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The Islamic State and Cultural Heritage: A two-track weaponization

María Gómez Landaburu

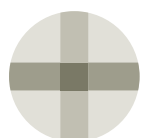


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Introduction

The systematic campaigns of destruction of culturally renowned sites perpetrated by the Islamic State have been a fundamental component of the terrorist group's visual imagery, but also of its political and sociological agenda, because in addition to the enormous diffusion that such acts have had in the media and social networks as part of a skillful propaganda campaign, the disappearance of sacred sites linked to the different minorities that inhabited the territories of the caliphate greatly eroded the socio-religious fabric and seriously compromised the intra-community ties that had persisted in Syria and Iraq for centuries. The different approaches to this phenomenon of cultural obliteration to date have been based both on interpretations according to a radical iconoclasm of jihadist inspiration, accompanied by an economic interest on account of the illicit trafficking of antiquities, and on an attempt to eradicate the ethnic and religious diversity of the areas under their control.

Although the intentional destruction of pre-Islamic archaeological sites and properties belonging to the ancient civilizations of Mesopotamia have attracted the most attention from the Western public, the reality is that the greatest number of attacks against heritage have been against Islamic buildings and places of worship still frequented by the local population, such as churches, synagogues and Yazidi sanctuaries. While the terrorists' rejection of artistic productions of polytheistic cultures would be due in the first instance to a religious mandate, the fact that careful video montages and massive campaigns of diffusion of such attacks were carried out personally and manually, with all the time and human effort that this entails, shows the enormous weight that the propaganda factor acquires in these events over and above even iconoclastic motivations. In the case of the destruction of mosques and shrines of local worship, however, we observe that the methods of execution and intentions behind these attacks are very different, much less recognized but with a perverse intentionality of potentially devastating consequences in the medium to long term, such as the permanent alteration of the religious landscape, the elimination of minorities and the erasure of the shared cultural legacy as a cohesive element of national unity.

Pre-Motheist iconoclasm, erasure of cultural diversity, economic benefits derived from the trafficking of antiquities, civilizational clash against the West or propaganda tools are all aspects contrasted in our opinion as catalysts of the attacks against heritage on behalf of IS, but we consider it essential for a correct interpretation of this phenomenon and the subsequent development of protection strategies to address and precisely define the context and motivations behind each of these acts of destruction, This requires an explicit distinction between the destruction of pre-Islamic archaeological property and that directed against the places of worship of the different ethno-sectarian minorities in Syria and Iraq, which would demand not only greater consideration and attention, but also greater involvement and the design of specific measures for their protection, since they are a potential and permanent threat to security and regional stability.

Objetives

When we set out to study the destruction of cultural patrimony carried out by the Islamic State in terms of its motivations, objectives and methods, what we found in the first instance was the damage suffered by archaeological sites of world renown, some of them even included in the Unesco World Heritage List such as Palmyra, Hatra as well as the destruction of the museums housing the treasures of mobile heritage excavated from these sites. But as we progressed in our documentary work we came to conclude that the attacks perpetrated against mosques, churches and local shrines, still in use by the inhabitants of these territories, despite reaching a much larger scale and having greater implications in the framework of security and political and social stabilization of the region, have not had far from the same coverage or diffusion in the media or in the Western academic environment.

For analyzing the two types of attacks that we have established according to this distinguishing criterion between pre-Islamic heritage protected by international conventions versus those historical and artistic properties (mosques, sanctuaries, churches, cemeteries) to which the local population is still attached today, we have identified in each case notable differences in terms not only of their procedural methods, but also of the motivations and objectives pursued. That is the reason why in this paper we propose to critically analyze these differences in terms of methodological and instrumental aspects, ideological foundations, methods of dissemination and expected

goals, also addressing the unequal outcomes between acts of destruction of pre-Islamic cultural assets and those perpetrated against places of worship of other religions and Islamic sects.

We propose to demonstrate in the following paragraphs how this distinction fully assumed by the IS between pre-Islamic heritage of great value for the western world and heritage of local use belonging to the rich religious ethnic fabric of Syria and Iraq is executed according to very different objectives; while the attacks on the former obey to a miscellany between economic motivations with the lucrative sale of archaeological pieces and a religious imperative to carry out iconoclastic acts, whose diffusion also serves as an illustrative and powerful propaganda resource, the destruction of those shrines or churches that occupy a prominent space in the daily life of the population responds to a pretended exercise of cultural erasure and social engineering in which all cultural diversity should be eradicated allowing the terrorists to lay the foundations for the imposition of their totalitarian vision.

In this project we eventually seek to vindicate the capital need to also incorporate this cultural heritage in the programs and strategies of protection in case of armed conflict, because even of lesser impact for scholars of archeology and art history and therefore recipient of much less funding for its recovery, it is of unquantifiable value for the communities in which it is inserted and in which they deposit not only their religious feelings but also their bonds of belonging, thus involving the destruction of such heritage an attack on the deepest part of their cultural identity.

Methodology

Both primary and secondary sources will be used to meet the objectives of this work and to answer the questions raised. We have resorted to reports issued by official bodies such as UNESCO, UNITRA or the United States Government Accountability Office to assess the damage perpetrated against cultural heritage by IS and the preventive measures put in place to avoid future attacks, while consulting speeches and publications by heritage managers linked to governments and official bodies that have a degree of relevance in the matter. The catalogs published by Syrian and Iraqi museums both before and after the conflict have also provided us with valuable information about the current state of the heritage assets, the impact of the conflict and the protection measures deployed, the outcome of which has been at times happy and at times tragic.

At the time of articulating the comparative analysis between the two types of attacks perpetrated by IS against the cultural heritage that we have identified, it was essential to consult both the videos and propaganda speeches of the organization and its publications on social networks or in its online magazine, where detailed visual accounts of the acts of destruction of cultural property are provided with a great definition and expertise, also allowing to hear the words and harangues of the terrorists at those moments.

The research work has also been based on the consultation of the work of local and foreign researchers and academics of relevance in the field of international security and defense, specialists in Middle East geopolitics and jihadist terrorism, as well as archaeologists and professionals in the protection of cultural heritage in areas of conflict in the legal, cultural and socio-political framework, whether in book, article, magazine or online publication format. These tasks of documentary support for our analysis have been nourished to a large extent also by the news disseminated in the media and social networks that made it possible to follow the conflict very closely and managed in some cases to document and capture on camera the damage caused against enclosures of great religious or artistic value, museums and libraries along with the account of the witnesses.

Literature review

The ideological corpus and foundations of IS has been the subject of study by numerous researchers (Yusupova, 2017; Gunther, 2020) whose observations we have contextualized and applied to its campaign of attacks against cultural property. Academic discussions in this regard have focused on ideological precepts related to iconoclastic beliefs (Segrest 2016) and sectarian violence (Jacoby, 2017), with the question also being tackled by addressing issues related to the visual culture and propaganda machinery of the terrorist group (Gruber, 2019) or the framework of the clash of civilizations between East and West (Pitcher, 2018).

While several authors point to ethnic and cultural cleansing objectives as motivators of heritage destruction such as Cheterian (Cheterian, 2015), or dedicate their research to analyze the sociological roots of religious violence applied to cultural property (Jurgersmeyer, 2018), those focused exclusively on the analysis and interpretation attending to their causes and procedures are much less numerous. One of the few and most outstanding works in this regard is by the researcher Ishakan (Ishakan, 2022) who, despite the fact that in his several essays dedicated to this topic he points out all the motivational factors of these crimes that we have mentioned above (iconoclasm, alteration of the demographic fabric, propaganda, economic profit) does not ascribe these factors to a certain context, i.e. he does not make a specific distinction between attacks on pre-Islamic heritage and the sacred sites of minorities which in our view is vital for a complete and accurate understanding of this phenomenon.

In the same way another of the scholars who have delved into this issue as Jones (Jones, 2018), although he does mention the existence of a different pattern in the attacks on both records, the issue is addressed in a certainly tangential way, focusing his research mainly on the destruction of antiquities as a negation of nationalisms. That is why in the following lines we propose to fill this gap in the literature through a comparative analysis of these crimes in both scenarios defined according to both temporal (pre-Islamic and Islamic eras) and religious criteria (polytheism, Christianity, Shiism or Yazidism versus Sunni orthodoxy); The first chapters deal with the international legal framework for the protection of cultural heritage in the event of armed conflict and the most relevant paradigms and doctrines, followed by sections on the attacks carried out against heritage in contemporary conflicts and the strategic thinking and ideological framework of the IS. The following item, which makes up the bulk of this essay, will be devoted to a critical and comparative analysis of the foundations, procedures and consequences derived from the destruction by the jihadist of some of the most relevant monuments and cultural enclaves according to the divisional criteria mentioned above.

CHAPTER 1. International legal framework for the protection of cultural property during armed conflict

The alarming increase in recent years of cases of intentional destruction of cultural heritage by sub-state actors during armed conflict is evidence that the current legal framework of protection, although very sophisticated and diversified, has proven ineffective, among other reasons due to its outdated approach, according to which cultural property attacked during a conflict is considered collateral damage and not a defined strategic objective that is ultimately of vital importance in peace processes, its application being furthermore reduced to limited actions both before and after the acts of destruction or attack. These acts of destruction of cultural heritage are not only an attack on the identity of peoples and the violation of their right to culture, but also, as historical experience shows, these attacks on cultural property are always indicative of subsequent crimes of persecution and genocide.

From the very origins of civilization, acts of genocide against an enemy population were inevitably accompanied by the destruction of the cultural heritage around which its identity was defined. Already in ancient Greece, the historian Polybius denounced in 212 BC the looting perpetrated by the Romans after defeating the city of Syracuse and the consequent destruction of the temples and their sacred images. Likewise, the premeditated destruction of the temple of Serapise in Alexandria ordered by Emperor Theodosius in 317 AD was the final blow to the pagan religion in the country through the elimination of the last remaining sanctuary. Much more recent examples, but of the same foundation and nature, are the bombing by Nazi Germany in 1943 after the so-called Warsaw ghetto uprising that razed the city to the ground and reduced its splendid palaces and churches to rubble, or the systematic destruction of the artistic and cultural heritage of the Muslim communities during the Balkan wars, both responding to an evident motivation of cultural and not only physical annihilation of the population.

Although tangible and intangible cultural property has always played a fundamental role in shaping the identity and collective memory of nations, it was not until after the Napoleonic Wars, when for the first time in 1815, a sophisticated body of international norms with specific provisions for cultural property was elaborated, that its conception as the property of all humanity became evident. The Lieber Code (1863) will be the first modern attempt to codify the laws of war, including in its articles 35 and 36 specific guidelines on the protection of cultural property during armed conflict, which will later be largely replicated in the Conference of Brussels (1874)¹ and the Hague Conventions I and II² (the former ratified by 50 states). These provisions, which to a large extent reflect current customary law, make it the duty of the inhabitants to indicate cultural property by distinctive signs visible to the enemy and also prohibit the pillage and destruction of enemy heritage in the absence of imperative military necessity (Techera, 2007). The protection of cultural property is equated in these treaties with that of other civilian buildings such as hospitals and universities, without reference to its symbolic and emotional value not only for local communities but for all of humanity (O'Keefe, 2009). This paradigm shift would not occur until 1954.

The Convention for the Protection of Cultural Property in the Event of Armed Conflict, adopted in The Hague in 1954 as a consequence of the massive destruction of cultural heritage during World War II, is the first international treaty with a global vocation dedicated to the protection of cultural heritage in the event of armed conflict. In one of the fundamental premises of the text, the obligation to safeguard cultural property threatened during a conflict falls both on the state where it is located and on the invading state that is occupying the territory, also prohibiting plundering, pillaging and banditry and justifying the attack on sites of historical-artistic value only under criteria of imperative military necessity (O'Keefe, 2009); the lack of definition of this concept has unsurprisingly given rise to numerous criticisms and heated debate. Protocol I of the Convention deals specifically with the protection of cultural heritage in times of occupation, establishing on the occupying army the obligation to prevent the illicit export of cultural property or its destruction, as well as to return cultural property confiscated during the conflict

1 Article 8, Project of an International Declaration concerning the Laws and Customs of War, signed at Brussels, 27 August 1874.

