Blast through the Past: Terrorist Attacks on Art and Antiquities as a Reconquest of the Modern Jihadi Identity

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Abstract

Terrorist destructions of art and antiquities could be the result of extreme Salafist ideology, with contextual and strategic concerns ancillary in the targeting process. Previously, politico-military, theological, and economic approaches were used to explain terrorists targeting cultural property. This article examined the ideological and historical context, and explores the strategic appeal for terrorists targeting heritage. The four case studies include the Islamic Group's attack on the Temple of Hatshepsut, Al Qaeda's bombing of the Askariya Shrine, Ansar Dine's assault on Timbuktu, and the Islamic State's partial destruction of Palmyra. Findings suggest that jihadists are engaging in a subconscious reconquest of the contemporary Salafi identity, through opportunistic (yet deliberate) dominance performances. These performances take advantage of the strategic appeal of heritage sites, while sending symbolically loaded messages to target audiences. Through re-enacting the Abrahamic rejection of idols, jihadists reimagine and propagate themselves as heirs to ancient conquest traditions. This tradition–involving the rejection, defacement, and destruction of works of art and antiquities–is rooted in a chaotic attempt at reconstructing identity. To that end, art works and antiquities are being targeted by jihadists who are engaged in reimagining the highly idealised, Al Wala jihadi, and benefiting from the subsequent influence and attention.

Keywords: terrorism, heritage, antiquities, Ayman Al-Zawahiri, Islamic State, Al Qaeda

Introduction

Antiquities and works of art are increasingly targets of acts of terrorism. In the past, terrorists of the first three secular waves of terrorism showed little inclination for deliberate attacks on heritage sites and monuments. Such targeting by jihadi groups appears to be unique to the fourth, religious wave of terrorism, notably conducted by extreme Salafists.[1] Previous explanations have tied such attacks to economic gain, assaults on cultural memory, ignorance, or cultural anachronism. This article first examines the historical and strategic context for attacks with the help of four case studies. Subsequently, it considers the ideological motivations and associations, examining the interrelationship between strategic access, symbolism, historical context, and ideological influences.

The case studies are Islamic Group's attack on the Queen Hatshepsut's temple in 1997, Al Qaeda's attack on the Askariya Mosque in 2006, Ansar Dine's desecration of Timbuktu in 2012, and the partial destruction by the Islamic State of the Palmyra ruins in 2015-2016. Conclusions throughout are limited to global Salafi jihadists. The four cases appear to be ideologically motivated, with strategic and historical concerns ancillary. While these were simple attacks in terms of strategy, they were all redolent in symbolism which was not explained by the strategic logic itself. The symbolism inherent in the targeting can lend itself to greater deductions. Are attacks on art and antiquities merely acts of iconoclastic destruction, and if so, why are so many resources going towards what would otherwise be merely an opportunistic attack on a soft target? It is suggested in the following that the symbolism of these attacks is integral to dominance performances which a) overwrite and replace place-based memories with a new, more favourable narrative, and b) supports a simple propagandistic message in line with ideology, which c) contributes, subconsciously perhaps, to a restructuring and reimagining of the Caliphate concept and the idealised, pure jihadi fighter.

The attackers were found to be using heritage site targets as props for an ideological narrative of re-identification. Significant place-based memories are erased and replaced with a specific Salafist narrative through the re-enactment of Koranic traditions of conquest and dominance. This idea, reinvigorated by Sayyid Qutb, but consolidated by Ayman Al-Zawahiri, is based on the concepts of *Al Wala* and *Wal Bara*, loyalty and enmity, cleanliness and the repudiation of the unclean. The targeting of art and antiquities by Salafists is not simply the result of ignorance, but constitutes a fundamental reconquest of modern jihadi identity. Through the Abrahamic rejection of idols, jihadists reimagine themselves as heirs to an ancient, purifying conquest performance. This new explanation, as will be shown below, provides a distinct interpretation from previous approaches.

Something Old, Something New

Conflict is rarely kind to art and antiquities. The act of destroying cultural property in order to destroy the foundations of a community or people has a long history. This destruction has commonly manifested itself as the looting of cultural property for profit. Art and antiquities are valued as sources of potential capital, wherever there exists a commercial supply and demand for the stolen goods, or, alternatively their deconstruction can serve to extract its individual resources (e.g., gold, silver and ivory). In the past, the main approaches for researching the destruction of works of art and antiquities have been politico-military, theological, or economic.

There are ancient precedents for politico-military destruction. The Roman Empire was notorious for destroying sacred indigenous sites. According to Roman law, sacred indigenous sites were not legally considered consecrated—despite the mythologised Roman *pietas*—respect for gods and ancestors. As a result, according to Steven Rutledge, such sites were "fair game for fire and sword."[2] Acts included the politically motivated destruction of the shrine of Bacchus and the temple of Isis.[3] Cicero was known for using such events, including the alleged burning of the temple of Nymphs by Clodius, to discredit his enemies. Rutledge's research demonstrates that the destruction of sacred sites was often a result of internal Roman politics.[4]

