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Performative Destruction: Da'esh (ISIS) Ideology and the War on Heritage in Iraq

Gil J. Stein

Well-publicized genocidal actions, combined with ferocious iconoclastic attacks on cultural heritage, characterize the violent expansion of the caliphate of Da'esh, also known as the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS or ISIL), over significant areas in the north of both countries from 2013 to 2019. These were not random acts of atrocity but instead formed a coherent, integrated politico-religious strategy of violence, communicated and amplified globally through innovative use of the Internet. In this chapter I suggest that Da'esh's politics of heritage demolition were central to its very identity. Its destruction of cultural heritage monuments was a form of "cultural genocide" closely linked to concurrent acts of human genocide in attempts to exterminate its enemies, both Muslim and non-Muslim, in Syria and Iraq.

This discussion has three parts. I start by showing that Da'esh's actions must be understood as deriving from the group's religious ideology of extremist jihadi Salafism as a distinct strand within Sunni Muslim theology. The second section shows how Da'esh's acts of parallel politico-religious violence against people and iconoclastic attacks on heritage monuments were publicized in a dangerous new paradigm of Internet-based "performative destruction." The third part examines the human and cultural targets of Da'esh's genocidal actions to emphasize that—contrary to the widely held Western perception—most of the heritage monuments destroyed by Da'esh were shrines sacred to rival Muslim groups, rather than ancient or pre-Islamic sites. I conclude by noting that Da'esh's public destruction of heritage is simply the latest and best publicized exemplar of a deep historical pattern in which the erasure of culture is the necessary prelude or accompaniment to the eradication of people. With the advent

of Internet-based performative destruction and viral violence, Da'esh has moved genocide and heritage destruction into new and uncharted terrain.

Da'esh's Ideological Roots

“Da'esh” is the Arabic acronym for “al-Dawla al-Islāmiyya fī'l 'Irāq wa'l Shām” (the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria). Founded in 1999 by Abu Mussaf al-Zarkawi, the organization participated in the insurgency against the US-led occupation of Iraq in 2003. After splitting from al-Qaeda, its parent group, and changing its leadership and name, Da'esh emerged as a major military, political, and ideological force, first in Iraq and then in Syria after the outbreak of the latter's civil war in 2011. In 2014, Da'esh's leader, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, declared the establishment of a caliphate as a theocratic polity dedicated to restoring the values of the original “rightly guided” caliphs in the seventh century CE.

By December 2015, Da'esh had conquered a vast area across northern Syria and Iraq. At its peak, Da'esh controlled an estimated eight to twelve million people in a caliphate that enforced its interpretation of Islamic law until its destruction as a territorial entity in 2019. Da'esh differed radically from other groups in its revolutionary politico-religious agenda of restoring the caliphate, in the enemies it targeted, and in its unique focus on the performative destruction of people and heritage. This core strategy of Da'esh fused politics, Islamic fundamentalism espousing jihad (religiously sanctioned war against unbelievers), and the use of the Internet in an unprecedented way as a weapon of war and a recruitment tool.

The political and military actions of Da'esh can only be understood by recognizing the importance of jihadi Salafism as its core ideology. A branch of Sunni Islam, Salafism requires its adherents to emulate “the pious predecessors,” equated with the first Muslim communities and the four “righteously guided” caliphs who ruled from 632 to 661 as the earliest successors to the Prophet Muhammad. Salafism encompasses several main ideological strands, united by a core of shared beliefs.¹ Salafis seek to revive the ideological purity of the seventh-century pious ancestors. They believe that the only valid sources of authority are the earliest texts—the Quran and Sunna (words and acts) of the Prophet Muhammad and his companions—rather than later schools of Islamic religious thought. On this basis, Salafis define themselves as the purest Muslim group, “the sect saved (from hellfire),” distinct, superior, and opposed to non-Muslim and even other Muslim groups.²

Salafis emphasize an imperative to combat polytheism, idolatry, unbelief, and all attempts to associate other beings or things with God. This includes uncompromising opposition to the belief in “intermediaries” between people and the divine, whether Sufi mystics or Christian clerics. Salafis seek to rid Islam of “reprehensible innovations” in religious beliefs and practices adopted from other faiths, and therefore focus on the “cleansing” of Islam.³ On that basis, Salafis strongly oppose Shiites as “rejectionists” of the first three caliphs.⁴ Although Da'esh is a Salafi organization, it adheres to the most

extreme strand of this ideology, a position not even shared by the majority of other Salafis, let alone Muslims in general.