2 Convention for the Protection of Cultural Property in the Event of Armed Conflict, adopted at The Hague, 1954, 249 UNTS 240. First Protocol to the Convention for the Protection of Cultural Property in the Event of Armed Conflict 1954, adopted at The Hague, 14 May 1954, 249 UNTS 358. Second Protocol to the Convention for the Protection of Cultural Property in the Event of Armed Conflict 1954, adopted at The Hague, 26 March 1999, 2252 UNTS 172.

once it has ended. It also includes a series of compensations for those purchasers who in good faith acquired an object illicitly exported from a region in conflict and eventually had to return it.

The next steps in the normative framework for the protection of heritage materialized in Protocols I and II of the Geneva Convention in 1977³, referring to international and domestic conflicts and signed by 93 and 44 countries respectively, in which the attack on cultural property or its use for military purposes is explicitly prohibited and the obligations for the protection of heritage are attributed to the attacker and not to the attacked party, and the massive destruction of property enjoying protected status is classified as a war crime. (Techera, 2007)

After the brutal wars in the Balkans in 1999, however, the very limited framework of protection offered by the Convention in the case of domestic conflicts and the need to find a more precise definition of the concept of military security became evident. The effectiveness of the treaty was in turn severely hampered by the lack of a higher body to implement the decisions and with the capacity to convene meetings on a regular basis, as well as the absence of a robust system of sanctions for violators or of an administrative body to organize the proceedings; the implementation of the agreements on the protection of cultural property was therefore almost exclusively dependent on the political will of the States concerned. Accordingly, this second Protocol seeks to provide a more precise definition of military necessity, as well as to simplify the procedures for granting special protection status to monuments and buildings of heritage value and to provide for individual criminal responsibility for offences of attacks on cultural goods. Heritage property which by reason of its use has become a military objective may be attacked when there is no feasible alternative, but a commanding officer of a force equivalent to a battalion must determine whether or not military necessity is invoked, and an advance warning must be issued if possible; in the case of an asset enjoying special protection, its consideration as a target of strict military necessity must come from the highest command and the issuance of a prior warning will have imperative rank (O'Keefe, 2009).

Compiling the basic rules within the legal framework for the protection of heritage during armed conflicts, the fundamental premise of these rules is the prohibition of attacking cultural property unless it would make a significant contribution to military action or its destruction would provide an effective military advantage. In no case is an attack on military objectives permitted if it cannot be carried out without damaging the nearby heritage in a way that is disproportionate to the military advantage to be gained, nor is the demolition of cultural property in the territory controlled by one of the contenders or its use for military purposes permitted unless there is an imperative strategic need.

Classified as a war crime in the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court, the intentional destruction of cultural heritage during an armed conflict will acquire the status of a crime against humanity if it is carried out systematically, with the obligation to safeguard the heritage falling, as mentioned above, on the occupying state. Protocol II of the Convention provides for the creation of an intergovernmental committee and a financial fund responsible for the elaboration and implementation of a coordinated protection strategy to achieve its objectives.

It is not difficult to imagine that the origin of all this body of law lies in the desire to hold those responsible to account individually for the massive destruction specifically aimed at cultural property that took place during the Second World War, when the well-known German Air Force Braedeker Brigades systematically bombed some of the most precious architectural treasures of the British Isles in cities such as Bath, Canterbury and Exeter, targets specifically selected for their cultural rather than military value in order to cause a greater psychological impact on the civilian population; the British then took revenge for these acts at the expense of the beautiful Hanseatic city of Lubeck, which was subjected on the night of March 28, 1942 to a massive air raid that devastated its historic center.

The advances made during World War II in the performance of explosives in bombing did not correspond to improvements in the precision of the range of the targets, and the volume of destruction of cultural heritage was consequently disproportionate and on a scale never seen before. It must be agreed, however, that most of this

3 Geneva Convention for the Amelioration of the Condition of the Wounded and Sick in Armed Forces in the Field (First Geneva Convention), Geneva Convention for the Amelioration of the Condition of Wounded, Sick and Shipwrecked Members of Armed Forces at Sea (Second Geneva Convention), Geneva Convention relative to the Treatment of Prisoners of War (Third Geneva Convention), and Geneva Convention Relative to the Protection of Civilian Persons in Time of War (Fourth Geneva Convention), adopted 12 August 1949; Protocol Additional to the Geneva Conventions of 12 August 1949, and relating to the Protection of Victims of International Armed Conflicts (Protocol I), 8 June 1977 and Protocol Additional to the Geneva Conventions of 12 August 1949, and relating to the Protection of Victims of Non-International Armed Conflicts (Protocol II), 8 June 1977.

destruction was not contrary to the laws of war at the time, since it was property inevitably damaged in the context of an attack on military targets, a distinction extended, moreover, to almost all buildings. The current situation represents a decisive step forward insofar as legitimate military objectives will be only those that effectively contribute to military action and not to undermining the enemy's capacity to sustain the war effort.

However, other cities such as Kyoto, Rome or Florence were fortunately spared from the bombings thanks to the enormous artistic and historical heritage they accumulated, and undoubtedly many European monuments avoided destruction thanks to the committee of experts in heritage, fine arts and archives that accompanied the American soldiers in the old continent, informing them of the location and care required by the most outstanding cultural property in a practice that the United Kingdom would later imitate in Libya. These same expert committees to advise the U.S. military were formed for the Gulf and Kosovo wars in the 1990s, drawing up a special list of Non-Target Assets due to their cultural value.

Notwithstanding, the United States has also been the protagonist of certainly negligent actions regarding the protection of cultural heritage in the conflict zones where it has been involved, violating in 1999 the prohibition of Protocol II of the Convention on the export of cultural property by looting the Baghdad Museum, or when it failed in its obligation to protect its collections from looting and destruction during the invasion of the country in 2003, in shameful scenes in which the museum galleries were subjected to banditry and looting of more than 4000 objects before the total impassivity of the American soldiers and the pleas of the workers.

While the II Protocol has brought notable improvements in the protection of buildings and monuments, as far as movable heritage is concerned it has been a resounding failure in view of the savage plundering and looting of movable heritage in Iraq's museums during the US invasion of 2003, being ultimately totally ineffective in preventing the destruction of the priceless archaeological sites destroyed by Daesh since 2014 such as Palmyra, Niniveh or Nimrod. The framework of protection offered by current international law is severely limited in a war scenario such as the Middle East, where most of the destruction of property takes place in a context of civil war or asymmetrical conflict involving numerous private, non-state actors, and whose compliance with international law is therefore disputed. The current legal framework, with all its complexity and extension, has often proved inoperative by creating situations that Lostal defines as *legislative congestion* (Lostal, 2015), in which in addition no treaty is able to build anything relevant on the foundations of the previous one. It is also opportune to point out that legal instruments by themselves have proven to be insufficient in many cases in the absence of a trained military corps to monitor and mitigate situations of cultural emergency in which a property is threatened and requires professionalized action for its preservation.

The first to be tried and convicted for looting and cultural theft were the Nazi leaders Keitel and Rosenberg (Marshal and Minister respectively) at the Nuremberg Trials, being of interest to refer briefly as well to what is known as the Al Mahdi case of 2015⁴, in which for the first time the International Criminal Court of the Hague convicted an individual responsible for orchestrating and perpetrating the intentional destruction of cultural property for war crimes, despite not being accused of any crime against persons. Until September 2012, al Faqui al Mahdi was a local religious leader in Timbuktu who held the position of leader of the Hishba, a body aimed at preventing vice among citizens and promoting virtue and Islamic morality, and was also a member of the Tuareg movement Ansar Dine, which was formally linked to al Qaeda's affiliate in the Islamic Maghreb. (Higgins, 2020)

Once the insurgency took control of the city in April 2012, its rich cultural heritage became the target of these Islamic fundamentalists under the pretense of cleansing it of all impurity. Sufi shrines and mausoleums venerating local saints, dating back to Mali's heyday between the 15th and 16th centuries and included on Unesco's world heritage list, were therefore considered as testimony to idolatrous practices which, after discussions with local religious elders, the leader of Ansar Dine Iyad ad Ghali decided should be destroyed (Higgins, 2020). Although al Mahdi initially opposed the destruction of the sanctuaries, he finally opted to obey orders and during the months of June and July 2012 he supervised and undertook personally with pickaxe in hand the savage destruction of more than 10 buildings of incalculable historical, artistic and religious value that played a very relevant role in the way in which the inhabitants of Timbuktu identified, defined and bonded together as a society. During the trial he pleaded

4 Prosecutor v Al Mahdi ICC-01/12-01/15. A second case concerning attacks on cultural heritage sites in Mali is currently before the ICC. See Prosecutor v Al Hassan Ag Abdoul Aziz Ag Mohamed Ag Mahmoud ICC-01/12-01/18.

guilty to the charges and, although the 9-year sentence imposed on him may be derisory in comparison with the gravity of the act committed, the al Mahdi case will undoubtedly prove to be a benchmark to be considered in future prosecutions against Dáesh members accused of attacking heritage in Iraq and Syria.

CHAPTER 2. Cultural obliteration and the R2P Doctrine

The rampant destruction of heritage perpetrated in Syria and Iraq by the Islamic State is unprecedented in the contemporary era in terms of its scale and degree of systematization. The then head of UNESCO Irina Bolikova, during a visit in November 2014 to the city of Irbil in Iraqi Kurdistan, described them as acts of “cultural cleansing”, thus emphasizing that it was not mere collateral damage but that the very pattern of action of the extremists was based on combining the persecution of the civilian population with the destruction of their most significant monuments. Based on this reasoning, the annihilation of diversity and the erosion of freedoms pave the way for the imposition of sectarian visions:

Either [the minority groups] conform to [the Islamic State's] views of religion or belief or they have to disappear. I don't remember anything like that in contemporary history,” she added. “This is a way to destroy identity. You deprive them of their culture, you deprive them of their history, their heritage, and that is why it goes hand in hand with genocide. Along with the physical persecution they want to eliminate –to delete– the memory of these different cultures.

The disappearance of a monument does not only mean physical destruction, but also the loss of identity and memory, sometimes irreversibly damaging the social fabric and the bonds of belonging between communities. Accordingly, the protection of cultural property can in no case be a luxury or a secondary matter relegated behind the protection of the people to the extent that they can and in fact are used as a weapon of war whose damage can be irreparable, generating a great psychological impact and a sense of hopelessness in the future for those same people who also face the threat of a major disintegration and social outbursts.

As a result of these episodes and despite the fact that the term “cultural cleansing” has fallen into disuse in recent years, a broad academic debate was forged on the appropriateness of applying the doctrine of Responsibility to Protect, a political commitment supported by all member states of the United Nations at the 2005 World Summit with the aim of preventing the worst forms of persecution and atrocities against civilian populations and not repeating the mistakes of the international community in the events that took place in Rwanda and the Balkans in the 1990s. The normative areas of application of the R2P principle would be in cases of genocide, war crimes, crimes against humanity and ethnic cleansing, with the state where these take place being responsible for their prevention, but the other states being obliged to assist it in the event that it does not have the capacity to do so.

The first time the application of the doctrine was authorized by the UNSC was during the Libyan conflict in 2011, the outcome of which was particularly controversial in view of the regime change it precipitated. Similarly, its application to cases of destruction of heritage raises many questions about what the international community should do when a sovereign state, responsible for protecting its own heritage, is unable to carry out this task. Considering that the attack on cultural property is defined as a war crime, or even a crime against humanity if it is circumscribed to acts of persecution, and taking into account the four cases contemplated for the application of the R2P doctrine mentioned above, it is unquestionable that it is a matter open to debate, especially when acts of cultural cleansing could be considered overlapping with those of ethnic cleansing or genocide if one were to accept the definition of “cultural genocide” on which we will consider below (Higgings, 2020).