Throughout World War II, works of art and antiquities were sought after war booty, with Adolf Hitler's Nazi regime systematically looting artwork, particularly from the Jewish community. This theft ranged from world class collections, like the Rothschild art collection, through to family portraits.[5] The Commissar for the Ukraine, Erich Koch, was responsible for the looting of Kyiv. Koch also ordered the Amber Room panels of Queen Catherine's Palace to be moved to Königsberg, along with 900 paintings and 450 icons.[6] Much of this art was stored in the cellars of the Wildenhoff Mansion. As the Red Army advanced towards Königsberg in 1945, the Germans ordered 65 crates to be destroyed. The mansion was set ablaze by an SS commando, one of them allegedly saying that they could not "leave all this for Ivan."[7] According to Patricia Kennedy Grimsted, the Wildenhoff art works were "among the most substantial Ukrainian cultural losses in the Second World War."[8]

Wegener and Otter directly compared the protection of heritage sites during World War II with the US-led coalition's invasion of Iraq.[9] Nazi Germany's systematic theft of art and heritage was compared to the feared potential destruction of the Iraqi National Museum. In both instances, Wegener and Otter highlight the interventions of museum and gallery staff as a similarity, despite the historical differences. Staff removed artwork, hid it, and–in the case of Iraq's National Museum–painted the internationally recognised blue shield symbol on the museum's roof to identify it as a cultural site. Wegener and Otter limited their review to conventional conflict.

The seemingly unreasonable destruction of the Bamiyan Buddhas in 2001 by the Taliban marked a departure from the conventional destruction of cultural property in the context of war. This led to theological

justifications (or, in some cases, condemnation), with some news sources around the world describing the Taliban and its ideology as ignorant and backward. [10]

According to Finbarr Barry Flood, it was (and is) commonplace to assume that the destruction of antiquities is indicative of Islamic iconoclasm.[11] Flood examined Muslim iconoclasm through historical practices. These practices included defacement, beheading, and trampling on icons. Throughout medieval Islamic conquests in South Asia, trampling on icons was an integral part of the victory celebration, thereby demonstrating that Muslims did not revere such icons.[12] Flood suggested that iconoclasts targeted the Buddhas of Bamiyan specifically because of that reverence: the greater the object or place is worshipped, the better its ability to generate publicity.[13] This publicity was used by the Taliban to exemplify Western hypocrisy. Many Western institutions were eager to donate millions to preserve the Buddhas–non-Islamic stone statues–but not to save the lives of Afghani people suffering from hunger. This was represented by the Taliban as the "fetishistic privileging of inanimate icons", according to Flood.[14] Ultimately, Flood rejected the ahistorical paradigm where destructive acts are situated as forced cultural homogenization, in favour of specific historical circumstances where due credit is given to agency, motivation, and analyses.

Francesco Francioni and Frederico Lenzerini believed the destruction of the Bamiyan Buddhas to be a "dangerous precedent" in that it was defying international public opinion and law.[15] They noted that while conflict has left collateral damage on such sites throughout history, the destruction of the Bamiyan Buddhas was a distinct departure from historical norms. Reasons for this included that the Taliban were not destroying foreign heritage, but their own Afghan national heritage; there was no tactical military objective; it was a meticulously planned and advertised demolition, not a careless bombardment; and it was undertaken in direct defiance of United Nations sanctions. Finally, Francioni and Lenzerini characterised the act as "narcissistic self-assertion" by the Taliban against the Director General of UNESCO. [16] Their findings about the Taliban's motivations stand in direct opposition to the position of Jamal Elias.

Elias examined the destruction of the Bamiyan Buddhas within the context of the Taliban general behaviour. [17] In a millennium of Muslim rule, the Bamiyan Buddhas had faced infrequent destructive acts, but there had also been occasional attempts to use the pre-Islamic site to boost the tourism industry. In 1999, the Taliban's Supreme Leader Mullah Umar had issued a decree protecting non-Islamic antiquities. However, less than two years later, a *fatwa* by Umar permitted the destruction of the statues which took place on 19 March 2001, followed by the sacrifice of one hundred cows.[18] Elias argues the destruction was not based in an Islamo-anachronistic world view, or in response to political pressure. Abraham is known in the Koran for the sacrifice of his son, but he is also recognised for departing from the idolatry of his predecessors. This, according to Elias, was "an obvious precedent" for the Taliban.[19] Elias found the Taliban were symbolically casting themselves as heirs to Abraham, by re-enacting traditions in line with the Hijri calendar, which also explains the animal sacrifice. The Western world denounced the destruction, emphasising the Islamic tenet that condemns destroying places of worship of other religions. The Taliban replied that as there were no Buddhists in Afghanistan, it did not constitute a place of worship. Moreover, the attempts of the international community to preserve the statues transformed them into idols, which further necessitated their destruction within the Taliban's Abrahamic re-enactment. Significantly, Elias suggested: 'Those who condemned the destruction of the statues on the grounds of preservation of global heritage, art, and religious tolerance view the icon smashers as the standard-bearers of an archaic ideology completely out of place in modern society.'[20] The act was a Taliban attempt at religious authenticity more so than an act of defiance against international political pressure, or proof of an ignorant society. Instead of condemning the act as irrational, Elias provides an insight that goes beyond political or economic explanations.