Salafi groups fall into three very different categories. The majority are “quietist” or “scholastic” Salafis, who follow a more traditional outlook, arguing that all forms of overt political organization and violence are forbidden because this can lead to civil strife between Muslims, and, in any case, obedience to Muslim rulers, even unjust ones, is religiously mandated. In contrast, the second Salafi group, known as *hariki* (activists), advocate nonviolent political activism in both Muslim and non-Muslim countries. The third and most radical group are the jihadi Salafis, who call for “violent action against the existing political order (whether Muslim, non-Muslim, or secular) and for the establishment of a unitary state in the form of the caliphate.”⁵ Da’esh and al-Qaeda are quintessential examples of jihadi Salafi groups.

Da’esh is committed to restoring what adherents see as original Islamic practices through political action, armed violence, and the extermination of those they define as enemies. Their principal targets are Middle Eastern groups that differ the most from Da’esh’s version of Islam—that is, non-Muslim communities such as Yezidis, Christians, and Jews. However, Da’esh’s enemies also include Muslim groups such as Sufis (seen as polytheists and believers in false intermediaries between God and humanity), Shiites (due to their rejection of the original pure Islam of the first caliphs), and even the governments of modern Sunni Muslim states whose secular or non-Salafi policies are seen as apostasy. Da’esh targeted not only the people directly, but also the mosques, shrines, and monuments of these enemy Muslim groups in order to restore Islam to its original state of purity. This policy of purification extended to include the destruction of ancient pre-Islamic monuments, also defined as idolatrous.

Overall, Da’esh’s actions are best understood as deriving from a powerful fusion of religious and political ideologies—deeply held beliefs, not simply political expediency. Jihadi Salafi ideology explains why Da’esh attacked specific people, groups, and monuments, and clarifies the discourse used to explain these actions in new forms of messaging. Although the targeting of people and monuments makes sense in political terms, the religious motivations were equally important as a means of legitimizing the attacks, allowing Da’esh to cast itself as more authentic than other nonstate armed jihadi groups. Although attacks on Sufis and Shiites do not fit the widely accepted Western narrative that emphasizes Da’esh’s hostility to Christians and Yezidis, the targeting of these Muslim groups as enemies is also a core element of Da’esh’s ideology. While political considerations were clearly important, the core Salafi imperative to combat both modern and ancient idolatry provided the religious rationale for Da’esh’s iconoclastic war on pre-Islamic cultural heritage monuments.

Da’esh Iconoclasm and Performative Destruction

Iconoclasm can be defined as the deliberate destruction of the material manifestations of cultural heritage because they represent a particular doctrine or ideology. As such,

these objects or monuments stand in opposition to the core beliefs of the group conducting the iconoclastic act. Iconoclasm extends beyond religious icons to include attacks on ethnic and political symbols.⁶ It destroys the past and present to create a new vision of the future.

Da'esh's public statements about iconoclastic acts such as the demolition of monumental sculptures and buildings at the ancient Assyrian capitals at Nimrud and Nineveh, adjacent to the modern Iraqi city of Mosul, made it clear that the demolition was an action against idolatry: "Today we destroy and obliterate another landmark of polytheism, which had been held in high esteem by the people, whereas they did not know that these relics are idols and statues which had been worshipped besides God."⁷

The declaration echoes the well-known precedent for this kind of widely publicized iconoclastic action, the Taliban's destruction in 2001 of the sixth-century monumental standing Buddha statues in the Bamiyan Valley of Afghanistan.⁸ The Taliban's edict announcing the destruction of the Buddhas stated that the action had been taken due to the characterization of the statues as "idols" and the need to suppress idolatry: "Edict issued by the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan, in Kandahar on the 12th of Rabiul-Awwal 1421 (26 February 2001): On the basis of consultations between the religious leaders of the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan, religious judgments of the ulema and rulings of the Supreme Court of the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan, all statues and non-Islamic shrines located in different parts of the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan must be destroyed. These statues have been and remain shrines of unbelievers and these unbelievers continue to worship and respect them."⁹