The paradigm of “cultural genocide” is a product of the work of the Polish jurist of Jewish origin Raphael Lemkin, to whom we also owe the coining of the term “genocide” itself. As a member of the UN Genocide Commission in 1948, he devoted enormous efforts to try to persuade his colleagues on the commission, Pella and de Vabres, to include a provision in the final document penalizing acts of genocide in the cultural sphere, but these were ultimately unsuccessful. Paradoxically, while earlier versions of the text did include the terms “cultural genocide,” the final product was based on a conception that physical and biological attacks against individuals were clearly distinguishable from those against cultural property, which did not fall within the scope of the legal instruments; the normative development of the concept of “cultural genocide” was thus hindered.

The concept of “cultural genocide” as a proper dimension of the crime of genocide has been rejected in the jurisprudence of international criminal tribunals. In *Prosecutor v Kristić*⁵, the Court recalled the wording of the

⁵ Prosecutor v Kordić and Čerkez, IT-95-14/2-A, Trial Chamber Judgment, 26 February 2001, para. 206.

Genocide Convention and the opinion of the International Law Commission, finding that “customary international law limits the definition of genocide to those acts which seek the physical or biological destruction of the whole or part of the group” with the result that an action intended to attack exclusively the cultural or social characteristics of a human group, thereby annihilating those elements that give that group an identity distinct from the rest of the community, would not fall within the definition of genocide.

According to Lemkin’s perception, attacks on heritage always preceded and anticipated episodes of physical violence against the community, making his own the phrase of the 19th century Ashkenazi poet Henrich Heine: “first they burn books, then they will start burning bodies”. (Higgings, 2020). This observation was already taken up in *Prosecutor v Kristić* and also seconded by the International Criminal Court:

Where there is physical or biological destruction there are often simultaneous attacks on the cultural and religious property and symbols of the target group, attacks which may legitimately be regarded as evidence of intent to physically destroy the group.⁶

The application of the R2P doctrine to the destruction of cultural heritage has found significant support in academia and international bodies. While UNESCO has argued that the R2P doctrine can and, indeed, should be applied to the protection of cultural heritage in armed conflict, the organization has yet to engage with the research community in a meaningful analysis of its practical application. Similarly, the theoretical application of the R2P doctrine to cultural heritage destruction has been supported by numerous scholars (Lenzerini 2016, Weiss and Connolly 2017), although the many persistent practical difficulties and lack of political will keep the issue still open to interpretation.

To the above, it should be added that the doctrine refers to the protection of “populations”; but the indivisible link between a population and its cultural heritage is neither stated nor defined in the legal framework. In this regard, some researchers such as Luck conclude that the R2P framework would not be an effective paradigm for addressing the destruction of cultural heritage, at least until its legal status and contours have been more precisely outlined and definitively accepted by the international community (Luck, 2018). In summary, it is therefore unlikely in our understanding that, in its present form, the R2P doctrine will be effective in cases of protection of cultural heritage or that the meaning of “cultural genocide” will be a useful legal paradigm in this respect in the near future.

From cultural to security paradigm

The use of the term cultural cleansing, although now generally relegated from official and academic circles, encouraged UNESCO and other cultural heritage protection agencies to address recent events in the Middle East and North Africa within the framework of regional peace and security, thus giving rise to the development of what Higgings calls the *paradigm of securitization* of cultural patrimony (Higgins, 2020). The 2017 United Nations program “Protecting Cultural Heritage from Terrorism and Mass Atrocities: Links and Common Responsibilities” would be the consecration of a new approach that, relegating the previously prevailing paradigms that underpinned the protection of cultural heritage on axioms such as cultural values and its civilian use, emphasizes the importance that culture and art play in the maintenance of peace and international security, as well as in the recovery and reconstruction of post-conflict societies. This implies to some extent the establishment of a new paradigm emanating from the words of the then director of UNESCO Bolkova in which she referred to the premeditated destruction of the cultural legacy of Syria and Iraq as acts of cultural cleansing in an evident vindication of cultural assets as indispensable resources to be considered in all peace-building initiatives, since the artistic value derived from them is irremediably entwined with the very survival of the population both in terms of their sense of identity and the recovery of local economies once the war is over.

The intentional destruction of the historical and artistic legacy of a community is therefore a significant threat to local and international security and stability, undermining the prospects for governance and social, economic and cultural development of the affected states. Despite the fact that the plundering of antiquities and objects of artistic value with their consequent illicit trafficking is one of the main channels of financing armed conflicts, it was not until Resolution 2100 of the United Nations Security Council in 2013 that the protection of heritage was included for the

6 Application of the Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide (*Bosnia and Herzegovina v Serbia and Montenegro*) (Merits) [2007] ICJ Rep.4, 124, para. 344.

first time in the mandate of a peacekeeping mission such as MINUSMA (Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali), whose armed forces, at the request of the Malian government, would be charged with helping to protect the country's cultural heritage, but in addition to other tasks such as the protection of civilians and the safeguarding of human rights, the disarmament and demobilization of rebel groups for their integration into the national army, support for the holding of electoral consultations, and activities in the fields of reconciliation and justice. ...a long list of functions that inevitably lead us to question the position of cultural heritage in the list of priorities.

To these limitations we must add the text of Resolution 2327 of 2017, in which the Council specifies that UN peacekeeping missions can be involved in the protection of cultural heritage only when specifically mandated by the Security Council, reflecting in its words the persistent approach of the United Nations to issues such as national sovereignty and the priority role that the State must play in the protection of its cultural assets. From this position it is clear that it is unwilling to authorize an intervention whose sole purpose is to protect the threatened heritage or to extend the mandate of a mission for the same matter without the consent of the state concerned.

While in recent years efforts have been made to combine more conventional approaches to the protection of heritage with those more focused on peacebuilding and security, including UNESCO-EU's Emergency Safeguarding of the Syrian Heritage Project, or the International Council of Museums Emergency Red List of Syrian Cultural Objects at Risk (Rosa & Foradori 2017), ultimately a successful integration of the cultural perspective in peacekeeping missions will depend on the degree of training, education and commitment among all members that compose the mission, as well as their capacity for coordination and cooperation, resulting in turn essential the understanding and participation of the local population (Petrovik, 2018). In order to effectively insert cultural input into peacekeeping missions, resources must therefore be pooled to create a design and mandate for such missions that does not generate a negative perception among the community, so that efforts to protect and rehabilitate cultural property serve as a means of gaining popular acceptance, the same that US troops lost after their reprehensible inaction during the looting of the Baghdad Museum in 2003.

It is hard to find a better example of how peacekeeping forces poorly trained in the historical and artistic legacy of the country in which they are deployed, displaying a total lack of respect for its heritage, can end up reversing an initial scenario of approval of the intervention to one of total rejection in which it is perceived as a neo-colonial enterprise and its members as invaders. This should serve not to forget the invaluable function of heritage as a reflection of the life, history and identity of communities, being also one of the pillars around which to articulate the recovery of societies hit by armed conflicts, restoring their identity, linking their past with the present and with a more hopeful future in which heritage becomes a symbol of unification and social cohesion.

CHAPTER 3. Attacks on cultural heritage in contemporary conflicts

The growing number of attacks on cultural property in recent decades has mostly taken place in the context of non-international armed conflicts in institutionally weak states, involving multiple state and private actors and with cultural property acting as a catalyst for politics of identity and nationalism, which, coupled with the proliferation of an illicit war economy, only encourages further destruction of heritage. Current conflicts revolve more around different communities and their relations with the state than the direct confrontation between different states or their political objectives per se, precipitating phenomena such as the creation of sub-nationalist currents in which the narrative of identity and belonging is employed in the service of political mobilization (Auwera, 2012). Such asymmetrical conflicts between different communities, which often take on an ethno-sectarian nature, are waged by warlords, mercenaries and terrorists, have no state resources and must therefore seek alternative sources of funding, of which the illicit trafficking of works of art is one of the most lucrative.

In this sense, the traditions and history of nations play a crucial role in contemporary politics, in which cultural production is instrumentalized with the aim of structuring a collective memory and identity, since heritage, rituals, myths and common values ensure a certain degree of continuity with past generations and help to build that narrative and national identity. The discipline of archaeology itself was born inextricably linked to the nationalist ideologies of the nineteenth century and at the behest of the new nation-states that sought to legitimize themselves through knowledge and scientific advances. Museums and cultural property themselves become carriers of ideology and valuable resources for the consolidation of national identity, a utility that Karim Qashim made good use of in his project for a sovereign Iraq in which national identity was firmly rooted in the rich pre-Islamic past (Auwera, 2012). Saddam Hussein will be an active continuator of this strategy, promoting improvements in Iraqi museums and numerous archaeological excavation campaigns, hence the dramatic images of the sacking of the Baghdad museum in 2003 by fervent civilians, and before the passivity of the American troops, must also be understood in the context of an act of contempt and revenge against Saddam's own regime.

Reasons to attack cultural property

Cultural assets, as symbols of identity and collective memory, are therefore a direct object of attack in conflicts with strong ethno-religious roots that respond not only to ideological foundations but logically also to the achievement of political objectives, since by damaging the sense of belonging of the adversary and causing him a terrible emotional impact by depriving him of all his cultural references and affiliations, it will be easier to impose on him a reconstructed version of history.

The attack on a cultural property can also respond to military and strategic approaches if it is possible to obtain a tactical advantage or cause psychological damage to the enemy that undermines their subsequent performance on the battlefield as happened with the seizure by the Islamic State of the fortress of the Crack of the Knights or the ancient city of Palmyra, which caused a tremendous impact in the local and international sphere and both had a great strategic value (the first insofar as it was an impregnable fortress at the crossroads of several trade routes and the second because it was located next to one of the most important gas plants in the country and was a transit point for several gas pipelines). Finally, it is imperative to mention the economic incentives derived from the plundering and illicit trafficking of antiquities that help finance the conflicts and perpetuate them over time, which in the case of ISIS amounted to 200 million dollars per year.

These practices of psychological warfare in multi-ethnic and multi-confessional states where identity is defined by the cultural landscape thus pursue the obliteration of the identity and the historical collective memory of a group by linking it always to the environment and the landscape in which it lives (Turku, 2018), and therefore the damage must extend beyond the margins of the property itself under the premise that it is not possible to govern a nation if there is a lack of shared memory and values that give a sense of belonging, thus generating a feeling of uprooting in the subjected population that could easily be filled with a new ideological repertoire.

The politization of restoration programs: the case of Palmyra

The destruction of artistic and cultural heritage is a substantial component within the visual repertoire of the Syrian war that seeks through the politicization of cultural property to delegitimize colonialist precepts and imperatives regarding heritage action and its preservation. From the joint French and Japanese action to rebuild Angkor Wat after the Cambodian civil war it is clear how these tasks are aimed not so much at preserving the material remains of the past as at ensuring a future of peace and coexistence (Plets, 2017), but in the same way it is necessary to emphasize how post-war efforts to rehabilitate or reconstruct a monument can be equally problematic as the destruction itself if a neo-imperialist bias emerges from its rehabilitation programs. In this regard, it is interesting to consider the case of the ancient Roman city of Palmyra, whose reconstruction has been part of Russia's diplomatic kit which, after recapturing it from ISIS in May 2016, boasted of this achievement as a symbolic success in an evident use of heritage and memory as a tool for manipulation in both its domestic and diplomatic spheres (Plets, 2017).

ISIS banners made their first appearance in the city in 2015, turning it into one of the main axes of their propaganda machine and proceeding to dynamite prominent parts of some buildings. The site served in turn as a space for a bloody ritual of beheadings of prisoners until the Syrian-Russian coalition troops retake the site the following year and, while the sappers were still clearing the site of explosives, the internationally renowned Mariinsky Orchestra of St. Petersburg performed on May 5th, 2016, three pieces of classical music on the stage of the ancient amphitheater, counting among the audience leaders of the different religions of Syria, representatives of the various ethnic minorities, Syrian and Russian troops, Russian officials, heritage professionals and 10 key ambassadors to UNESCO. This event was broadcast by RT news agency with the purpose of staging the prevalence of art and culture over barbarism, with the presence of President Putin at the site as part of a civilizing mission free of geopolitical interests, but which paradoxically implied the destruction of more antiquities following the establishment of a Russian military base inside the complex.



