, the destruction of Sunni mosques might be considered an attempt to humiliate the ruling regimes of Iraq, Syria, and even Saudi Arabia. The two former countries because the monuments destroyed are located in either nation, and the latter due to its status as the bastion of modern Sunni Islam.

52 The Islamic State, “Know Your Enemy: Who Were the Safawiyyah?” 12.
As explained in chapter 2, the Islamic State is challenging the sovereignty of Iraq and Syria in a revolutionary bid. IS sees the Sykes-Picot agreement as illegitimate and thus, the nation-states as illegal. Furthermore, the ruling regimes are perceived as oppressing Muslims worldwide. In the case of Iraq, the government of Nouri al-Maliki favored Shi’a Muslims, but limited the privileges of Sunnis and Kurds by centralizing governance. For IS, the presence of Shi’as in government was indicative of a conspiracy between the West and nonbelievers, all in an effort to suppress Sunni Muslims:

[Zarqawi] goes on to explain that the Rafidah [Shi’a] were beginning to dissolve their militias and join the newly formed Iraqi government, army, and security under the sight of the Americans and with American aid. The Rafidah knew a direct conflict between them and Ahlus-Sunnah [the global Sunni community] would only harm Rafidi interests by awakening Ahlus-Sunnah to jihad. The Rafidah believed that such a conflict would have to be delayed until the stabilization of a cruader backed government controlled by the Rafidah themselves. And they committed many crimes against Ahlus-Sunnah before the establishment of such a government, but always covertly, killing many mujahidin, scholars, intellectuals, doctors, and engineers, while taking advantage of the fact that unlike the very obvious Americans, the Rafidah spoke Arabic, looked Iraqi, and knew the Iraqi territory well.53

By destroying Sunni mosques in Iraqi territory, the Islamic State exposes the Iraqi government’s failure and unwillingness to protect its own citizens, thereby delegitimizing the ruling regime. Moreover, al-Maliki’s links with the U.S. government further incensed IS. The Caliphate sees the Iraqi government as failing to represent its interests, instead acting only to further a Shi’a centric agenda.

The Islamic State has voiced similar sentiments about the Syrian government, which is controlled by Bashar al-Assad, an Alawi Muslim. Daniel Pipes writes that there are fundamental differences between Alawites and Sunni Muslims, causing major religious tension between the two groups. Even the name “Alawite” is contentious: where supporters of the Assad regime use

Alawite to imply a connection to Ali, the son-in-law of the Prophet Muhammad, others refer to them as Nusayri to emphasize the group’s rejection of Islam. The Islamic State, in its literature, routinely uses the term “Nusayri.” In fact, Alawism has doctrines derived from Phoenician paganism, Mazdakism, Manichism, Hinduism, and Christianity. Scholars have even considered them Christians with Shi’a elements. Pipes concludes that the group has little in common with traditional Sunni Islam: “where Muslims proclaim their faith with the phrase: ‘There is no deity but God and Muhammad is His prophet,’ Alawis assert ‘There is no deity but Ali, no veil but Muhammad, and no bab but Salman’. Alawis reject Islam’s main tenets; by almost any standard they must be considered non-Muslims.” For the Islamic State, Alawis are sinners of the worst kind. Destroying Sunni mosques in territory controlled by the regime again is a sign to Sunni Muslims to emphasize the consequences of voting in and supporting an “apostate.” The act is meant to humiliate the Assad regime for failing to protect its own civilians. In doing so, the Islamic State manages to signal the dire state of life under Alawi rule.

Above all else, the Islamic State has been vocal in its hatred of the Saudi regime and its connections to the United States government. For the most part, they consider the presence of American troops in the land of the two mosques to be an affront to Islam. Although the kingdom of Saudi Arabia is ostensibly the main bastion of Sunni Islam today, IS considers their relationship with the West as threatening the safety of Muslims worldwide. To that end, the destruction of Sunni mosques again accomplishes two things: first, the act alerts Sunni Muslims to the inability of the al-Saud family to protect them and their heritage. Second, the destruction is

also a humiliation tactic, essentially emasculating the Saudi regime by proving them incapable of protecting Sunni cultural property.