It is important to emphasize that Da'esh's and the Taliban's focus on destroying pre-Islamic statues or other monuments as "idolatry" has no real historical grounding in the practices of the earliest Muslim "rightly guided" caliphs and does not represent mainstream Sunni Muslim belief or practice. In 2001, after the Taliban announced their edict, Sheikh Yusuf al-Qaradawi, an Egyptian cleric regarded as one of the most respected religious scholars in the modern Arab Muslim world, stated: "The statues made by the elders who came before Islam are part of a historic patrimony. When the Muslims penetrated Afghanistan, in the first century of Hijra, these statues were already there, and they were not destroyed. I advised our brothers of the Taliban movement to reconsider their decision in light of the danger of its negative impact."¹⁰ Similarly, Sabri Abdel Raouf, chief of the Division of Islamic Studies at al-Azhar University in Cairo, stated that "statues intended for worship can be forbidden as contrary to Islam but statues that are not worshipped are not forbidden."¹¹ The views of these scholars were incorporated into the 2001 Doha Declaration on Islam and Cultural Heritage:

The *'ulamâ* participating in the Symposium affirmed that the position of Islam with regard to the preservation of the human cultural heritage derives from its appreciation of innate human values and from respect for peoples' beliefs. They explained that the position of Islam regarding the preservation of the cultural

heritage is a firm position of principle which expresses the very essence of the Islamic religion. Any individual or collective behaviour which is at variance with that position in no way reflects the Islamic position as expressed by the *‘ulamâ* and *fuqahâ* (Islamic jurists) of the umma (nation of Islam).¹²

Clearly, Da’esh’s commitment to the destruction of pre-Islamic and non-Islamic statues, monuments, and art—regardless of whether they were actually being worshipped—represents an extreme fundamentalist view at variance with the formally declared beliefs of mainstream Sunni Islam.

Da’esh’s devastation of both ancient and modern cultural heritage was so effective because it took place in a well-integrated system that combined religious ideology, a political agenda, extreme violence, and Internet-based communication. Michael Danti describes Da’esh’s attacks on heritage as “performative destruction” to emphasize their public character: “Performative deliberate destructions are scripted productions with ISIL militants delivering speeches and reciting religious passages on camera, purporting that the targeted heritage is idolatrous or heretical within their interpretation of Islam. . . . These diatribes are followed by meticulously edited film sequences showing destructions of architecture and sculpture using explosives, heavy machinery, and hand tools (figs. 9.1, 9.2). Videos and still photos are then posted on the internet with ISIL branding or are featured in the ISIL magazine *Dabiq*.”¹³ The importance of these actions goes far beyond Da’esh and may foreshadow the emergence of a broader-based new paradigm of performative destruction that could threaten people and patrimony in unprecedented ways at a global level.

Da’esh’s performative destruction of objects, monuments, and sites was a religiously and politically motivated public propagandistic act of cultural genocide accompanying

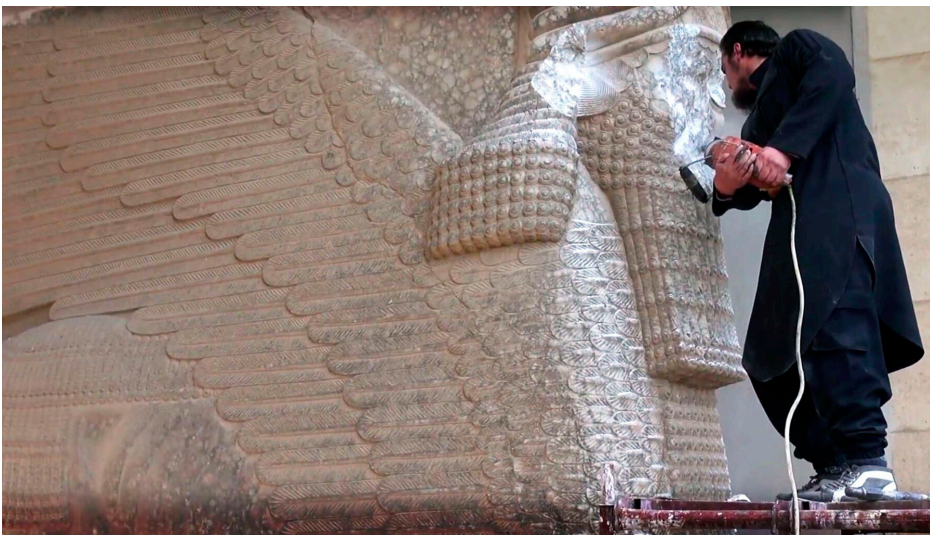


Figure 9.1 A Da’esh militant uses a power tool to destroy an Assyrian winged bull dating to the early seventh century BCE at the gate of Nineveh, near present-day Mosul, Iraq. Image: CPA Media Pte Ltd. / Alamy Stock Photo



Figure 9.2 The Church of the Virgin Mary in Tel Nasri, Syria, devastated by ISIS on Easter Sunday in 2015. Image: Rodi Said / Reuters / Alamy Stock Photo

the destruction of people and communities through physical genocide as defined in international law.¹⁴ These attacks were so effective because they were embedded in a well-integrated system that combined religious ideology, a political agenda, extreme violence, and sophisticated propaganda—all amplified at a global scale to reach multiple, targeted audiences through Internet videos, digital magazines, and other social media. Nonhierarchical channels of Internet communication make these messages extremely difficult to counter or suppress.