Mariinsky orchestra plays in the amphitheater of Palmyra (ABC, 05/05/2016)

To this must be added the fact that ISIS manages to recapture the city in December 2016, proceeding to attack new areas of the complex with explosives and deliberately destroying the main facade of the amphitheater. In the words of Timur Karmov, a Russian archaeologist and part of the conservation team that visited the site after the first liberation, it was recognized that the Islamic State deliberately inflicted these destructions in response to the concert that had been held there, so that the first attack would obey the site's connections with pagan culture while the second attack specifically exploited those monuments that acquired a special symbolism for the enemy, in this case the amphitheater that hosted the members of the orchestra.

This involvement of Russia in the reconstruction of cultural heritage is particularly striking as within the borders of the Russian federation the Kremlin has not precisely encouraged cultural diversity and identity claims of minorities in regions such as Tatarstan or Altai, where cultural assets are skillfully manipulated under the pretext of adapting them in line with the state narrative. An example of this is the heritage policy deployed in the annexed Crimea, where Russian propaganda resolutely impacts on extolling episodes of the Crimean War and the legacy military heritage

of the Crimean War that connects the peninsula and its population to Russia, while the former Tatar heritage is severely denied (Harding, 2016).

During the last decade especially Russia has been investing a lot of diplomatic capital in order to gain more preeminence within UNESCO, it was at its behest that the resolution to rebuild Palmyra was passed and succeeded in using the organization's officials present at the concert as an instrument to politically legitimize the Syrian regime and the acts undertaken by Russia. The Russian strategy was to make the Assad regime a stakeholder, if not the main stakeholder, in an international renewal effort supported by UNESCO that would allow it to gain enough political capital to end its isolation and get back on the path to the international stage, where the Syrian dictator was clearly considered a pariah. The ritual dilapidation of the artistic heritage by the terrorists in Palmyra was then followed by Putin's strategic manipulation, who tried to inexorably link the protagonism assumed by Russia in the reconstruction of the site to the assumption of a role of equal importance in the political reconstruction of Syria. Control over Syria's material past would thus enable control over its future (Plets, 2017)

In societies deeply fractured by ancient sectarian ethnic divisions and traumatized after years of war, such as Syria and Iraq, the value of heritage as a binding axis of the different sensibilities around which to structure national identity has often been undermined by its instrumentalization and manipulation at the hands of sectarian elites who have tried to turn it into an object of contestation and a catalyst for their exclusionary discourse. Given the experience of recent years, any post-conflict strategic design and planning for the reconstruction of heritage assets must have as a priority to restore and strengthen national sentiment and identity so as to facilitate a scenario conducive to stability and reconciliation, avoiding as has been customary the pretensions to shape a new supranational identity based on sectarian, religious or political criteria.

In this regard, the one-party Baath system in both countries exemplified this effort to create a supranational identity from the political level in which both Saddam and Assad senior carried out a meticulous manipulation and exploitation of the historical and patrimonial legacy, politicizing cultural and educational institutions that served to support their narrative and linking their political performance with the exploits of past heroes such as Gilgamesh, Zenobia or Saladin as a means of legitimizing their regimes. The formulation of a future inclusive national identity should therefore dispense with the interference of divisive elements based on tribal, ethnic or sectarian affiliations that make up the rich societal fabric of Syria and Iraq and turn to those that allow for the construction of a shared history and legacy, among which are undoubtedly their artistic heritage, culture and traditions.

CHAPTER 4. The lost heritage of the caliphate. Iconoclasm and strategic thinking of the Islamic State

The outbreak of the war in Syria following the protests against the regime of Bashar al-Assad in 2011 has led to the staging of a chaotic geopolitical framework, in a context of permanent instability, polarization and humanitarian collapse fueled by the intervention of various foreign powers that offers Daesh a more than favorable scenario for the dissemination and imposition of its narrative of purification of society according to its apocalyptic fantasies and its Manichean worldview (Gunther, 2020), with the intention of perpetrating a radical transformation of the socio-religious landscape of the region at the spatial, material and intellectual level.

The origins of the Islamic State are usually placed in the collective imagery in June 2014, when its leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi declared from the al-Nuri mosque in Mosul the establishment of the Islamic caliphate that for more than four years came to occupy almost 90,000 square kilometers in which more than 8 million people lived. Its main objective was to expand the domains of the caliphate in the adjacent regions and in the medium term to undertake a global conquest in which the sharia would be imposed from al Andalus to the Jhorasan. The invasion of Iraq in 2003, the religious sectarianization throughout the region, often politically fueled, or the failure and repression of the Arab revolts of 2011 in Syria and Libya are conditioning factors for the future performance of this terrorist group, whose roots however date back to October 2004, when the Jordanian terrorist al-Zarqawi swore allegiance to Bin Laden, and the Islamic State of Iraq was formed as an al-Qaeda affiliate in the country.

The ideological differences between the two were already notable at the time of establishing this alliance, especially with regard to the attacks targeted at muslim populations and to the effective occupation of territories, of which the Jordanian was in favor, while Bin Laden defended limiting their activity to guerrilla tactics and terrorist attacks, but without exercising direct control on the ground. These discrepancies remained latent in the following years even with both terrorists already dead, so that when al-Baghdadi took over the leadership of the ISI in 2010 it was already functioning practically as an autonomous al-Qaeda organization which, benefiting from the chaos that erupted in Syria the following year, managed to expand its influence over large areas of the territory. The intention to merge with the al Qaeda branch in Syria, the al Nusra front, to create a joint Islamic caliphate, failed due to the rejection of both the al Qaeda leadership (its leader al Zawahiri wanted them to continue operating separately in both countries) and al Nusra, which was wary of being absorbed by the ISI and losing all clout. After years of tension and conflict, and in the face of the unstoppable advance of the ISIS in Syria, the split of both groups materialized in 2014, a few months before the proclamation of the caliphate.

The implosion of ISIS on the Iraqi scene was therefore due to a confluence of different factors starting with the unrest in early 2011, when several Sunni-majority provincial councils in the provinces of Saladin and Diyala threatened to split their territories in the face of what they perceived as an uncontested neglect by Baghdad and the repressive president al Maliki, of Shiite confession. The massacre of 40 Sunni protesters in Kirkut in April 2013 by security forces along with the conviction of Vice President Tariq al Hashimi, who was sentenced to death in absentia, only fueled radicalism and spurred the rise of a plethora of armed groups, including al Zarqawi's group of fighters. Since 2012 they had taken a determined step forward, launching themselves into the effective conquest of territories and beginning to gain territory also in Syria, where they successfully undertook campaigns to free jihadists held in prison as in the case of Abu Ghraib in July 2013, which resulted in the escape of more than 1,000 prisoners. In this regard it is worth mentioning the incursion carried out by ISIS sleeper cells last January 2021 when, in its greatest demonstration of force since the defeat and official disintegration of the caliphate in 2019, a fuel tanker exploded at the gates of the prison of Ghwayran (northwest Syria), making possible the release of more than 800 prisoners and obliging the US air force to intervene to help PKK forces that were absolutely overwhelmed to maintain control of the prison.

It is now evident that the repressive patrimonialism of the Baathist governments of Assad and Saddam Hussein in Syria and Iraq managed to keep under control the latent sectarian hatreds in the social fabric of both countries for centuries, but the subsequent collapse of their regimes led to the overflow of such ethnic and sectarian divisions that came to form a conflict under the basis of what Jacoby calls "confessional chauvinism" (Jacoby, 2017). It

should be effusively emphasized that the Islamic State was configured as an external movement, totally alien to the social customs and habits of the region but also to Islam itself, which acquires its extremist nature as a result of the emergence of numerous Sunni armed groups that championed similar ideologies but competed with each other, imploding both in the post-invasion of Iraq and in Syria in 2011. In a new demonstration of Briton's thesis, once competition breaks out between different groups in a revolutionary context, power shifts from moderates to radicals, with the most brutal and determined ultimately surviving (Briton, 1965). Zarqawi and his followers succeeded in transforming the Salafist-jihadist ideology into a revanchist confessional platform (Cheterian, 2015) rather than a pan-Islamic movement, attracting those mostly Sunni Iraqis who felt hopeless and abandoned by state institutions to embark on a sectarian war against the Shiites. This gave ISIS a solid popular base, which included numerous Iraqi army officers who became unemployed after the US invasion and tribal leaders, many of them Sunnis, whom Maliki had marginalized and relegated in decision-making concerning their own territories.

The ideological underpinnings of the organization were a miscellany between a global jihadist and Sunni empowerment movement in which the apocalyptic cult also had a place. This prophetic vision was anchored in the stories of the Hadids and not so much in the Koran, with particular relevance to a passage in which reference is made to the final battle against the West that would take place on Syrian soil, where according to the words of Prophet Muhammad the hosts of the infidels would be defeated: "The Hour will not come until the Romans land at al-Amaq or in Dabiq".

Westerners would thus be identified with the Romans, who were to confront the Muslims somewhere between the settlements of al-Amaq (Turkey) or Dabiq, in northern Syria, the latter being also the title chosen for the organization's online propaganda magazine since July 2014 whose main task was to claim the religious legitimacy of the Islamic State and its self-proclaimed caliphate, thereby encouraging Sunni Muslims to migrate there.

In this regard, it is unquestionable that the contribution of IS is not limited to an ideological corpus and religious foundations, but also encompasses lifestyle issues and new support and containment structures for uprooted populations deprived of opportunities and now endowed with a sense of community belonging. Likewise, the thousands of young Muslims raised in the West who migrated to the Caliphate did so attracted by the promises of a society of peace and justice for believers, where, unlike what they had experienced in their countries of origin, they would feel integrated and accepted. It was therefore social factors of rootedness and protection that motivated these young people disenchanted with Western society to join the ranks of ISIS and not so much a religious mandate, as can be seen from the fact that many of these foreigners took with them on the plane to read books such as *Islam for dummies* and substitutes during the journey to Syria, thus illustrating that many of them were barely familiar with the normative and dogmatic principles of the faith (Gunther, 2020).

The ISI has meant to all intents and purposes a radicalization of the premises and methodologies from which Al Qaeda started, constituting a machinery of mediatized terror whose atrocities in the form of crucifixions, beheadings and mutilations in public squares have been broadcast to the world in streaming with high quality audiovisual formats and careful production in the Hollywood style. The capital of the caliphate was located in Raqqa, a city of more than 200,000 inhabitants that was once also the splendid and cosmopolitan capital of the caliph Harun al-Rashid and a meeting point for artists, scientists and thinkers of all confessions. Under the yoke of the ISI, however, its Al Naim Square became a place of public executions and the once vibrant and dynamic population was plunged into a panorama of terror and repression in which all kinds of barbarities were committed and strict prohibitions were imposed, such as smoking, drinking alcohol, listening to music or watching movies considered inappropriate for Islamic morality, and whose violations were mercilessly punished physically and publicly.

It is interesting in this context to note the role played by Saudi Arabia, which supported the anti-terrorist efforts of the US and the West despite the fact that paradoxically, or perhaps not so much, the terrorists have fulfilled one of the priority goals of Saudi foreign policy, which is to break the territorial continuity of the Shiite crescent. ISIS managed to successfully integrate and squeeze the jihadist ideology of al-Qaeda with the existing confessional divisions in the Middle East, with nation-states whose institutions born after World War II were practically in ruins and where ISIS found a new and fertile ground for its activities. To uproot the movement from the social fabric and eliminate the terrorist threat, some argue that a second "war on terror" will not be enough, for as long as sectarian

division dominates the Middle East, ISIS will have both the allies and the enemies it needs to survive, and even thrive (Cheterian, 2015).