On the other hand, economic motivators were clear in Cambodia with the commoditisation of works of art and antiquities. The invasion of Cambodia by Vietnam, and the subsequent Lon Nol/communist insurgency, caused major political destabilisation. Dougald O'Reilly found that the gap between rich and poor in

Cambodia was responsible for the looting of heritage sites, whereby impoverished rural people turned to looting to generate income. [21] Cambodia, which hosts sites such as Angkor Wat and Koh Ker, is an ideal target. International initiatives have been organised to create sustainable tourism to these areas to generate income and reduce looting.[22] Still, according to Tess Davis, the sale of illicit Khmer artefacts continues, especially through Sotheby's auction house, where as much as seventy-one percent of sales have no published provenance or legitimate sales history.[23]

Regional destabilisation also contributed to the looting of museums in Iraq for profit. Eric Garcia viewed the subsequent destruction in the Iraq National Archive, National Library, and Museum as the fault of the Bush administration, which did not prioritise protection.[24] Garcia believed the looting was economically motivated, and that Iraqi art and antiquities were stolen for illicit trade and financial gain. Garcia broadens his scope to the entire Middle East, discussing also the burning of the Iranian Mazar-e-Sharif and the destruction of 55,000 books in northern Afghanistan's Pol-e Khumri Library. [25] Such acts, Garcia argued, attacked intellectualism at its fundamental level.[26]

Other researchers have looked into the possibility of deterrence. Frey and Rohner examined possibilities for protecting cultural monuments against terrorism. They described terrorists as media-hungry, and monuments as attractive targets.[27] They suggest that terrorists focus on sites which are important symbols of the state. By that logic, they claim that rebuilding the symbol will reverse or mitigate the symbolic damage to the state. Based on the assumption that vulnerable sites will be targeted and eventually destroyed, Frey and Rohner suggested that one should prepare for post hoc reconstruction rather than anticipating damage by maximising security. Examples of successful reconstruction can be found in Dresden, Germany and Lucerne, Switzerland. They suggested that the reconstruction will be received by the media as a triumph over arson and terror, thereby removing the incentive for the act.

Briggeman and Horpedahl questioned Frey and Rohner's logic.[28] It was their suspicion that, should terrorists be discouraged from targeting cultural monuments, they would redirect their efforts towards people or production sites. While they admit that terrorists derive value from the exposure generated by attacks on such sites, Briggeman and Horpedahl also make the valid point that mass-casualty attacks also generate significant publicity, even without leaving permanent visible reminders. They contend that even if funding was set aside for the reconstruction of cultural monuments and prominent buildings, the policy would still be suboptimal by redirecting the destructive instincts of terrorists towards the populace. Buildings can be rebuilt – people cannot.

Crettez and Deloche entered the debate as to whether cultural sites should be protected or rebuilt, using a game-theoretic framework.[29] They found that if the monuments were considered truly unique treasures, then by the same logic, they were worth protecting. As deterrence relies on rebuilding, it does not address the primary problem of the targeting in itself. It actually recreates it, with terrorists able to target the same site again after every rebuilding. Al Qaeda-type terrorists, they claim, are generally more interested in killing people than targeting symbolic sites.

Yet the economic approach might be able to provide actionable outcomes for UNESCO. Irina Bokova, Director-General of UNESCO, highlighted the impact which terrorism has had on cultural heritage. She identified the threat as new and distinct, and described it as "a tactic of war, to tear humanity from the history it shares."[30] Bokova goes on to list three ways to economically combat terrorism's impact on cultural heritage: undermining illicit traffickers, reinforcing training and support for protection, and reinforcing international cooperation through sharing of intelligence and actions. Bokova was declared "the woman standing between ISIS and world heritage" by *The Guardian*.[31] She made a strong connection between people and places, identifying attacks on cultural heritage sites as cultural cleansing, whereby even people's memory is removed. Bokova successfully campaigned for UN Resolution 2199, which aims to prevent terrorist groups from benefiting from the trade in antiquities, by asking member states to make sure their

nationals do not access the black market.[32] This approach assumes that targeting art and antiquities is influenced by financial gain motives.

Further pursuing economics-based theories of terrorist target selection is a plethora of articles examining the relationship between terrorism and tourism. Paraskevas and Arendell cite sources from the eighties and nineties, describing tourism areas as soft targets for terrorism, as they are easy to infiltrate, guarantee international media coverage, and have substantial impact on the target government's foreign exchange earnings, making them cost-effective targets.[33] An article by Mete Feridun explored the relationship between tourism and terrorism in Turkey between 1986 and 2006.[34] More recently, Raza and Jawaid examined the situation in Pakistan from 1980 to 2010, and similarly found that there were significant long-term and short-term negative effects on tourism from terrorism.[35]

One of the few studies situating recent attacks in an ideological context was conducted by Omur Harmansah. He investigated the destruction of art and antiquities by terrorists, specifically by the Islamic State (IS).[36] Operating mainly in Syria and Iraq, IS has engaged in a program of destruction against cultural heritage sites, targeting artefacts, archaeological sites, libraries and archives. Harmansah argued in terms of place-based violence, with the intent of destroying belonging and memory in local communities, and is integral to a scorched-earth policy. These attacks are also choreographed media events which form part of IS's own self-representation. It was found that IS's media performances "operate like a reality show that effectively mobilizes the consumerism of visual media".[37] The international outrage about the destruction at Hatra or Mosul is the very purpose for the destruction. Harmansah therefore argues that IS is not, as widely assumed, backward and anachronistic, but extremely modern in its adoption of social media for propaganda, creating a sense of hyper-reality. Hence, the perceived iconoclasm in IS acts must be treated with scepticism. IS may exploit iconoclasm as powerful rhetoric without sincerely believing the icons pose a threat to its religious practice.