Public acts of iconoclasm have a long history.¹⁵ Performative destruction as defined here, however, is qualitatively different, innovative, and proven to be a highly effective strategy for propaganda and recruitment at a global scale. Publicly broadcast imagery intensified the visual and emotional impact of victories, killings, and heritage destruction. Da'esh's demolitions of cultural heritage monuments and shrines were performed as acts of religiously justified cultural genocide linked with the actual killing of targeted ethnicities and faith communities. This use of the Internet for performative destruction has been characterized as “digitally mediated iconoclasm”¹⁶ and “socially mediated terrorism”: “the use of social and networked media to increase the impact of violent acts undertaken to further a social, political and/or religious cause with the aim of creating physical, emotional or psychological suffering that extends beyond the immediate audience.”¹⁷

In performative destruction, the Internet and social media are used to reach diverse global audiences with targeted messages designed to accomplish multiple goals:

- ◆ Establish the ideological and political legitimacy of the organization;

- ◆ Recruit followers at local and international levels;
- ◆ Terrorize and demoralize local enemies by amplifying victories and atrocities;
- ◆ Promote the group relative to other competing groups; and
- ◆ Provoke enemy states through attacks on heritage, while polarizing Western states and the Islamic World.

Nonstate armed groups such as Da'esh require a continuous communicative effort through digital media to legitimize and constantly relegitimize themselves by establishing and maintaining the greater authenticity of their religious credentials as distinct from rival groups.¹⁸ The viral character of Internet communication, including social media, makes these messages nearly impossible to rebut or stifle.

The Da'esh strategy of performative destruction also relied heavily on its online magazine *Dabiq* to complement online videos and social media postings by explaining and amplifying at greater length the ideological bases for its iconoclastic actions. The name of the magazine is significant: *Dabiq* is a place in northern Syria where, according to early Muslim traditions, the final apocalyptic battle between Islam and Christianity will take place.¹⁹ Published online in Arabic, English, German, and French from 2014 to 2016, *Dabiq* served a number of strategic purposes. A primary goal was to call on Muslims worldwide to support Da'esh by emigrating to Syria and Iraq to join the caliphate. *Dabiq* used carefully written accessible text with high-quality graphics to describe Da'esh's success in gaining the support of the Syrian population, report successful military operations, and graphically portray its own violence against Shiites, Sufis, Yezidis, and other enemies. In fifteen thematic issues, *Dabiq* used classic Islamic texts to explain and justify the nature of the caliphate, its intentions, legitimacy, and authority over all Muslims.²⁰ *Dabiq* was aimed at multiple audiences, seeking to communicate with both non-Muslim enemies and potential Muslim supporters at a global level. Readers who could not themselves come to the caliphate were asked to encourage others to emigrate. Muslims abroad were asked to organize local allegiance pledges, and to publicize them as much as possible, including by recording and distributing the pledges through social media. *Dabiq* explained that publicized pledges intimidated unbelievers, normalized loyalty to Da'esh, and encouraged others to pledge.²¹

Online magazines, video postings, and the use of social media were seamlessly woven into the core strategies of Da'esh. The US Department of State estimated that at the height of the conflict, Da'esh's supporters posted around ninety thousand messages a day online through a variety of platforms, including YouTube, Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram.²² This transformed the war in Syria into "the most socially mediated conflict in history."²³ This novel widespread use of social media and video imagery was an essential force multiplier for the emotional, political, and military effectiveness of performative destruction as a weapon. As stated by sociologist Kevin McDonald, "We

need to recognise that the camera phone does not simply film contemporary war, it plays an increasingly central role in shaping it.”²⁴

The War against People: Genocide against Yazidis, Christians, and Muslim Enemies

Da'esh viewed its acts of performative destruction as part of the eternal struggle between monotheism and idolatry, carried out at both ideological and material levels. A key aspect was the “purification” of the earth from any forms of idolatry or its practitioners, explaining why Da'esh barely distinguished between human enemies and material expressions of unbelief, whether modern or ancient—all were seen as targets for destruction.²⁵ These actions and their religious legitimization were central elements in the way Da'esh differentiated itself from rival nonstate armed groups, allowing it to claim a level of extreme ideological purity that also played a key role in recruiting new followers. The consequences of this outlook and its implementation were horrific for the Yazidi and Christian communities, as well as those Sufi and Shiite Muslim groups that Da'esh defined as enemies.