The systematic destruction of cultural heritage perpetrated by the group obeys to a variety of considerations of a strategic and political nature which, in our view, become as relevant as the religious imperative they wield to carry out a cleansing of impure objects and idolatry in the areas under their control. The attack on cultural property has also been used as a tool of intimidation, propaganda and recruitment that will greatly hinder the recovery of societies traumatized after the conflict and of two multiethnic states such as Syria and Iraq, where national identity has in the cultural landscape one of its defining aspects and whose economic recovery has been seriously hampered by the disappearance of heritage sites to the extent that they will prevent in the near future the arrival of tourist flows considered by them as a harmful Western influence (Yusupova, 2017)

These organized and institutionalized practices towards heritage are therefore not mere iconoclastic acts but are aimed at eliminating the cultural references and distinctive social practices that constitute the key to the different community identities that inhabited the territories of the caliphate. Even more so when the iconoclastic doctrine itself, since its roots in the Byzantium of Leon III (VII century), has always responded to socio-political and not only religious motivations, serving as a foundation for a new cultural repertoire. The ISIS attacks on a wide variety of elements (shrines, churches, cemeteries, trees, etc.) frequented by local communities are aimed at disarticulating those aspects vital to the creation of social ties and belonging that are so necessary for social cohesion. They are thus an attack on the community as a whole, whose ontological framework and ideosyncrasy were founded on its attachment to its cultural heritage (Gunther, 2020); proceedings such as the destruction of graves are therefore an attack on the practice itself as well as an impediment to the veneration of saints as a social custom.

This procedure must be approached according to the multiple contexts in which it is produced and the different dogmatic objectives it pursues. In their strategy of civil engineering as one of the pillars of their government action they develop what Isakhan and Gonzalez Zarandona (2017) call “symbolic sectarianism”, which is nothing but a practice of repression and systematic cultural erasure towards other Islamic sects that do not commune with their doctrine, or actions of pre-monotheistic iconoclasm against sites and artefacts emphasising polytheistic cults and practices (Cunliffe & Curini, 2018). Hence, for Syrians and Iraqis living in ancient cities, praying in old mosques and shopping in bazaars with centuries of history, the cultural assets that were part of their daily lives and deeply rooted in the community have been torn away from them, causing the destruction of collective memory, uprooting and a fuelling of the conflict that greatly hampers the narrative of national reconciliation.

In its quest to achieve total domination over the population, it is therefore imperative for ISIS to eliminate the collective memory and ancient cultural precepts that determined and shaped the meanings and interactions between communities. Consequently, every ethno-sectarian group was singled out, and the Sunnis were not spared even in their attempt to effect permanent demographic changes and alter the social fabric through episodes of ethnic cleansing, forced exoduses in Iraq to Kurdistan and central and southern Iraq, as well as executions, recruitment of children and kidnapping of women to serve as sex slaves, as evidenced by the dramatic events suffered by the Yazidi people. Actions such as the marking of houses with letters, if not their expropriation or destruction, resulted in large areas depopulated and stripped of their cultural foundations whose resettlement became impossible in the short term, producing a profound change in the religious landscape in population centers where different confessions and ethnic groups had coexisted in a predominantly peaceful manner for centuries.

It cannot be overlooked that the destruction accompanied by institutionalized looting of cultural property carried out by terrorists is also due to the huge economic benefits it brings them and helps them to continue financing their war and state-building activities. It is therefore clear that it is often more important for them to preserve archaeological objects plundered from sites or museums in order to introduce them into the illegal art market than to destroy them on the basis of a religious mandate.

During a raid in 2015 at the home of one of the leaders of the organization called Abu Sayyaf, in addition to multiple objects and evidence of looting, tax invoices applied to the trade of cultural property and documentation emanating from the Department of Precious Resources, created expressly to manage and regulate these looting practices and manage their succulent profits, which between December 2014 and March 2015 alone are estimated at 265 thousand dollars. It was a real looting bureaucracy in which abu sayyaf, as regional leader, was in charge of issuing the permits

to undertake archaeological excavations, being levied a tax (khum) of 20% on the total value of the objects found. As can be seen from the documentary evidence found in his house, Sayyaf also mercilessly punished those who tried to obtain valuable artifacts in a clandestine manner outside his bureaucratic apparatus.

The iconoclasm practiced by IS needs to be contextualized and understood as deeply inserted in the visual language of the terrorists who, rather than championing a puritanical rejection of images, seem to use them to spread their message in what Pitcher appreciates as an evident contradiction according to which iconoclasts end up being creators of images (Pitcher, 2018). Under the premise of the fulfillment of a religious mandate, the dissemination of these acts of iconoclastic destruction against heritage are strategically instrumentalized as part of the propaganda machinery of the organization in which imagery and symbols occupy a very prominent role in its visual repertoire (the mallets and hammers with which they destroy sculptures and reliefs, the orange uniforms with which they execute prisoners or the black clothing and banners of the jihadist to give some examples).

The Islamic state thus engaged in a symbolic war in which the destruction of heritage functioned as a means to, in addition to subjugating an indigenous population, make an impact and give global meaning to its actions through the power of imagery and symbolism (Bauer, 2015). The dissemination of such acts in the social networks and the media only amplifies an image of strength that the terrorist group is interested in enhancing and using as a resource for psychological warfare. It is not by chance that the Taliban announced the demolition of the Buddhas of Bamiyan in advance and allowed the event to be covered by foreign journalists who were going to give it a new dimension, not being arbitrary the position taken by many experts who advocate not to give these events any media coverage in order not to amplify their message (Cunliffe & Curini 2018). In the same vein, in January 2015, the Iraqi News magazine published that the ISI had blown up the walls of Nineveh even though the news was not true, but rather due to an interested leak by the terrorists so that the dissemination and publicity given to this act would serve to increase the commitment of the sympathizers as well as the arrival of new ones, finally materializing the destruction of parts of the wall of the ancient Assyrian city two months later.

With this purposeful and calculated destruction of such relevant enclaves for world heritage as Palmyra, Nimrud or Hatra, ISIS sought to subdue the enemy's will, creating a strong commotion among the local population but also in the West, where UNESCO and other institutions in charge cannot but feel anger and impotence at the impossibility of stopping it, as well as perceiving it as an attack on the global values of world heritage, mainly stemming from Western institutions, literature and concept of civilization itself.

In this regard, it is interesting to rescue Pitcher's reflection on the apparent transition that is experienced in the current era in the way of understanding and studying cultural property whose condition as objects desired by colonial modernity, acquired without much thought to the cultures from which they come, is now complemented by their condition as local, regional and national resources that participate in identity economies configured around a constant mercantilization of issues of creed and ethnicity (Pitcher, 2018). However, these identity economies were in our understanding already entangled in a complex web that includes international tourism, the illicit antiquities trade, and major international museums as centers of cultural value exchange. This implies that the notions of heritage as a bearer of "cultural diversity" and the criteria for the valuation of antiquities at the artistic level are defined and negotiated on a global stage where Western institutions continue to play a dominant mediating role according to which the artifacts and objects of historical and artistic value to which we have access in exhibitions reach us filtered exclusively through Western epistemologies and institutions.

Identifying these actions with mere cultural barbarism would therefore be only a partial explanation of a phenomenon that also refers to a strategic theory of instrumentalization of iconoclasm. ISIS jihadism combines aspects of radical Sunni Salafism with traits of a new modern Islam adapted to capture the attention of a millennial collective, a young population frustrated by the lack of opportunities that represent a fundamental recruiting ground for the organization. As part of their doctrinal beliefs, the affirmation and active action in defense of the faith and not only passive is an imperative requirement to prevent idolatry (Shrik), manifesting accordingly a great hostility towards the reverence of idols and especially those dating back to the Jahibija (pre-Islamic) era (Clapperton, Smith 2017). It is important to highlight the differences between traditional Salafism, more puritanical and which advocated the strict replication of the customs and habits of the times of the first four caliphs, as opposed to the Sunni Salafist jihadism wielded by IS, which expressly defends the resorting to violence.

Through the selective and organized destruction of objects and monuments of great artistic value, recorded with maximum precision and broadcast in detail, they intend to replicate the acts of Muhammad destroying the idols of the Kaaba and its dissemination is of vital importance to capture the attention of Muslims around the world eager to follow his footsteps. As a theatricalization of extreme violence, several videos of Isis militants destroying monuments and art pieces with their own hands, carrying hammers and axes instead of resorting to more sophisticated machinery, were spread on the internet precisely as part of this intention to replicate as faithfully as possible the acts of Muhammad.

As a theatricalization of extreme violence, several videos of IS militants destroying monuments and art pieces with their own weapons, carrying hammers and axes instead of resorting to more sophisticated machinery, were spread on the internet precisely as part of this intention to replicate as faithfully as possible the acts of Muhammad. In the same way, they reported in advance the attack on the shrine and mosque al Aksari of Samarra (whose previous destruction in 2006 was the turning point for the triggering of the bloody sectarian conflict in Iraq in 2006) as a top priority, with the intention to terrorize and cause the greatest possible impact among the Shiite faithful who flocked to the site. Fortunately in this case the advance warning allowed the regular Iraqi army and the Shiite militias to anticipate and prepare for their defense, managing to contain the invaders and finally expel them from Samarra. Its broadcasting is, as we mentioned, a propaganda and recruitment tool, but the core underlying objective is the development of a new narrative of origin free from the pernicious idolatrous elements of polytheistic cultures or of other Islamic sects considered heretical, in addition to the reconstruction of these societies in conformity with a new ideological order that imposes the radical and fundamentalist theses of IS.

CHAPTER 5. Comparative analysis: two-track weaponization of cultural property

5.1. Attacks against pre-islamic heritage

As IS was expanding its territorial domain since the seizure of Falullah in December 2013 and Raqqa the following month, the international community was deeply alarmed by the threat that this implied for some of the world's most renowned archaeological sites, which ended up materializing in a confluence of motivations of both dogmatic and pragmatic nature, having even in our view the latter a greater relevance as the main triggers of the acts of destruction as we intend to demonstrate in the following lines.

The rejection of cultural goods belonging to polytheistic civilizations prior to the arrival of Islam was justified on the basis of religious and doctrinal precepts according to which they are reminiscent of an era of darkness and idolatry in which false gods were worshipped and attitudes contrary to the designs of Allah were displayed. The truth is that the pre-Islamic historical legacy of the ancient region of Mesopotamia developed on the banks of the Tigris and Euphrates goes back to the very origin of civilization with the appearance of some of the first Sumerian urban centers more than 5000 years ago, such as Ur, Uruk or Lagash, which were followed by Akkadians, Chaldeans, Assyrians, Babylonians, Medes, Greeks, Romans, Parthians and Sassanids to form a copious historical-artistic legacy that, we repeat, never suffered any kind of attack by the following Muslim rulers until the arrival of IS. The reason is that in addition to obeying these dogmatic motivations it is evident that the careful and meticulously retransmitted destruction of many of the pre-Islamic treasures of universal value as a testimony of the origins of Western civilization meant for the organization an immense media and propaganda success, giving their acts a worldwide repercussion, hindering extraordinarily the economic recovery of the region after the conflict by hampering the arrival of tourists while exponentially increasing their own profits from the illicit trade in antiquities.

Museum of Mosul and Assyrian archaeological sites

The first evidence of intentional attacks against the heritage by the IS massively disseminated in the media and social networks comes through a video released by the organization on February 26, 2015 and taken in the galleries of the Mosul Museum. The five-minute montage released by the press office of Nineveh Province, where Mosul is located, begins with a voice reciting verses from the Koran about idol worship and then focuses directly on a militant who speaks directly to the camera arguing the need to destroy all statues and objects belonging to polytheistic cultures such as Assyrians and Akkadians, even if the value of these is counted in millions of dollars.

What follows is a full-fledged display of barbarism in which the terrorists proceed to remove the protective covers of the items, great masterpieces of the Assyrian and Parthian period extracted from nearby sites such as Hatra or Nimrud, which are then savagely destroyed by using sledgehammers, pickaxes, drills or simply barehands, violently pushing the sculptures against the floor.

Finally, images are shown of a man dressed in black at the gate of Nirgal, an archaeological site within the urban fabric of Mosul dating from the seventh century that showed the way to the capital Nineveh. Equipped with an electric drill in his hands, it can be seen how the individual pierces parts of the face of one of the characteristic Lamasus, hybrid figures with human and animal characteristics of apotropaic character that guarded the entrance to the buildings and cities in Mesopotamian architecture, and that in this case had the shape of a winged bull with an anthropomorphic head.