As the above literature review makes clear, previous research has adopted explanations based on politico-military, theological, or economic frameworks. While these approaches are all valid in their own way, this article takes a more historical view. While its author had hoped to find earlier examples of attacks on antiquities in the history of terrorism, the clearest cases were found in the last two decades. Using historical research, mitigating factors such as ideology, situational context, and strategic logic will be examined. The methodology involved utilises historical research, site examination, and the analysis of primary sources. Case studies include the massacre at the Temple of Hatshepsut by the Islamic Group, the bombing of the Askariya Shrine by Al Qaeda, the partial destruction of Timbuktu by Ansar Dine, and the attacks on Palmyra by the Islamic State.

Holy of Holies, Temple of Hatshepsut

The mortuary temple of Queen Hatshepsut was built during the fifteenth century BCE, and has chapels for the Egyptian deities, Hathor and Anubis.[38] There is very little about the site which, in and by itself, would present symbolic significance to Salafi terrorists such as the Islamic Group (*Gamal Islamiya*). Yet, on 17 November 1997, fifty-eight foreign tourists and four Egyptians were killed at this temple.[39] In what became known as the Luxor Massacre, between six and ten terrorists ambushed the site with guns, killing two policemen before turning their attention on the tourists. Most of the victims were shot during the forty-five minute attack, but others had their throats slit using long knives, and some victims were defaced.[40]

Handwritten leaflets left at the scene allegedly said: "No to Tourists in Egypt". [41] In another statement, they claimed: "*We shall take revenge for our brothers who have died on the gallows. The depths of the earth are better for us than the surface since we have seen our brothers squatting in their prisons, and our brothers and families tortured in their jails.*"[42]. Based on the propaganda of the Islamic Group, this attack can be seen as an act of

vengeance, targeting the vulnerable tourist industry but aimed at a powerful government. Taking advantage of weakness in the protection of people to damage and undermine a target government has been a terrorist strategy of long standing.

The symbolism of this attack was taken to reside with those who visited it. This was not so much an attack on antiquities, as it was an attack on tourism, described by Raymond Stock as "the bloodiest assault yet" on the industry.[43] At that stage, Egypt had a three billion dollar tourism industry, providing occupation to ten million people, based on the income from four million visitors every year.[44] However, the heritage site itself played a significant role in generating media attention. The Egyptian public appeared to be unsympathetic to the terrorist goal, with Stock noting that the public turned on the Islamic Group because the economic backlash caused a sharp decline in the tourism industry. [45] The Luxor Massacre must be viewed as terrorism at a heritage site, rather than terrorism targeting a heritage site. Nonetheless, the rejection of the infidel, and the purification through violence, are symbolic themes that are also present.

Why was the site chosen by Islamic Group? Was it, in line with Parasevkas and Arendell's theory, a combination of access, influence, and impact that made this an attractive site to target? The temple was guarded by two armed policemen: one Muslim, the other Christian. They were killed in the first moments of the attack. The site (at that time) had no phone access, which delayed the arrival of Egyptian security forces. There was meagre cover provided by the stone pillars, not enough to hide most tourists from the gunmen.

The site was only accessible from one direction, had minimal contact with the outside world, and minimal protection. The foreign nationalities of the victims made this an international incident. That, combined with the significance of the site itself, guaranteed international media coverage which, in turn, contributed to the economic losses suffered by the Egyptian tourism industry. Not only was this attack by the Islamic Group successful in an operational sense, it provoked a significant economic loss on the target government. If their propaganda is to be believed, they achieved their goal of limiting tourism in Egypt, at least for some time.

The site choice and victim choice magnified the propaganda of this attack, but the tactical considerations do not entirely justify its selection over other significant tourist destinations. It could be that the Temple of Hatshepsut was nothing more than a convenient podium to agitate against foreign tourism. But this does not explain the defacement of some of the victims or throw light on their ideological motives. As demonstrated by Flood, defacing idols is a recurring theme in Muslim conquest hadiths, where Muhammad blinded the eyes of idols with an arrow following the conquest of Mecca.[46] Perhaps, then, the defacement of the victims was an indication of the evolving dominance performance for a barely recognisable narrative. The place itself is arguably more symbolic than the victims. Luxor has a longstanding reputation as one of the most sacred sites of Ancient Egypt. The dominance performance then becomes symbolic, trying to overwrite ancient glories with new place-based memories reflecting the Islamic Group's ideology.

Luxor remains a popular target. On 10 June 2015, jihadists launched an attack on Karnak, detonating a suicide vest before police engaged two suspects.[47] Such a new attack could be interpreted as an effort to bring back memories of the previous attack. It must be remembered that Islamic Group had connections with the Egyptian Al Jihad – an group with which the future al-Qaeda leader, Ayman Al Zawahiri, was involved before it merged in the late nineties to become al-Qaeda. Al-Qaeda is no stranger to symbolic attacks; in 2006 it bombed the Askariya Shrine.