The Yazidis are a Kurdish-speaking, heterodox ethnoreligious group whose heartland lies in the plains and mountainous areas near Mosul in northern Iraq. The Yazidi faith incorporates elements of Zoroastrianism, Manichaeism, Gnosticism, Christianity, and Islam.²⁶ Due to the secretive nature of Yazidi religious practices and their veneration of the Peacock Angel (“Tavus Melek” in Kurdish), many Christians and especially Muslims have erroneously accused them of being “devil-worshippers” who are not considered “People of the Book”—i.e., monotheists.²⁷

In public statements disseminated through *Dabiq* and other media, Da'esh defined the Yazidis as polytheist idolators²⁸ and launched a campaign of ethnic cleansing and genocide against them in 2014. In the initial assault, between ten and twelve thousand Yazidi men, women, and children were killed.²⁹ All victims were abused and tortured, male Yazidis above the age of twelve were killed, and female Yazidis were publicly traded in a complex network of sexual slavery. The thousands who fled to Mount Sinjar in northern Iraq were besieged to ensure their death from thirst and starvation. In total, more than four hundred thousand Yazidis were enslaved, driven from their homeland, or killed.³⁰ In *Dabiq*, Da'esh framed these actions as consistent with Islamic law: “Enslaving the families of the [nonbelievers] and taking their women as concubines is a firmly established aspect of the Shariah. . . . After capture, the Yazidi women and children were then divided according to the Shariah amongst the fighters of the Islamic State . . . after one fifth of the slaves were transferred to the Islamic State’s authority to be divided as *khums*.” *Khums* is the one-fifth share or tax on the spoils of war owed to the state. According to a 2016 report by the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, “No other religious group present in ISIS-controlled areas of Syria and Iraq has been subjected to the destruction that the Yazidis have suffered.”³¹

Despite the fact that mainstream Islam considers Christians to be People of the Book, who are tolerated within Islam subject to their payment of the *jizya* tax on non-Muslims,

Da'esh viewed both Western and local Middle Eastern Christians as enemies: "We tell Christians everywhere that the Islamic State will spread, God willing, it will reach you even if you are in fortresses. Those who embrace Islam or *jizya* will be safe. But those who refuse . . . will have nothing from us but the edge of the sword. The men will be killed, the women and children enslaved, and the money seized. That is Allah and the Prophet's judgment."³² Following the earlier language of Osama bin Laden and al-Qaeda, Da'esh labeled Western Christians as "crusaders" who were enemies of Islam to be destroyed. The fourth issue of *Dabiq*, titled "The Failed Crusade," included an article asserting that "every Muslim should get out of his house, find a crusader and kill him." Syrian and Iraqi Christians, especially Syriac-Aramaic-speaking Assyrians and Chaldeans, were also singled out for persecution, forced conversion, and extermination.

After capturing Mosul on 10 June 2014, Da'esh demanded that the Christian population pay the *jizya* as a condition of their safety and permission to remain in the city. Two days later, Da'esh reneged on this promise, declaring instead that Christians would be killed or forced to convert to Islam if they did not leave Mosul by the following week. The local Syrian Catholic leader, Ignatius Yousef Younan, stated that at least five hundred Christians from his diocese were killed by the militants when they failed to flee Da'esh territory in time. Da'esh's actions of expulsion, expropriation of property, destruction of homes, forced conversions, and targeted killings in Mosul and the adjacent Assyrian Christian heartland of the Nineveh Plain vastly accelerated the devastation of the Iraqi Christian population, which had declined from a population of 1.4 million in 2003 to an estimated 150,000–275,000 by 2016.³³ In the latter year, the legislative bodies of the European Union, the United Kingdom, and the United States voted unanimously to denounce Da'esh's violence against Iraqi Christians as genocide.³⁴