The video is a frenzy of violence and destruction carefully staged, with a very theatrical character seeking to obtain a sense of spectacularity in images that are much easier to see in its entirety and digest than previous documents that showed beheadings and various forms of executions in a very explicit way. Employing a very suggestive style, it is a clear invitation to his sympathizers around the world eager to emulate the actions of the prophet described in the Koran, when with his own hands he consummated the smashing of the pagan idols of the Kaaba. The perceived iconoclastic barbarians turned out to be skilled large-scale producers of images that would later be consumed

worldwide and their reproductions would number by millions; hence, in our opinion, we cannot dismiss the possibility that the filming of the video was in itself one of the main, if not the main, trigger for the attack.

The extent and scope of the destruction of the museum would not become known to the international community until the liberation of Mosul in July 2017, and the following year the Iraqi Ministry of Culture, Tourism and Antiquities requested financial support from the ALIPH Foundation to carry out the project to rehabilitate the museum and its collections. Representatives of the Louvre Museum, the Smithsonian Institution and ALIPH traveled on a special mission to Iraq in October 2018 to, together with colleagues from the Iraqi team, identify the most urgent priorities and measures and undertake the restoration work, which happily concluded with the reopening of the museum in November 2020.



Destruction of a parthian sculpture in the Museum of Mosul (Himilicon 03/12/2015)

Nimrud

Following the success of the Mosul Museum video, a second short film was released in April 2015 from the archaeological site of Nimrud, the ancient city of Kalhu founded in the 9th century by the Assyrian king Ashurnasirpal II (883-859 BC) on the banks of the Euphrates. The royal palace was an architectural prodigy in whose interior were displayed a series of luxurious and elaborate panels carved in reliefs of great technical expertise with scenes of palace banquets, hunts or religious festivities that are exhibited today mostly in the British Museum.

Other priceless reliefs and architectural elements remaining in the complex contrary could not be spared from destruction and were attacked with sledgehammers, angle grinders, pneumatic drills and bulldozers. The destruction of Nimrud took place in three phases, starting the first one in March 2015 when the main facade of the palace was attacked with bulldozers and the most economically valuable objects that could be transported were collected and stored in trucks to be later traded on the black market. In a second phase, the main entrance gate will be blown up with explosives and finally, in a third phase, more explosive material will be spread all over the enclosure and detonated.

It can be observed in the video released by IS in April 2015 in detail and with great definition a male perpetrated with a sledgehammer hitting the upper arm of a sculpted supernatural figure, consequently dropping the pulverized stone on the ground and rising into the air. The facial profile of another winged figure is struck from behind and is focused directly onto the piece of profile that has detached from the sculpture and falls into the camera to then show several sections of delicately carved human figure reliefs and tree forms ripped from their original supports. The militants are also shown using saws to bring down a huge alabaster relief depicting King Assurbanipal II surrounded by the main divinities of the Assyrian pantheon, eventually being recorded in the video the assembly of barrel bombs followed by at least two explosions covering a large area of the site, employing the same basic production techniques and resources known from other IS videos such as slowing down, speeding up and reversing the footage, a predilection for out-of-sequence shots accompanied by post-production sound effects and the ubiquitous nasheed soundtrack

of processed chants (Pitcher, 2018). The result of this barbarism is total devastation, the capital of the Assyrian empire reduced to rubble with only a couple of stretches of wall of what were once slender structures still standing.

Nineveh

Important urban center for 4000 years, during its heyday in the seventh century BC as capital of the Assyrian emperor Sennacherib (705-681 BC) was one of the largest cities in the world that behind its robust walls displayed a splendid set of palaces, temples and gardens. It was also found in the 80 room Royal Palace the fantastic Library of Ashurbanipal, grandson of Sennacherib, and where a huge number of tablets with cuneiform inscriptions with valuable information not only historical but also about religious beliefs, social organization or the finances of the Assyrian empire have been found.

Although the degree of destruction suffered by the archaeological complex of Nineveh has been dramatically remarkable, this destruction has taken place amid great confusion and great efforts have been necessary to verify the date on which it took place as well as the methods used by the criminals. Already at the beginning of January 2015 the news portal AINA (Assyrian international news agency) collected the testimonies of inhabitants of the Bab Nergal area, close to the archaeological site, who claimed that IS terrorists had threatened to destroy it in case of an offensive against them by the Iraqi army. This consequently resulted in widespread feelings of despair and anguish among the Assyrian population, the only indigenous ethnic group in the country whose historical roots and sense of identity are deeply linked to the heritage of Nineveh (AINA, 2015).

This same media outlet reported at the end of January the destruction of large sections of the wall by detonating a huge amount of explosives, echoing the statements of witnesses in the area, although several days earlier a short film of this alleged destruction of parts of the wall had already been circulating on social media. Therefore, we can elucidate that the IS propaganda machine launched this video on the internet before the attack against the site had actually materialized, so that the representative and communicative load of the act precedes its own execution, resorting to the power of image and symbolism as a tool of psychological warfare in order to convey a sense of strength that does not necessarily conform to reality.

As seen in the authentic video of the attack, strategically released by IS a few days after losing the battle of Tikrit in a clear political diversionary maneuver, the terrorists were forced to resort to electric drills to remove the face of a gigantic lamassu guarding one of the entrances to the enclosure, which was built using “the hardest stone of the mountain whose texture was similar to grain” according to an imperial inscription from the reign of Sennacherib (Romey, 2016). The same fate befell numerous sculptures of angels and winged bulls that adorned walls and pavements of the palace enclosure. In addition, photographs published exclusively by National Geographic in April 2016 and contrasted with satellite images showed the razing of the Mashki Gate⁷ and the Adad Gate⁸, two of the most distinguished entrances to the city, which were demolished using earth removers.

7 Known as the “Gate of the Watering Places,” may have been used to lead livestock to the nearby Tigris River.

8 Takes its name from the Mesopotamian god of weather and storms.



Isis militant destroys a lamassu with an electric hammer in Niniveh (Himilicon, 27/02/2015)

Hatra

The ancient city of Hatra, designated as a UNESCO World Heritage Site, was a large fortified trading settlement of the Parthian Empire and capital of the first Arab kingdom of Irak in the second century AD, behind whose thick turreted walls unfolded an exuberant collection of temples built under the Greco-Roman architectural foundations but adorned with decorative motifs of oriental inspiration, being like Palmyra an exquisite example of the artistic eclecticism and religious syncretism of the region.

Hatra is certainly the biggest survivor of the vortex of property destruction perpetrated by the IS with a balance of damage fortunately much reduced than in Nineveh or Nimrud. When the city fell under their control in March 2015, its temples and palaces were used as training grounds for their fighters and as storage rooms for the military arsenal, placing statues and decorative elements as targets for their shooting practice (Shamdine, 2021). At the end of March, coinciding in time with the Associated Press report on the attack, audiovisual evidence of it appeared on a website of IS sympathizers frequently used by the group. In this video, one of its members can be seen on a ladder violently striking the back of the face of a sculpture with a sledgehammer until it crashes to the ground and is smashed to smithereens, while another militant fires a Kalashnikov at a zoomorphic mural statue and a third group of men is devoted to cutting off the bases of some of the larger pieces.



Defaced relief of Hatra (The Guardian 06/05/2015)

Palmyra

One of the episodes that gained the most prominence and caused the most stupor globally during the Syrian war was the conquest of the ancient oasis city of Palmyra by IS on May 21, 2015. The city known as the “pearl of the desert” is already mentioned in chronicles 3800 years ago, reaching its apogee during the Seleucid era between I-III centuries AD as a commercial enclave on the route connecting the Persian Gulf and India, where hundreds of caravans arrived laden with spices, glass, metals, perfumes, silks and ivory whose profits allowed it to become a splendid city with dazzling buildings of monumental scale.

Halfway between East and West, the ancient capital of Queen Zenobia (240-274 AD approx) was a melting pot of people from different regions that formed a religious panorama of great syncretism where Phoenician, Babylonian, Arab and Canaanite deities were worshipped, as evidenced by many of the thousands of inscriptions found at the site. The appearance of Palmyra with its sturdy columns, elegant buildings and delicate reliefs that combined the artistic traditions of the Roman-Hellenistic and Mesopotamian world was a breathtaking vision, worthy of the distinction as a World Heritage Site in front of which more than 150,000 tourists admired every year before the outbreak of the Syrian crisis in 2011. In the words of British traveler, archaeologist and poet Gertrude Bell who visited the site in 1900:

I wonder if the wide world presents a more singular landscape. It is a mass of columns, ranged into long avenues, grouped into temples, lying broken on the sand or pointing one long solitary finger to Heaven. Beyond them is the immense Temple of Baal; the modern town is built inside it and its rows of columns rise out of a mass of mud roofs. And beyond, all is the desert, sand and white stretches of salt and sand again, with the dust clouds whirling over it and the Euphrates 5 days away. It looks like the white skeleton of a town, standing knee deep in the blown sand.

The fall of the city of 50.000 inhabitants at the hands of the terrorists was not only a social human tragedy but also a cultural one of which the alarm had been raised in the previous weeks due to the unstoppable expansion of IS in the territories of northern Iraq and Syria, along with acts of destruction of archaeological sites and sculptures labeled as heretical because of their idolatrous character. It was undoubtedly a strategic victory that occurred only 5 days after the capture of the valuable Iraqi city of Ramadi, since Palmyra is also in a privileged enclave next to gas fields at a crossroads of the main roads of the country and where there was also the infamous Tadmur prison in which Syrian dissidents had languished for decades and which was itself in the crosshairs of the militants. Once they take full control of the settlement, the propaganda videos released by the organization show a number of fighters proceeding to lay mines in large areas adjacent to the archaeological site under the pretense of containing a possible attack by the regime's troops to recover the city as well as to record the potential damage they could cause to the ruins.

With the international community alarmed at the catastrophic damage that could be inflicted on the complex, the IS military commander in charge of Palmyra whose *nom de guerre* is Abu Laith al-Saoudy declared a few days after the conquest during an interview on an anti-Assad radio station that the buildings would be respected in their integrity and only the idols would be destroyed given their status as impious objects: “Concerning the historic city, we will preserve it and it will not be harmed, God willing. What we will do is break the idols that the infidels used to worship” (Jeffries, 2015).

The stage of the roman theatre will then become the place that hosts the execution of about two dozen foreign fighters from Assad's ranks who had been taken prisoner before breaking their promise in August with the destruction of the most famous buildings in Palmyra, as can be seen in the photographs released on the Internet by the terrorist group. The images show several young militants piling up large quantities of explosives inside a building along with a series of barrels connected to detonating cords around the walls and then blowing up the cella (inner sanctuary) and several interior and exterior columns.

Unlike what happened in the museum of Mosul and the Iraqi sites, the dimensions and robustness of the buildings of Palmyra made it totally unfeasible to carry out the destruction of the site using only hand tools such as sledgehammers and drills despite being much more visually suggestive in the propaganda materials, although the enormous human effort it would require, impossible to supply, forced them to resort to dynamite, thus causing a much larger scale destruction. The degree of devastation would become known through the dissemination of

satellite images taken of the site by Airbus Defense and Space and released on August 27, 2015, which confirmed that the two main structures of the enclosure had been reduced to rubble along with many other related damages.

The temple of Bel was an architectural jewel, the most outstanding building of the Roman era in Syria consecrated in 32 AD in honor of the supreme deity, who was widely revered in Palmyra along with the other two members of the Babylonian trinity and Aglibol and Yarhibol, lunar and solar gods respectively. This sanctuary of turreted structure was the center of the religious life of the city, where festive celebrations took place and processions concluded in a courtyard surrounded by slender columns with a distinctly classical appearance and an inner cella with a double chamber reminiscent of the distribution of spaces typical of Mesopotamian architecture.