**Conclusion**

This chapter has explored cases of cultural destruction in order to evaluate their narrative effects. I started by exploring patterns of radical recruitment, arguing that extremist groups often target disillusioned young men. Exploiting narratives of masculinity and emasculation, they emphasize that the West is in a position of undeserved power which it uses to oppress Muslims worldwide. The duty of the radical Islamist is to emasculate the West and reclaim its power. I explored the theories that govern this narrative in the next section. Finally, I conducted a large analysis through case studies of cultural destruction in order to explain how IS achieved its humiliating ends by attacking select sites. Overall, the destruction of cultural heritage was an act of revenge against the West, Iran, Iraq, Syria, and Saudi Arabia.

These case studies demonstrate the relationship between cultural destruction and political revolution. Although much of IS’ rhetoric emphasizes the as a form of religious legitimation, the fact that the group targets those sites which will provoke the pithiest response suggests that cultural destruction is a mechanism of violence and recruitment instead. Given that attacks on heritage require military and economic resources, there must be tangible political outcomes from this act. Together, these shore up the Islamic State’s ability to conduct a successful revolution.
Figure 4. The destruction of the “Grave of the Girl,” a monument to a young female who was believed to have died of a broken heart. Historians have guessed that the grave belonged to a Sunni historian of medieval Islam.\textsuperscript{57} Image from The Islamic State, “On the Destruction of Shirk in Wilayat Ninawa,” Dabiq 2, July 27, 2014, 15, https://clarionproject.org/docs/isis-isil-islamic-state-magazine-Issue-2-the-flood.pdf.

Figure 10. Graph showing reasons contributing to the positive and negative opinions of the Islamic State based on cultural destruction. Image from Emma Cunliffe and Luigi Curini, “ISIS and Heritage Destruction: A Sentiment Analysis,” *Antiquity* 92, no. 364 (August 2018): 1105, https://doi.org/10.15184/aqy.2018.134.

Figure 15. Images from the excavation of Ur, conducted by Sir Leonard Woolley. The photographs were meant to convey that the Iraqi natives had been living atop such a glorious cultural ruin for centuries, without realizing its value. Image from University of Pennsylvania Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology, “The Last Season,” accessed April 22, 2019, https://www.penn.museum/sites/iraq/?page_id=44.
Figure 18. Austen Henry Layard’s depiction of a throne-room from an Assyrian Palace, with fabricated imagery and exuberant polychromy. Image from “Assyrian Queen, Homepage,” Learning Sites, accessed April 22, 2019, http://www.learningsites.com/NWPalace/queen_home.php.

Figure 21. ISIS destroying the lamassus of Nimrud. Photo courtesy of Karim Sahib/Agence France-Presse, Getty Images.
Figure 22. Graph published by Emma Cunliffe and Luigi Curini showing that churches are monasteries are not often targeted by IS and do not attract a notable response. Image from Emma Cunliffe and Luigi Curini, “ISIS and Heritage Destruction: A Sentiment Analysis,” Antiquity 92, no. 364 (August 2018): 1100, https://doi.org/10.15184/aqy.2018.134.
Figure 25. The Islamic State considers the destruction of churches as part of a greater war against the Vatican and other institutions. Image from The Islamic State, “The Ruling on the Belligerent Christians,” *Rumiyah* 9, May 4, 2017, 9, https://qb5cc3pam3y2ad0tm1zxuhho-wpengine.netdna-ssl.com/wp-content/uploads/2017/05/Rumiyah-9.pdf.

Conclusion

This thesis proposes two conclusions, with the first enabling the second. To start, the exercise of cultural destruction should be viewed as a strategy of political revolution and, in fact, should cement the Islamic State’s status as a revolutionary movement. Second, discussions about IS’ actions have been an application of contemporary Orientalism. Instead of decrying cultural destruction as senseless barbarism, the act must be viewed as a political tool with specific and effective functionalities.

Thesis Outcomes

I start by summarizing the argument threading through the preceding five chapters. In the introduction, I established the link between national identity and heritage sites to demonstrate the importance of collective memory in state building. I offered a review of the existing literature, which has focused on the economic benefits of artifact looting and its identity building potential. However, I identified a gap in the characterization of the Islamic State. I suggested that re-contextualizing the group would shed light on the purposes and outcomes of cultural destruction.

The first chapter concluded that IS is not a terrorist group, but instead a revolutionary movement. Drawing upon the theoretical frameworks proposed by Charles Tilly, Theda Skocpol, Stephen Walt, and others, I proposed that the Islamic State’s expression of sovereignty, sophisticated military apparatus, and economic extraction mechanisms distinguished it as a revolution. In chapter 2, I aimed to situate cultural destruction within this political context. I began with a discussion of collective memory, which I connected to discourses on invented traditions and imagined communities. I established the built environment as an extension of national identity building, thus rendering attacks on heritage a tactic of delegitimization. A
historical analysis of cultural destruction indicated that the practice has been a strategy commonly employed by warring states or revolutionary groups.