Da'esh targeted those Muslim groups whose beliefs differed from Salafi religious principles, most notably Sufi and Shi'ite communities. Sufism is a mystical form of Islam that emphasizes introspection and spiritual closeness with God, and Sufi practice includes the veneration of saints, often at their tombs and shrines. Although most Sufis are Sunni Muslims, Da'esh violently opposes Sufis as polytheists or idolaters whose veneration of saints is the false belief in intermediaries between humanity and God.³⁵ As early as 2016, Da'esh began systematically razing the shrines and tombs of Sufi saints in publicized acts of performative destruction. In 2017, it began mass executions of Sufi worshippers during prayer.³⁶

Da'esh also took extreme action against Shi'ites in Iraq, considering them apostates for their refusal to recognize the legitimacy of the first three caliphs as successors to the Prophet and their exclusive acceptance of the fourth, Ali, and his descendants as the legitimate caliphs.³⁷ This view was highlighted in the thirteenth edition of *Dabiq*, in January 2016, on the theme "The Rafidah ('Rejectionists') from Ibn Saba to the Dajjal." In contrast with other nonstate armed groups such as al-Qaeda, who considered attacks on Shi'ites detrimental to public support and a distraction from its jihad against the West, Da'esh made bombings and massacres of Shi'ites a priority, targeting shrines, holy cities,

and pilgrimages. In one of its worst atrocities, Da'esh fighters killed 670 Shiite prisoners in a raid on Badush prison northwest of Mosul in June 2014, in addition to bombings and other attacks on Shiites in Baghdad.³⁸

The War against Things: Da'esh Attacks on Modern and Ancient Cultural Heritage

Da'esh's extreme violence against Christians, Yazidis, and enemy Muslim groups has been generally recognized as genocide. These acts did not occur in isolation, instead accompanying attacks on the cultural heritage monuments of these groups, along with the destruction of ancient, pre-Islamic heritage sites and monuments. Da'esh's destruction of cultural heritage took two forms: the looting of artifacts from ancient sites for profit, and the performative destruction of both modern and ancient sites and monuments for politico-religious reasons. Both foci of Da'esh activities stood in stark contrast with earlier patterns of conflict-related damage to ancient cultural heritage in Iraq.

From the 1991 Gulf War to the aftermath of the 2003 US invasion of Iraq, there was little or no state-sponsored destruction of Christian, Yazidi, Sufi, Shiite, or ancient heritage sites. During this period, the looting of the Iraq Museum in Baghdad and of numerous ancient sites in southern Iraq were economically motivated crimes by individuals and gangs.³⁹ However, with the ascendancy of Da'esh and its establishment of a caliphate, attacks on heritage took a qualitatively different form. This was especially true of looting: what had formerly been criminal activities by profit-driven private entities were reinvented as meritorious moral obligations authorized by the central authorities of the caliphate. This Da'esh-sanctioned looting was justified through traditional laws and practices of jihad. In both Syria and Iraq, the group, at this point acting effectively as a state, issued official licenses to looters of archaeological heritage sites, who were obligated to pay 20 percent of their profits to the caliphate as *khums*.⁴⁰ Looting became a major source of revenue for Da'esh. Officially sanctioned looting complemented Da'esh's program of performative destruction of modern and ancient cultural heritage, justified in terms of jihadi Salafist ideology and the caliphate's political agenda.

The fight against idolatry, whether modern or ancient, was enormously important for Da'esh as a way to frame its physical genocide of people and cultural genocide against monuments within a discourse of Islamic piety. As stated by Christoph Gunther and Tom Bioly, "Explicitly defining the material representations of its enemy serves as a means to illustrate and sharpen the perceived bipolarity of the situation of conflict, which the Islamic State seeks to fuel. In further suggesting an analogy between themselves and the first generations of Muslims, the followers of the Islamic State claim both legitimacy and authenticity for their actions. This elevates iconoclasm to a virtuous expression of 'genuine' Islam as well as to the struggle for a new system of social order."⁴¹

Western attention has mainly focused on Da'esh's performative destruction of ancient heritage sites in Syria and Iraq, such as Palmyra, Hatra, Nineveh, and Nimrud.⁴² These sites seem to have been deliberately targeted as a way to send a message to two very distinct audiences in the West. At one level the attacks were meant to provoke Western governments and populations into overreactions and thereby to exacerbate the polarization between Christian and Muslim communities in Europe and North America. In tandem, they were also intended to inspire European and North American Muslims and ultimately recruit them as followers.