Meanwhile, the temple of Balshamin was the second most important building of the settlement, dating from the first century AD and dedicated to the Phoenician god of rain. Very different from the temple of Bel, dedicated to a Babylonian god, this structure also shows the same eclectic style between the Eastern and Western currents, resorting mainly to Corinthian capitals and inserting a small window in each of the sides of the cella, a motif originating from the Near East and foreign to the Greco-Latin world.



Temple of Bel in Palmyra before and after Isis (Julija Nedje, 06/11/2019)

The loss of these two buildings greatly complicates understanding the synergy and cultural interactions that shaped an extraordinarily vibrant and cosmopolitan civilization, whose architectural and artistic style reflected this genuine mixture of Western and Eastern styles and that intercivilizational dialogue that seems to be so difficult nowadays. The territories of Syria and Iraq that made up ancient Mesopotamia hosted the very birth of civilization, the oldest urban settlements that traditionally functioned as a meeting and exchange point between the distant empires of China and India and the Mediterranean civilizations, thus shaping very diverse societies that captured in their artistic productions the essence of this ethnic and religious syncretism; a very rich historical and artistic legacy that IS needs to destroy in order to impose its totalitarian vision in a new pure and homogeneous social fabric in terms of creed and ethnicity, completely uprooted from its past and collective memory. It is worth adding that the ground on which the ruins of Palmyra stand has been under Islamic rule since the time of the first Umayyad caliphate in the 7th century and none of the successive Muslim leaders ever undertook an attack against them.

The studied and systematic sequence of acts of destruction specifically directed towards the most significant enclaves of the site continued with the demolition of a very substantial part of the Triumphal Arch, which was left in ruins, accompanied by the destruction of the nearby tombs of two saints who were revered by the inhabitants of Tadmur, the modern city of Palmyra. This rampage of savage destruction continued with the museum of the site, leaving the building badly affected, full of shrapnel, broken glass and debris and more than 200 pieces that made up the collection destroyed. The herculean and beautiful sculpture of the lamassu of the 1st century AD known as the Lion of al-Lat was destroyed, although most of the pieces in which it was decomposed remained on the site with a very different fate to that of other priceless pieces that were plundered or destroyed. Authorities and museum workers worked against the clock to save more than 400 statues and artifacts that were packed and moved to safety

in Damascus, but the sudden and lightning arrival of IS in the city left them with no time to evacuate the larger statues.

Special distinction deserves the particular courageous action of the archaeologist and director of the Palmyra site Khaled al-Asaad, who at the age of 82 and after more than five decades working at the site was captured in the month of August 2015 by the terrorists and despite being interrogated under torture, he refused to reveal the whereabouts of the most valuable objects in the museum's collection, and as a result was beheaded and his body publicly displayed hanging from a column in one of the entrance ways to the monumental complex.

After the capture of the city by government forces in a Russian-backed offensive on March 27, 2016 and the celebration of the lavish concert by the Petersburg orchestra on the stage of the ancient amphitheater, the IS managed to recapture Palmyra in December and it was precisely in retaliation that the facade of the Roman amphitheater was the target of their next attack, with which they dynamited much of its structure. A similar fate would run the Tetracylon, a monumental typology of Roman origin and cubic shape that presented an opening in each of its sides and were traditionally located in places of crossroads. The Palmyra complex consisted of four colonnaded structures totaling 16 columns of which only four remained standing after the attack, although fortunately all, except for a single original column, were replicas produced as part of the 1963 reconstruction program.

The damage to the archaeological site at the hands of IS is absolutely devastating and shocking, reducing to rubble some of the most important artistic and architectural treasures of humanity whose reconstruction efforts are still far from complete after having generated a great controversy among the scientific community about the desirability or otherwise of restoring the ancient structures or the scope and procedures of such reconstruction work. Despite the fact that many experts claim the urgent need to recover the lost heritage of Palmyra with prompt restoration work that would restore the city to an appearance at least superficially similar to the original, we support the opinion of the editor of the publication *British Archaeology* Mike Pitts when he stated in an interview to *The Guardian* newspaper that an excessive and unreliable restoration of the ruins would be tantamount to fictionalizing its historical past and in a way to deny or try to bury the tragedy caused by terrorism and devalue the importance of the structures that managed to resist. Even though IS has now lost almost all of its territorial presence and has seen its operational capacity seriously diminished, the Palmyra site must in our view remain for future generations as a permanent reminder and lesson of a time of darkness, ignorance and oppression that always threatens to return.

Although attacks against pre-Islamic archaeological heritage are much less numerous than those directed against places of worship still in use by the local population, they receive much greater media attention and funding for their rehabilitation. The total rejection of idolatrous and impious artistic productions arising in societies that worshipped pagan gods and had not received the message of Allah is understood as part of their religious mandate in which they claim to be the true heirs of the Prophet and his companions, whose interpretation of Islam is therefore purer and more rigorous than that of all Muslim rulers prior to their arrival (Isakhan, 2022). But this iconoclastic denial of cultural property belonging to pre-Islamic civilizations is directly proportional to their opposition to the archaeological discipline insofar as it is a fashion imported from the West and therefore with the destruction of the archaeological legacy the IS achieves the desired commotion and indignation on a global scale.

Thus, to these implications of religious and ideological nature must be added, if not superimposed, other implications in the practical aspect more related to strategies of provocation and propaganda directed to national and foreign audiences in which the diffusion is an essential part of the process. To this must be added the economic interests generated by the illicit trade in antiquities which, while the terrorist group generated huge profits to finance its activities, the plundering and looting of the Syrian and Iraqi cultural heritage has been and continues to be a tremendous hindrance to their economic recovery. The absence of tourist flows, considered a socially harmful influence that had to be eradicated, will be perpetuated even for several years as long as the security situation in both countries remains so precarious, in what is clearly a sort of posthumous success of IS even though it has lost almost all territorial presence.

5.2. Attacks against heritage of local worship

In contrast to the observations made about the pre-Islamic artistic heritage, the analysis of the attacks on shrines, mosques, churches and other places of worship still frequented by the local population yields very different conclusions regarding not only their rationale and methodology but also, and especially, the objectives they pursue. The annihilation of the cultural heritage of other sects considered incompatible with the radical fundamentalism championed by IS responds to a planned engineering program towards the once diverse ethnic and sectarian fabric of the region. Thus the social network composed of Assyrians, Christians, Shiites, Sunnis and Yazidis, would be irremediably altered after the forced exodus of large sectors of these populations, who along with the disappearance of their heritage witness at the same time the suppression of their identity and collective memory.

Religious buildings of all kinds –mosques, churches, shrines or cemeteries– were the priority target in these destruction campaigns that lasted for more than three years under IS rule, especially those most revered by the local population because of their unique historical value or strong symbolic significance. But beyond their incalculable historical and religious value, these buildings were also the epicenter of socio-cultural activity, the nucleus around which the communal solidarity networks were configured, which were dismantled with their destruction, as well as their sense of belonging and community identity.

Given that the scale of attacks on local places of worship is much higher than that of attacks on the pre-Islamic archaeological legacy and is counted by several dozen, a detailed tour of each and every one of the sites attacked would significantly exceed the dimensions and scope of this paper, which is not intended to be a mere enumerative list. Therefore we propose in this section to address in detail the destruction of those enclaves of special relevance as places of worship and focal points of social cohesion whose disappearance meant an irreparable loss for humanity but also the outbreak of numerous waves of instability and violence.

Mosul and Nineveh Plains

Just before storming northern Iraq in June 2014 IS issued a list on social media of 40 monuments located in Nineveh province that they intended to destroy, moving into action immediately after the capture of the city of Mosul that same month by tearing down busts and statues of prominent Muslim poets and thinkers who had aggrandized the city's name over the past thirteen centuries. A process of cultural cleansing had begun in which every ethnic or sectarian group was targeted as shrines, madrasas, churches and mosques (including Sunni mosques) were mercilessly destroyed.

The three years of IS presence in the city of Mosul, the second largest city in Iraq, has had fatal and irreversible consequences both for the world cultural heritage and for the urban and social integrity. Around 90% of the patrimonial legacy of what had been until then a vibrant and cosmopolitan city in where the Christian, Armenian, Yazidi and Assyrian ethnic minorities played a very active role and where different faiths had coexisted peacefully was razed in just two weeks. Nearly all of the city's architectural landmarks were destroyed, including Shiite places of worship, both Sunni and Shiite mosques, madrasas, churches and cemeteries that gave Mosul its very genuine and multiconfessional character. This systematic elimination of cemeteries and places of worship that had been venerated for generations was effectively instrumentalized as a means of humiliation and cultural disintegration within the ongoing ideological struggle that the jihadists maintained against local communities and in a broader scope against the Western world within a struggle of civilizations that they pretended to conduct (Rashid, 2016)

Unlike the attacks against archaeological sites discussed in the previous section where the terrorists were equipped with pickaxes, sledgehammers and drills to increase the visual impact of carefully filmed scenes showing in detail the destruction of the most iconic elements, what we find when analyzing those against local places of worship is the surprising absence of documentary evidence of most of these attacks, which were not recorded or when they do the subtitles are in arabic and not in english, since their primary purpose was to be witnessed by a local population that would be irremediably terrified and traumatized after the event. Moreover, instead of opting for manual tools to perpetrate the destruction and thus achieve a more theatrical effect for the propaganda videos, shrines, mosques and churches were blown up with explosives at a stroke in a maneuver that required much less human effort but still successfully fulfilled its objectives of annihilation of cultural diversity and obliteration of historical memory.

The tomb of the prophet Jonas was one of the most iconic and representative monuments of Mosul, a focus of attraction for pilgrims and a place of worship for Jews, Christians and Muslims and one of the few remaining historic mosques on the east side of the city. It was considered the burial place of the prophet Jonas, whose story is recorded in both the Koran and the Bible and dated around the eighth century BC, tells the famous episode in which he is devoured by a whale, but also is closely linked to the city of Nineveh, whose inhabitants warned of the total destruction of the city by God if they did not cease their sinful behavior. The tomb was located on top of a hill with an ancient historical layout, where an Assyrian palace of King Eshardon (7th century BC), a small Jewish sanctuary, a Christian church and a mosque of the 12th century BC were successively erected. In 1924 the prestigious Turkish architect who added an elegant minaret to the structure defined it as “a gift from God for the city of Mosul”, which would later be restored by Saddam Hussein in the 1990s to make this monument a prominent tourist attraction in the city.

But it was much more than a tourist attraction, it was a powerful symbol that rose above the city's skyline and permanently reminded Mosulites how rich, diverse and multicultural the place they lived in was. It was the materialization of Iraqi religious diversity, totally opposed to the sectarian currents that have dominated the political landscape of the country for the last decades, thus responding its destruction perpetrated by IS to its desire to eliminate all traces of shared history, of a common cultural legacy and a shared worship space, eliminating the possibility that different ethnicities and religious groups could share anything at all (Al Arabya, 2014). On July 24 around midday, according to local news reports, the terrorists closed the doors of the building and forbade the worshippers to enter and close it, then proceeded to mine the interior and surrounded the complex with explosives so that the explosion caused a gigantic ball of smoke and dust in front of a large mass of worshippers gathered in the surrounding area.

The video of the detonation was posted on youtube using an aerial view of Mosul to exemplify their dominance over the landscape and the population, who absolutely shocked were walking through the rubble recording with their cell phones or making calls to tell what they were witnessing while excavating machines were clearing the site. We presume that for greater visual impact, the minaret is shown in the foreground exploding into pieces rather than collapsing, inferring that the militants carefully prepared and placed the explosive charges to ensure a large-scale destruction that totally eliminated the minaret and the higher parts along with the parts of the structure containing Jonas's tomb, which were severely compromised. Only the outer courtyards of the complex suffered more residual damage and managed to remain standing.