Twice Shy–the Askariya Shrine

The Askariya Shrine in Samarra (Iraq) is one of the holiest sites in Shiite Islam, built in the ninth century CE. It contains the tombs of the tenth and eleventh Imams (considered to be successors of Muhammad) and the mausoleum of the Hidden Imam. The Shrine was frequently renovated, with the Great Dome finished in 1623, and tiled in gold in 1868.[48] Various heritage sites, including Samarra were noted as being at risk in

the ICOMOS 04/05 report, but it did not receive much attention until the 06/07 report, by which time it was too late.[49] On 22 February 2006, seven al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI) members in paramilitary clothing entered the mosque, subdued the sleeping guards, and rigged the building with explosives. At 9:00 a.m. the explosives were detonated, with the power of the blast leading to the collapse of the dome while also destabilising the north wall.[50] On 13 June 2007, AQI again targeted the site, destroying the two remaining minarets.[51] They did not claim responsibility for either attack. Later that year, the Samarra shrine was included in the World Heritage listing. It was reconstructed in 2009.

At the time, Iraqi leaders and others suggested that the bombings were intended to inflame tensions between Shiite and Sunni Muslims.[52] Reprisal attacks swept across Iraq, with over twenty Sunni mosques being bombed, shot at, or set ablaze, leaving eighteen people dead.[53] In his 18 June 2007 address, President G.W. Bush said:

> *This barbarous act was clearly aimed at inflaming sectarian tensions among the peoples of Iraq and defeating their aspirations for a secure, democratic, and prosperous country. I join Iraq's leaders in calling on all Iraqis to refrain from acts of vengeance and reject Al Qaida's scheme to sow hatred among the Iraqi people and to instead join together in fighting Al Qaida as the true enemy of a free and secure Iraq.[54]*

In lieu of al-Qaeda claiming responsibility, there are clear statements by Iraqi and Coalition force leaders condemning the attack on the important monument, and positioning it within the broader scope of sectarian violence. Some claim that this was the event which paved the way for Iraq's later civil unrest.[55] While sectarian tensions were inflamed, this conclusion does not necessarily explain why the site was targeted twice.

The site is strategically located, with three major access and exit points. It is situated in an urban area, which means that the jihadi attackers would have been capable of blending in with the populace after changing clothing. The site was minimally protected as their guards were sleeping. The terrorists were able to work uninterrupted throughout the night, carefully positioning their explosives around key symbolic and structural points of the mosque – notably, the famed golden dome. No one was killed in this bombing, which indicates that the target was the building and what it stood for itself. Likewise, the lack of international deaths limited the attention and influence of this event to regional significance. The addressees of this bombing appeared to be Shiites, and beyond them, regional stability. Osama bin Laden himself once portrayed a similar attack on buildings as punitive, writing that when he saw the towers of Lebanon fall in the early 1980s civil war, he wanted to see America's towers fall in retribution. [56] There was no financial or economic incentive to this attack as Al Qaeda did not steal the gold from the dome. It was an unprovoked act of destruction against a significant monument, a symbol of Shiite heritage, and a place of worship.

The symbolism of the Askariya Shrine lay in its image and importance to Shiites, spurred by the attackers Salafist repudiation of all other forms of Islam. It could hardly be considered idolatrous, but could be considered unclean to extreme Salafists, who assert their interpretation of Islam as being the only correct one. Bringing down the golden domes was an act of self-assertion by al-Qaeda, which also constituted the alteration or erasure of a significant place, trying to overwrite it with a new Salafist narrative and memory. Such an act went beyond AQI's desire to merely destabilise the Iraqi government; it was a performance to demonstrate dominance and assertion. This attack can be seen as the forerunner of the much more systematic destruction of heritage by Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM).

All the Way to Timbuktu

Timbuktu is a heritage-listed city of Outstanding Universal Value, located in Mali. The city was built in the fifth century, and is home to Sankore University, a major spiritual and intellectual centre for Islam in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. The mosques and mausoleums are a testament to the strength of the former Askia dynasty, while the city itself was a centre for culture and trade, particularly of gold and salt.

[57] Influenced by regional unrest and the Arab Spring, in March 2012, Mali saw its fourth Tuareg uprising since the end of colonial days. Coinciding with a military coup attempt in the capital Bamako, Islamist forces overran some of the key northern cities.[58] The fractious Islamist coalition comprised of the National Movement for the Liberation of Azawad (MNLA); Ansar Dine (Defenders of the Faith) led by Taureg rebel Ag Ghaly; Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM); and their splinter, the Movement for Unity and Jihad in West Africa (MUJAO). Ansar Dine and AQIM split from MNLA over religious differences, and implemented strict observance of Sharia Law in major towns. In April 2012, Ansar Dine seized Timbuktu. By May, its militants had begun to destroy the World Heritage site.