Chapters 3 and 4 were empirical studies of the outcomes of cultural destruction. The former established the link between violence and coercion, arguing that attacks on heritage were a form of political spectacle meant to consolidate power and force submission. The second analyzed radical Islamist discourse patterns in order to demonstrate that cultural destruction functioned as a recruitment tactic. I proposed that demolishing historical sites managed to humiliate the West and other groups, thus legitimizing the Islamic State’s long-term goals and attracting new soldiers.

**Contemporary Orientalism**

In 2016, a replica of the destroyed 2,000-year-old triumphal arch from Palmyra was displayed in Trafalgar Square. An ecstatic Boris Johnson, then mayor of London, participated in the unveiling ceremonies, declaring that those in attendance stood “…in defiance of the barbarians [IS]…” who ruined the site.¹ Former UNESCO director-general Irina Bokova argued that the fall of Palmyra displayed “…how extremists are terrified by history and culture.”² A 2015 National Geographic article characterized the damage as “senseless,” implying a sort of reckless barbarism to the Islamic State’s actions.³

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This thesis has aimed to challenge the assumption that the Islamic State’s acts of cultural destruction were either “random” or “barbaric.” Rather, the demolition of heritage is a strategic initiative. In chapter 2, I used historical examples to demonstrate that the Islamic State is continuing a long tradition of cultural destruction. Most warring states and revolutionary groups have damaged historic property as part of their legitimation efforts. Chapters 3 and 4, explored the political consequences of cultural destruction, which benefitted the Islamic State by coercing civilian obedience or by bolstering recruitment efforts. In both cases, the productive outcomes of this act explain its prevalence. Why then does the West insist on referring to IS’ cultural destruction as senseless?

Art historian Zainab Bahrani posits that the outcry is rooted in contemporary Orientalism. The term was first immortalized in Edward Said’s pioneering 1978 work to describe the constellation of preconceived notions developed by the West to describe the East. Orientalism identified persistent tropes that Americans and Europeans used to visualize and textualize foreign peoples. Representations of a then alien culture have come to define contemporary discourse.

Bahrani develops Said’s thesis further in her essay Assault and Abduction, an in-depth study of cultural destruction in the Ancient Near East. She expresses discontent at the West’s practice of othering these attacks as “senseless” or “barbaric.” In academic scholarship and the public ethos, the West has served as the norm while the East has been a foil against which to compare it. A renewed investigation rooted in postcolonial studies should compel historians to re-evaluate their biases.

With regard to IS’ actions, the proclivity toward outcry is due to stereotyping that portrayed and perpetuated the image of the East as barbaric. I use this controversial term

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deliberately. The concept of the “barbaric” arose from Herodotus’ characterization of the Persians in his *Histories*. Scholars of classical reception have concluded that the casting of the Persians in this role allowed mid-century philologists to invent the concept of the sophisticated Hellenic race.\(^5\) The inclination to condemn cultural destruction has the same roots. In the following passage, Bahrani argues that Orientalism defined modern attitudes toward these attacks:

The Otherness of the Near East is often articulated through stereotype in art-historical writing. A case in point is the discussion of the practice of mutilating images in the Near East… Not only have stereotypes been utilized in the interpretation of this practice, but a privileging of one type of ancient text over all others has also aided in its perception as a ‘senseless’ act of violence, and thus serves the purposes of the Orientalist model by validating two of its main abstractions as defined by Said: Oriental violence and Oriental despotism.\(^6\)

For Bahrani, this discussion is mired in Orientalist thought. Although she is not referring to the Islamic State here, the same principles apply. Instead of viewing IS’ cultural destruction as a strategic undertaking, journalists were quick to denounce the action as something horrendous and unnecessary. However, in this thesis I aimed to show that cultural destruction was a tactic of political revolution.