However destructive and shocking they are to Western eyes, such attacks on ancient pre-Islamic sites and monuments formed only a small part of the overall picture of Da'esh's program of heritage destruction. Statistics compiled by the American Schools of Oriental Research Cultural Heritage Initiative show that at least 64 percent of the cultural heritage monuments destroyed by Da'esh as of 2015 were mosques and shrines of Sufi and Shiite groups, while only 3 percent of the monuments destroyed were at ancient, pre-Islamic heritage sites (table 9.1).⁴³

This focus on Sufi and Shiite monuments can also be seen in the analysis of cultural heritage destruction in the Old City of Mosul during the period of Da'esh occupation from 2014 until its recapture by Iraqi security forces in July 2017.⁴⁴ Da'esh destroyed or damaged forty-one significant modern heritage sites in this area of the city, and an additional 114 sites on the Nineveh Plain to the east (table 9.2).⁴⁵

Da'esh saw its destruction of Shiite and Sufi tombs and cemeteries as fulfilling the well-established Wahhabi and Salafi doctrine of *taswiyat al-qubur* (leveling of graves)—the religious duty to destroy burial places if they were used as places of worship, since this is considered a form of idolatry.⁴⁶ One of the most important heritage shrines

Denomination/ Category	Sites as percentage of total heritage sites destroyed by Da'esh (n=250)
Sunni-Sufi	17%
Other Sunni	8%
Shia	39%
Yezidi	10%
Christian	9%
Ancient	3%
Other/Misc.	14%

Table 9.1 Main patterns of Da'esh destruction of cultural heritage sites in Iraq and Syria. Data from Michael D. Danti, "Ground-Based Observations of Cultural Heritage Incidents in Syria and Iraq," *Near Eastern Archaeology* 78, no. 3 (2015): 137, Figure 12.

Denomination	Mosul– Old City	Nineveh Plain	Total
Sunni	35	6	41
Shiite	1	73	74
Yezidi	0	26	26
Christian	3	6	9
Other/Misc.	2	1	3
TOTAL	41	114	155

Table 9.2 Patterns of cultural heritage site destruction in the Old City of Mosul and on the Nineveh Plain east of the city, 2014–17. Data from RASHID International, *The Intentional Destruction of Cultural Heritage in Iraq as a Violation of Human Rights* (Munich: RASHID International, August 2017), 9, Table 1.

destroyed by Da’esh in Mosul was Nebi Yunus—the tomb of the biblical prophet Jonah—a shrine sacred to Muslims, Christians, and Jews.⁴⁷ Nevertheless, overall, Da’esh focused its performative destruction on cultural heritage sites belonging to “enemy” Shiite and Sunni Sufi Muslims far more than on Yezidi, Christian, or ancient pre-Islamic ones. The actions against modern heritage sites took place at the same time as Da’esh’s demolition of the monumental winged bulls that adorned the main gates of the eighth- to seventh-century BCE Assyrian capital of Nineveh, opposite the Old City of Mosul.⁴⁸

In all these attacks on Muslim, Yezidi, Christian, and ancient heritage monuments, Da’esh’s performative destruction took the same form: a video record for later posting on the Internet and social media, in which a spokesman justified the action on Islamic religious grounds as a necessary and virtuous act, followed by the actual demolition of the monument. Da’esh defined this destruction of modern heritage sites as religiously sanctioned opposition to idolatry, using the same language it employed to justify genocidal attacks on modern enemy groups. Da’esh’s innovation was the widely publicized performative nature of these acts. However, one of the most disturbing aspects of Da’esh’s performative destruction framed in Salafi religious discourse was the concomitant genocidal destruction of people and things.

Conclusions: Genocide, Performative Destruction, and the Future of Viral Violence

Heritage destruction, cultural genocide, and the eradication of ethnic and religious communities are inextricably linked. The disturbing connection between cultural and physical genocide assumed special importance during World War II and its aftermath. Raphael Lemkin, who invented the term *genocide*, emphasized this linkage in his definition: “Genocide . . . is . . . a coordinated plan of different actions aiming at the destruction of essential foundations of the life of national groups, with the aim of

annihilating the groups themselves.”⁴⁹ For Lemkin, these foundations were both material and cultural.