On 4 May 2012, one Ansar Dine member burned the tomb of Sidi Maymoud.[59] On 30 June 2012, Ansar Dine members destroyed three Sufi shrines, including the greater mausoleum of Sidi Maymoud.[60] On 1 July 2012, thirty Ansar Dine jihadists targeted Sufi mausoleums in Timbuktu city, damaging three, using AK-47s and pickaxes.[61] It announced: "Ansar Dine will today destroy every mausoleum in the city. All of them, without exception… God is unique. All of this is haram… We are all Muslims. UNESCO is what?"[62] The fourteenth century Djingareyber mosque, the sacred door of the Sidi Yahia mosque, Sidi Moctar's tomb, Alpha Moya's tomb, countless manuscripts and artefacts were destroyed. The group believes that saints should not be idolised, making Timbuktu's 333 tombs of saints attractive targets.[63] As a Salafist group, Ansar Dine condemned the worship of Muslim saints as idolisation and *haram* (forbidden). Before Ansar Dine and AQIM were driven out of Timbuktu, they had also set fire to the Ahmad Babu Institute, targeting an irreplaceable and extensive fourteenth century collection of artefacts.[64]

Timbuktu had great strategic appeal. Ansar Dine had easy access when the Malian army abandoned the city, leaving the attackers to establish their military dominance in a regional power vacuum. Though the sites were in urban regions, Ansar Dine's position as the dominant local power gave them situational control. Ansar Dine used pickaxes, hoes, chisels, and cheap, effective assault rifles, such as the AK-47, for the attack. The timing was also significant, coming four days after Timbuktu was listed as in danger by UNESCO. The impact of the destruction measured in terms of coverage by international media was extraordinary. *The Australian* reported that the crime was payback against UNESCO, and a "rape".[65] Sebastien Martinez argued that the acts constituted war crimes.[66] In line with Salafi ideology, others noted that the site was considered blasphemous by Ansar Dine, similar to the Bamiyan Buddhas.[67] Timbuktu, like Mecca and Medina, has important symbolism within the history of Islam. However, while the Taliban destroyed pre-Islamic national heritage, the Ansar Dine was destroying both Malian and Islamic heritage. In August 2016, one Ansar Dine member, Ahmad Al-Faqi al-Mahdi, was prosecuted by the International Criminal Court (ICC) for cultural destruction, to which he pleaded guilty, expressing regret for his actions.

Can this event be interpreted as a simple rejection of folk Islam by extreme Salafists? This risks ignoring the links with al-Qaeda and the influence of ideological concepts such as repudiation and purity. It is also possible the attacks represented the Ansar Dine quest to establish itself and its identity by engaging in a dominance ritual for consumption by local and international observers. The psychological victory and the media attention made it worthwhile for Ansar Dine, mitigating possible drawbacks. Similar to earlier attacks, Ansar Dine overwrote the place-based memories with a new story of conquest, of heavy-handed assertion of newly-gained power. This narrative appeals to modern Salafi audiences, as it signifies the destruction of old empires and paving the way for a Salafist Caliphate.

Palmyra, Bride of the Desert

In the Syrian Desert lie the ruins of Palmyra. It was originally a caravan oasis, thought to have been established in second millennium BCE, which later expanded into a vast city. It was a cultural epicentre of the ancient world, combining Greco-Roman and Persian architecture and influences; and acted as a thoroughfare for trade from Rome to Persia, India, and China. Important attributes include an 1,100 metre

long colonnaded street, a triumphal arch, the Agora, Amphitheatre, Diocletian's Camp, the Temple of Baal Shamin, the Temple of Bel, the Mamluk Citadel, and the Valley of Tombs.[68] Islamic State, having seized control of large swathes of territory abandoned by a retreating Syrian Army, established a Minister for Antiquities, and began a program of systematic looting and destruction.

On 23 August 2016, IS detonated explosives within the Baal Shamin Temple, claiming it was idolatrous.[69] Two days later, IS blew up the Kithot, Jamblique, and Elahbel Funeral Towers in three separate attacks.[70] On 30 August 2015, IS terrorists destroyed the Temple of Bel, claiming to have used 30 metric tons of explosives.[71] Within a week, the Arch of Triumph was also destroyed by an explosive device.[72] On 27 April 2016, UNESCO attempted to take stock of the destruction, finding that Palmyra's Museum had been considerably damaged. That which could not be looted and sold was defaced or destroyed.[73] The triumphal arch, the Temple of Bel, and Temple of Baal Shamin were entirely destroyed. The Mamluk Citadel remains inaccessible. The Islamic State did not limit its destruction to Palmyra. IS also targeted heritage sites in Bosra with its Roman ruins; the frescoes of Nimrud; Hatra, the first Arab Kingdom which withstood a Roman invasion in the second century CE; the 721 BCE palace in Khorsabad; and the museums, library, and tombs of Mosul.[74]

The strategic logic appears to be based on access and opportunity. The destruction occurred in areas where IS was, however briefly, the dominant power, holding the site despite regional conflict. This situational dominance gave them the access required to meticulously plan the destruction, as evidenced by the amount of explosives used for destruction of the Temple of Bel. IS also publicly beheaded the museum's curator, Khaled Al-As'ad, in the square and displayed his body with the severed head between his legs alongside a placard bearing the word "heretic".[75] The dominant argument is that IS considered Palmyra idolatrous, polytheistic, and blasphemous. IS released videos titled "Smashing Idols", and statements attributing the destruction to fundamentalist iconoclasm. The choice of target was perhaps less a matter of ideological symbolism, and more about the dominance performance (indicated by thirty tons of explosives) which resulted in a dramatic photo and an expansion of the conquest narrative.