Cultural destruction in the Middle East has been condemned since the Persians sacked the Parthenon in 480 BC, much to the chagrin of Western scholars. The razing of a building so revered in the Western consciousness has marginalized Eastern peoples for centuries. Classicists and historians have used this event to exemplify the barbarity of the Orient. Bahrani offers the following evidence:

…perhaps the best-known act of Near-Eastern assault and abduction of statues and monuments, that of the sacking of the Athenian Acropolis in 480 BC. Ever since Herodotus and Lycurgus, the incident has been presented in western scholarship as the prime example of the barbarity of the east. Handbooks on Greek art or history do not

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\(^6\) Bahrani, “Assault and Abduction,” 363.
attempt to disguise their disdain for this act of philistine depravity, and scholars of the Near East have inherited this view. Aligning themselves with the ancient Greeks, they see the mutilation and theft of statues as a barbaric act of violence.\textsuperscript{7}

The sack of the Parthenon has prompted an othering of the peoples of the East. Since then, cultural destruction has been viewed as an act of pure barbarism, one associated with a less intellectually sophisticated group. The discourse around the Islamic State’s actions is rooted in a history of oppression and marginalization and, to an extent, proves the exact narrative that the group denounces.

In some ways, this thesis is a metadiscourse on Orientalism. As the previous section states, the aim of this project was to contextualize and define the Islamic State’s cultural destruction practices. The outcomes of this exercise indicate the sophisticated nature of the strategy. Instead of denouncing IS’ acts as senseless violence, they should be evaluated in terms of their political consequences. To do otherwise is to perpetuate a narrative of Orientalism. Reclaiming this understanding of cultural destruction is a transformative act, meant to elevate ongoing dialogues about the subject.

**Future Work**

The success and spread of IS’ tactics have prompted other insurgency groups to engage in similarly destructive acts. Extremists have attacked religious sites, libraries, and museums in Egypt, Tunisia, Libya, Yemen, and Mali.\textsuperscript{8} These spectacular acts of destruction, however, have been unnoticed or uncovered in Western media. Moreover, the Assad regime in Syria has committed more attacks on heritage – albeit as consequences of war rather than deliberate

\textsuperscript{7} Bahrani, “Assault and Abduction,” 372.
assaults – than even IS. Yet, the loss of structures like the Grand Mosque of Aleppo or the town of Bosra have not phased Western consumers in the same way.

Just weeks ago, on April 15, 2019, the famed cathedral of Notre Dame went up in flames. The blaze shocked the world, and a global outpour of support and mourning followed. Almost every major media station covered the fire, interviewing citizens about the cultural significance of the monument. As Notre Dame burned, the world watched with shock, sadness, and abject horror. Within days, French President Emmanuel Macron vowed to rebuild the structure and billionaires promised boundless financial support. Plans are already underway to restore Notre Dame, an iconic Western church, to its former glory.

Often, analyses of IS’ cultural heritage destruction are accompanied by discussions on policy initiatives or national interventions that could preserve important sites and structures. However, what is required is a fundamental change in the narrative surrounding historic material. Journalists and scholars have always prioritized Western culture, at the expense of that of the Near and Far East. Compare the response to Notre Dame’s burning to the bombing of the Bamiyan Buddhas in 2001 or the looting of the Baghdad Museum in 2003. In both cases, there was a lack of media coverage and remorse on the part of Western consumers.

The disintegration of Notre Dame was an accident. An unfortunate one, but a mistake nonetheless. There was no malicious intent to erase a religion, a culture, or a way of life. There

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was only an accidental blaze. Yet, where billionaires rushed to offer financial support, no similar outcry has occurred for the multitude of sites destroyed as a result of ethnic cleansing in the Middle East. Only Palmyra managed to provoke a similar response, but as I mentioned in chapter 4, the Western world perceived the ancient city as its own heritage, not Syria’s.

The best way to protect cultural property worldwide is to offer each site the same valuation. Western institutions always discuss monuments with a clear hierarchy: the ancient Greco-Roman material is far better than anything produced in the Near or Far East. European paintings outshine Islamic tessellations. To paraphrase John Henry Rawlinson, the winged lamassu is not the Belvedere Apollo. What needs to be accomplished is an equalization and respect for all cultural heritage. While the loss of Notre Dame feels monumental, the destruction of the Grand Mosque of Aleppo was tragic but negligible.

To protect cultural heritage, states and international organizations must first understand its value, not only in the abstract but also in reality. The destruction of a site in the Middle East may then seem more monumental, provoking a more thoughtful response. As always, structures are not as important as human lives. The priority should be to defend and support civilians. What IS has accomplished, in its few years of existence, is astounding. Cultural destruction must be treated as a strategy of revolution, in order to facilitate a more effective response.
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