Architecture, most notably the structures we consider heritage monuments, is emblematic of a culture and encompasses a complex set of meanings that together play a key role in defining a group’s cultural identity. This linkage of the tangible and intangible makes culturally significant architecture extraordinarily valuable to a group while at the same time making these same structures extremely vulnerable to attack by the people who seek to destroy that culture. For that reason, the destruction of culturally significant monuments has become linked to ethnic cleansing, characterizing various twentieth- and twenty-first-century conflicts.⁵⁰ Hannah Arendt captured the fundamental logic behind the power of this connection: “The whole factual world of human affairs depends for its reality and its continued existence, first, upon the presence of others who have heard and seen and will remember, and second, on the transformation of the intangible into the tangibility of things.”⁵¹ This explains why genocidal campaigns “inevitably wage war on material culture, why buildings are also seen as the enemy, and their death and humiliation every bit as necessary as those of enemy groups.”⁵²

This connection lies at the heart of Da’esh’s performative destruction of cultural heritage in Syria and Iraq. The uncomfortable truth is that performative destruction works disturbingly well as a tool of propaganda and warfare for extremist groups. It was highly effective as a recruiting tool for Da’esh, who used it to attract roughly forty thousand people from 110 countries to come to Syria and join the caliphate.⁵³ The global reach of the Internet combined with the strong emotional impact of video imagery gave Da’esh a vastly larger and more diverse audience than it could otherwise have achieved and dramatically amplified the intensity of its ideological messages for friends and foes alike.

The paradox of Da’esh’s performative destruction is jarring in that it merges the most modern multimedia communication technologies with religious ideologies that explicitly ground themselves 1,400 years in the past—in the seventh-century origins of Islam. This kind of fusion has only become possible within the last two decades. Acts of terrorism and heritage destruction had been publicized by earlier groups, such as the Taliban in their demolition of the Bamiyan Buddhas in 2001. However, the viral capabilities of the Internet enabled Da’esh to reach more people than any militant group before and to do so with great effectiveness. Da’esh showed a high degree of sophistication in integrating print media (its paper and online magazine *Dabiq*), well-produced video clips of executions and heritage destruction, and the power of the spoken word—as can be heard in the Quranic recitations in the video soundtracks. Da’esh reached large numbers of people comprising very different audiences: supporters to be kept informed, potential supporters to be recruited, and enemies to be polarized and intimidated. The nonhierarchical organization of the Internet made it extremely difficult to block or suppress Da’esh’s messages: when they were removed

from one platform, followers and supporters downloaded and recirculated the content through more poorly monitored or through encrypted forms of social media. The decentralized character of modern violent extremism meshes perfectly with the decentralized organization of the Internet, and this should be cause for deep concern.

Even after the military defeat of the Islamic State and the destruction of the caliphate as a territorial polity, it is almost certain that this innovative strategy of viral violence will allow Da'esh to survive, morph, and reorganize in a new decentralized form that will be extremely hard to counter or suppress.⁵⁴ In their online, post-caliphate life, Da'esh militants have become a community of

connected content creators through the functionalities and reach of social media. During this time, IS's [Da'esh's] online responsiveness to external events and interventions enabled it to make innovations at the collective level, such as multiplatform resource sharing, the move to encrypted messaging and chat rooms, and the use of shoutouts in response to suspensions, meaning that IS remained flexible, potent, and agentic online. Perhaps more significantly, through a combination of the affordances of social media (through which IS could satisfy supporters' key instrumental, identity, and relational needs), the decentralized nature of the group, and the unique psychological processes that occur through online interactions, IS created a new and innovative form of online, shared social identity.⁵⁵

With the emergence of this new form of virtual community, the destruction of the caliphate as a territorial entity in 2019 simply means that Da'esh militants have migrated to a different environment.

The flexibility and potential power of the performative destruction paradigm is not limited to Da'esh and other jihadi Islamist groups and messages. It is likely that a broader range of nonstate armed extremist groups in other parts of the world will also emulate the core elements of the Internet-based performative destruction paradigm and adapt it to their own local conditions, ideologies, and goals.⁵⁶ Governments, international security structures, and the heritage community will need to develop innovative new legal and policy strategies to confront and hopefully neutralize this emerging threat.

SUGGESTED READINGS

Michael D. Danti, "Ground-Based Observations of Cultural Heritage Incidents in Syria and Iraq," *Near Eastern Archaeology* 78, no. 3 (2015): 132–41.

Christoph Gunther and Tom Bioly, "Testimonies for a New Social Order: The Islamic State's Iconic Iconoclasm," in *Image Testimonies: Witnessing in Times of Social Media*, ed. Kerstin Schankweiler, Verena Straub, and Tobias Wendl (London: Routledge, 2019), 154–66.

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