If the sites were chosen for theological reasons, it might have been expected that IS would emphasise the theological rationale behind the attacks. Conversely, if Palmyra was chosen to enhance the dominance performance, it might explain the multitude of Twitter photos and posts. The impact was tremendous because of the site's significance and how they were dramatised on social media. IS *mujtahidun*[76] (industrious ones) have hyperactive Twitter accounts, numbering between 500-2,000 IS accounts, with 46,000 affiliated supporting accounts who have, on average, 1,000 followers each.[77] Tweets occurred in sporadic, concentrated bursts, with *mujtahidun* tweeting 50-150 times per day.[78] The images are frequently graphic. This achieved a high level of media saturation. IS was able to convey, within a limit of 140 tweet characters, an impression of what their new world order would look like – all this without lengthy theological manifestos. The simplicity of their slogans appeals to a broad audience, and the imagery juxtaposes to the chaotic present an idealised, and yet achievable, sense of identity.

The performance then becomes one emphazising dominance: sites were used depending on how they supported the performance, such as the colonnades or agora; or destroyed based on impact, such as in the case of the Temples of Bel and Baal Shamin. The symbolic importance of Palmyra for IS became evident in late 2016 again when it reconquered the site from which it had earlier been expelled. The rationale for reconquering Palmyra appears to have been largely symbolic. The Russian government, which intervened in Syria, staged a musical concert among the ruins to celebrate its victory, which was broadcast worldwide by satellite television. It was probably in an effort to overwrite the Russian image that IS decided to have a second go at Palmyra – a symbolic slap in the face of Russia.

Reconquest and Reimagining

Terrorist strategic logic has undergone significant adaptation in modern history. High profile targets were, and are, often famous and important people, such as demonstrated by the assassinations of the Russian Tsar Alexander II in 1881, Austria's Archduke Franz Ferdinand in 1914, Indian Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi in 1991, and former Pakistani Prime Minister Benazir Bhutto in 2008. Given the challenges in taking down high-risk targets, there has been a gradual turn towards low-risk targets (not limited to civilians in holiday resorts). One can see that instead of targeting highly restricted sites such as the Al'Aqsa Mosque, jihadists aim instead at significant sites with little protection and low risks for themselves, with access that allows them to easily establish (usually only temporary) dominance. The destruction of these sites damages local economies and affects public morale, while generating enormous media attention. Yet, there is more to such events than opportunism or symbolic iconoclasm.

The strategic appeal, the ease of access and withdrawal, and the damage to morale makes attacks on art and antiquities easy targets for a psychological victory, which is intrinsic to the dominance performance. Flood demonstrated that trampling, defacing, and destroying idols has long been part of the victory performance, alongside repudiation of idolatry and barbarism. Central Al Qaeda ideology spurns idolatry, and indeed throughout the AQ manifesto "Moderate Islam is prostration to the West," there are half a dozen rejections of idolatry.[79] All of the mentions of idolatry are basic, in line with Harmansah's argument. [80] Iconoclasm, ignorance, and opportunism appear to be too simple explanations.

This article sought to find a rationale behind terrorist groups' engaging in the destruction of cultural property. The Egyptian Islamic Group, which first targeted Luxor, was interlinked with Islamic Jihad. Islamic Jihad merged with the Afghan Mujahedeen Service Bureau in the 1990s and formed Al Qaeda. Al Qaeda's Iraqi cell, AQI, was then responsible for the bombing of the Askariya Shrine. As Al Qaeda spread across North Africa in the form of Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb, allying closely with Ansar Dine, the group which desecrated Timbuktu. Al Qaeda in Iraq then evolved into the Islamic State, which targeted Palmyra (among other sites). The key leader during these times is Ayman Al Zawahiri, who has been associated with Islamic Jihad, Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb, and, initially at least, with al-Qaeda in Iraq, the precursor of the Islamic State. The al-Qaeda ideology, and Al Zawahiri himself, were influenced by Sayyid Qutb and his concept of *jahilliya*.

Jahilliya translates as ignorance of Allah's guidance. Once taken to refer to a time of pre-Islamic barbarism, Qutb made *jahilliya* a very modern condition, a "living movement" permeating throughout modern society. [81] Qutb believed that the only way to confront this was *jihaad bis saif* (striving through fighting) until nothing remains of the ignorant *jahili* society.[82] Such a totalitarian world view demands that barbaric sites be razed. The old world must make way for the new, which would adhere to a presumably purer notion of fundamental Islam. It has long been part of the terrorist credo that decadent society must be utterly torn down and cleansed to make way for the ideal order. Destruction must precede construction. The repudiation of the existing, flawed order by Salafists is therefore not so different from the goals of 19th century anarchists.

Al-Qaeda's ideology championed by al Zawahiri in "Loyalty and Enmity", placed more significance on the interrelated concepts of *wala* and *bara* than on idolatry. *Al Wala*, generally translates as 'devotion' or 'protection', but it is a loaded term which can in this context mean 'loyalty'—that is, allegiance to Islam. *Wal Bara* means 'repudiation/enmity', but also refers to 'spurn/reject with contempt', to keep oneself pure.[83] Modern Salafists, according to Bin Ali, want to purify Islam from *shirk* and *bid'ah* (idolatry and innovation). [84] Essentially, *bara* means to be free from the corruption of *shirk*, but the Salafists broadened this notion to repudiate anything un-Islamic or contravening *Shariah*.[85] In order for *tawhid* (oneness with God) to be achieved, *wala* and *bara* must be applied.[86] These two concepts reveal another dimension: that of purification. The destruction of art and antiquities generally only happens in territories which the terrorists

consider their own. It also legitimises the destruction of pre-Islamic and non-Salafist Islamic sites. The territory is being purified, making way for *dar al-Islam* (the abode of Islam).

This is not to negate Elias's Abrahamic re-enactment theory or Flood's performance theory, but to expand upon both. The destruction of works of art and antiquities is not simply a dominance performance rooted in its strategic appeal, but also an act of purification. The territory is being cleansed to prepare for an idealised world order, with the monuments of past civilisations making way for the new. These elements indicate a subconscious reconquest of identity that is buried within the strategic, historical, and ideological factors underwriting the formulaic rhetoric. The concept of conquest is key to the Islamic State as territorial expansion plays a crucial role in its propaganda. On 22 May 2016, a spokesman of the Islamic State called for international lone wolf attacks during Ramadan, "the month of conquest and jihad."[87] Another statement from 6 September 2016 encouraged fighters to launch attacks on Australian landmarks, specifically pointing at iconic sites such as the Opera House and Bondi Beach, indicating the importance of significant places in conquest performances.[88]

This reconquest of territory goes hand in hand with the proclamation of a modern Salafi identity and the projection of that identity. The elaborate re-enactment, the gaudy fervour, the posed Twitter imagery, the iconoclastic displays—all these contribute to the dominance performance which, at its heart, is reimagining the pure Salafi identity in a chaotic age of *jahilliya*. Salafi jihadists are attempting to rebuild and rediscover a quintessential and highly idealised, *wala* jihadi. Destructive acts against works of art and antiquities are not limited to their immediate strategic appeal, but are instrumental dominance props for the broader reimagining of their Salafi ideal.

International Response

International attempts have been under way to address but also limit the impact of conflict on art and antiquities. The Hague Convention for the Protection of Cultural Property in the Event of Armed Conflict (1954) was ratified in the wake of the large-scale destruction of art, antiquities, and cultural property in World War II.[89] It provided for the protection of moveable and immovable artefacts, works of art, and sites through a series of peacetime measures, considerations, sanctions, and the establishment of specialised cultural property protection units. Cultural property could only be attacked in cases of a clear military necessity. The Geneva Conventions's additional Protocol I of 1977 clearly defined which objects could be legitimately attacked. The Convention's Second Protocol from 1999 refers inter alia to the enhanced protection of cultural property, and allows the criminal prosecution of those responsible for the destruction of cultural property.[90] Article 22 also expanded this to include armed conflicts of a non-international character. However, it did not cover sporadic acts of violence which are often be associated with terrorist attacks.

Many Western government agencies, including the U.S Department of Defence, have no strategic policy for the protection of works of art and antiquities in areas of military operations.[91] In 2015, the United Nations Security Council adopted Resolution 2199.[92] It specifically condemns the destruction of cultural property by terrorists, the looting of significant sites, reaffirming the ban on illicit trade in antiquities, while imposing a new ban on such activities regarding Syria. It remains to be seen whether these measures will be effective at curtailing terrorist targeting of art and antiquities. This is the more so when an extremist militant state is in the process of shaping its global identity. In such a situation, the destruction of monuments can serve its efforts of narrating a reconquest of place and memory.

Conclusion

It is commonplace to assume that terrorists who target works of art and antiquities are displaying iconoclasm, ignorance, and/or intolerance. By examining the massacre at the Temple of Hatshepsut by the Islamic Group, the bombing of the Askariya Shrine by Al Qaeda, the desecration of Timbuktu by Ansar Dine, and the partial destruction of Palmyra by the Islamic State, new conclusions were drawn. Associations between the terrorist groups involved were found to be close, elevating the ideological significance. It was found that gaining control of the heritage sites demanded no strategic complexity, as they were relatively easy to access, destroy and to retreat from, while yielding significant media coverage. These attacks carried with themselves the strategic appeal of psychological victory, served to lower international and regional enemy morale, while contributing to the terrorists' dominance performance. This dominance performance is, as has been argued here, intrinsic to a re-enactment of celebrating conquest, and purifying territory. Significant to this are the concepts of *Al wala* and *Wal bara*, in which devotion to Allah is offset by the repudiation of unclean otherness. In rejecting, defacing, and destroying heritage sites, jihadists are actually engaged, however chaotically, in self-purification and reconstruction of identity. In a time of turmoil, jihadist Salafists appear to be engaged in the formation and projection of a highly idealised modern jihadi identity. To that end, works of art and antiquities are being destroyed by terrorist groups, optimising opportunities for influence and attention, in order to re-imagine or model the modern jihadi identity.

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