An Iraqi man walks past a destroyed tomb of the Prophet Jonas (REUTERS, 03/09/2017)

The assimilation of previous cultural traditions and sources of knowledge has always been a sign of identity and strength of all Middle Eastern civilizations from the dawn of humanity to the present time, when centuries-old churches, synagogues and mosques, evidence of a shared history and legacy characterized by cooperation between different faiths, were reduced to dust motes or garbage dumps and still to this day (2022) reconstruction work has not been completed. This criminal act of total cultural obliteration did, however, shed a glimmer of hope amidst the tragedy when, thanks to the tunnels that IS militants had dug under the structure in search of antiquities to

traffic, they exposed the remains of hitherto unknown cuneiform inscriptions and reliefs from the Assyrian palace of Eshardon.

Another of Mosul's architectural landmarks is the Great Mosque of al-Nouri, erected on the orders of the Turkish ruler of Mosul and Aleppo in 1172 and from where al-Baghdadi proclaimed the establishment of the caliphate in a speech during Friday prayers on July 4, 2014. It is a complex of inestimable historical and artistic value whose cubic minaret called al Hadba, already described by the traveler Ibn Batutta in the 14th century, suffered an attempted destruction at the hands of IS that same month that was miraculously averted by local residents who, upon seeing a group of jihadists loaded with explosives approaching the mosque's courtyard, formed a human chain surrounding the minaret and preventing its destruction (BBC News, 21/07/2017). During the more than three years that Mosul was in the hands of the terrorists, this Sunni temple was a symbol of their power and dominion over the city, in the same way that when they decided to dynamite it in June 2017, finding the Iraqi troops backed by the USA only a few streets away, it was an explicit recognition of their defeat. Happily in 2021, four years after it was severely damaged and its iconic minaret disappeared in a cloud of dust, rehabilitation works commissioned by UNESCO are striving to restore the mosque to its former splendor.



Isis blows up al Nouri Mosque (France 24, 21/06/2017)

This destructive vortex that involved the loss of about 90% of the cultural heritage of Mosul continued with the destruction of the shrine and mosque of the prophets Seth, son of Adam, and Jirgis (biblical George) built in the fourteenth century on an ancient cemetery quraysh, which according to eyewitness accounts would be bombed and destroyed on July 25 and 27, 2014 respectively. The same fate befell the shrine of the prophet Daniel and the one known as Tomb of the Girl, located in the district of Ras al Jada, which was the shrine of the ancient Muslim historian Ibn al Athir, dated 1232.



Excavating machines at the Tomb of the Girl (Gates of Niniveh, 07/05/2014)

The total and immediate blasting of the monuments, without recreating the details with careful and sharp close-ups as we saw in the attacks on Palmyra or Nimrud, evidences a remarkable knowledge and skill in the use of squibs and other controlled demolition techniques necessary to collapse monumental structures, as well as the little relevance given to the massive global propaganda that was given to these acts, which were mostly recorded by local residents and covered by local news portals. These attacks were conceived and designed to be observed by the local population and to irreversibly alter the ethnic and religious fabric of the city, so it was not necessary to resort to sophisticated filming equipment or innovative visual resources.

The origins of this tendency to destroy shrines and tombs where local saints, including Sunnis, were revered, is strongly rooted in a religious-political tradition that predates IS, namely Wahhabism, an extremist current born in Arabia in the 18th century from the union between the lieutenant Ibn Saud and the cleric Wahab, who, under the pretext of realizing their vision of a purified Arabia free of heretical influences, had no qualms about destroying numerous tombs and shrines, among which was that of Zayd b. al-Khattab (d. 633), a prominent Companion of the Prophet Muhammad and a brother of the second caliph 'Umar (r. 634-644). On the other hand, they did not have enough courage to attack the tombs of the Prophet Muhammad himself and of the caliphs Abu Bakr and Oman, buried next to him in the sacred precinct of Mecca.

A source reported by al-Sumaria News told how during the month of June 2014 ISIS militants destroyed the shrine belonging to Imam Abu al-Ila after planting a circumference of explosives around the building, along with a mosque in the district of al-Faisaliya and several Shiite mosques, which were also called Hussainiyas, that were bombed, among them the beautiful complex dedicated to Fatima al-Zahra. A few days later, the same media announced the demolition of the tomb of the revered imam Yahya Abu al-Qassem and of several Sufi shrines which, belonging to the mystical and spiritual current of Islam, are considered sacrilegious and persecuted by the extremists.



Demolition of the Shia Qadoo Mosque (Gates of Niniveh, 07/05/2014)

Thus, what was once one of the most vibrant and attractive cities in the Middle East had lost during the IS domination almost all the elements that gave it such authenticity, with almost all the mosques and shrines belonging to the “Mosul School” of medieval architecture gone. This artistic current developed in the 13th century represented a beautiful synthesis of Christian and Shiite typologies and styles unique in the entire Islamic world, to whose disappearance are also added important examples of Ottoman religious architecture from the 16th to the 18th centuries.

Moving on to Syria, the intentional destruction of several shrines where local sages or imams were revered, some even belonging to the companions of Mohammed, such as the cases of Ammar ibn Yasir (d. 657) and 'Uways al-Qarni (d. 657) whose tombs were outraged in Raqqa, has also been reported. Two other ancient shrines were also dynamited in the vicinity of Palmyra belonging to Mohammed bin Ali, descendant of the cousin of the prophet Ali bin Abi Taleb, and the shrine of Shagab or Abu Behaeddine, a prominent religious leader of Palmyra who lived about 500 years ago.

Focusing now on the Iraqi Christian population, they had been settled in the place for more than 2000 years and even though they were a minority, they were very relevant, participatory and fully integrated in the socio-economic fabric of cities like Mosul or Erbil, so it is not surprising that they were one of the priority targets for the IS fundamentalists. The number of Christians living in Iraq exceeded one and a half million before the 2003 invasion, but by the time IS began to gain territorial presence in the north of the country the figure had already dropped to about 250,000 and once the city fell into the hands of the terrorists practically all the Christians had already fled; on July 18, 2014 the last Muslim Christians fled for their lives (NRC IRAQ, 2021).

Both in Mosul and in the other settlements of the province of Nineveh, the militants began to mark the houses of the Christians, as they would also do with the Yazidis, by means of an inscription with the letter “n” that referred to “Nazarene”, the Arabic word for followers of the faith of Christ, who were also given an ultimatum impossible to accept, which involved either accepting a forced conversion or the payment of a fee or *jiziyah*, the amount of which would be arbitrarily determined by the IS commanders; refusal meant being put to the sword. 40 churches and monasteries were severely damaged in the plains of Nineveh, 30 of them in Mosul alone, which as we have already said had been for millennia a city of tolerance, religious syncretism and cultural exchanges. Beautiful Chaldean and Assyrian churches, some as old as the 1st century AD, were bombed or dynamited, causing real havoc and a great shock among the Christian faithful who had been robbed of a fundamental pillar of their identity with the purpose of uprooting their sense of belonging to the city they had been living in and enriching for 2000 years.

The painful loss of the monastery and tombs of Benham and Sarah (4th century), blown up with explosives and completely razed to the ground in March 2015, was not only an irreparable architectural and artistic loss, being also one of the only churches in the Middle East that contained inscriptions in the Uyghur language, but exemplified once again the incombustible attempt of terrorists to erase the heritage and history of Iraqi Christians. The same method and objectives were behind the destruction of the Syrian monastery of Saint Elian (5th century) under a hail of explosives in August 2015, of which in this case the terrorist network did disseminate some images.

Other places of great significance for the Christian faithful in Mosul were the Chaldean church of St Markourkas (10th century, the oldest in the city) or the monastery of St. George (18th century), which was also used as a place of detention. They were two symbolic enclaves that gathered around them the community of the faithful who, in addition to their religious duties, carried out their social relations, economic agreements, etc. there. They were therefore focal points of the socio-political fabric of the city that were severely damaged by IS in March 2015, but not razed to the ground as they did with other places of worship (FIDES, 12/03/2015); it is not at all surprising that in all cases they looted all the liturgical objects and works of art of value for subsequent incursion into the illicit market.



Severe damage on St. Markourkas Church (Anadolu Agency, 10/03/2015)

In November 2016 local media reported that IS had begun demolition of the city's most important church Our Lady of the Clock using demolition machines and hydraulic hammers, which was corroborated by satellite imagery from DigitalGlobe showing isolated damage to the southern courtyard. However, in June of the following year the local newspaper *al-Mosuliya* released a video showing much more extensive damage to the complex, with much

of the facade missing and traces of bullets and shrapnel on the walls. On the pavement of the first floor were found remains of bulletproof vests, garbage and remnants of clothing, crediting the statements of IS militants captured by Iraqi troops who claimed that inside the temple was located the base camp and training camp of a battalion of new members and where women and children were held hostage for an undetermined period of time. (Analoulou Agency, 10/03/2015)

The phrase of the 19th century German poet and essayist Henrich Heine: “those who burn books will in the end burn people”, so premonitory for other dramatic events in contemporary history, has also materialized in its full extent and crudeness against the Mosulite literary heritage. The National Library as well as the University Library were looted as soon as the IS occupied the city, stealing thousands of manuscripts that were hundreds of years old while many other books disappeared forever in the shadows of the international art market. Subsequently both buildings were burned, riddled with explosives and blown to pieces along with the huge amount of documents and ancient artifacts used by Muslim scholars of the past and decisive in the historical and scientific development of the city, thus implying their disappearance also the elimination of a shared historical memory.

It is interesting to note a fundamental aspect in the attacks and demolitions of local shrines, as is the fact that the vast majority of them were executed by a group of IS militants led by a “sheik” who happened to be a character known by the local population and perfectly identifiable by the neighbors of the district or village where it took place. This leads to two interpretations: firstly, the choice of an individual recognized by the community to carry out the attacks can only inflame hatred and social divisions, but at the same time, since the acts were not anonymous, it makes it possible for the perpetrators to be perfectly identified and brought to justice for their crimes.

The Yazidi genocide

The atrocious acts committed by IS against the Yazidi minority are an illustrative example of how, to take up Lemkin’s thesis, the destruction of cultural heritage precedes or even temporarily coexists with acts of genocide. When the jihadists took control of large areas of northern Iraq, they simply razed to the ground a fragile cultural and religious mosaic through genocidal progromes and cataclysmic iconoclastic campaigns that reduced hundreds of Yazidi shrines and places of worship to rubble. Thousands of men were executed, women and children were sold into slavery and tens of thousands of people were forced to flee their homes to save their lives.

The origins of the Yazidi people are quite confusing, being mostly ethnically and linguistically considered Kurds, while others are Arabic speakers and claim an Arab ethnic affiliation or locate their roots in one of the Mesopotamian civilizations that inhabited the area, but the historical chronicles already locate in the twelfth century in the valley of Lalish to a small community that began to follow the teachings of the Sufi sage Sheik Adi, and who gradually consolidated their own religious beliefs that incorporated elements and traditions foreign to Islam, many of them taken from Zoroastrianism and other pre-Islamic cults such as the peacock angel, a sort of demiurge descended from the heavens as a representative of God on earth or the black serpent, who helped save humanity by sealing an escape in Noah’s ark. The worship of fallen angels, serpents and similar figures of syncretic religions are very controversial among the three great monotheistic religions as they are associated with the story of Lucifer and the original sin of Eve, thus earning the Yazidis the qualification of “devil worshippers” in the eyes of IS terrorists.

Yazidi heritage sites are primarily tombs of local sages and shrines, located at some distance from the urban fabric, usually in rural areas or on hilltops to perform ritual functions in a cult much more focused on orthopraxy (correct ethical or liturgical conduct) than orthodoxy (correct belief). They were places of celebration of public meetings and collective worship of the divinity, fundamental in everything related to the consolidation of identity and religion in a collective that gives enormous importance to the celebration of their rituals and pilgrimages, so it is also a destruction not only of the physical heritage but also of the intangible cultural heritage of the Yazidi people, who after the passage of the Islamic State through their lands were deprived not only of their meeting places, but also of the mere possibility of executing their liturgy, rituals and traditions.

The black banners of IS became visible in regions with a large Yazidi population such as Sinjar, Bahzani, Ba’shiqa where, in addition to marking and looting those Yazidi homes to distinguish them from Muslims, they proceeded to a systematic dismantling of shrines and places of worship: the shrine of Sheikh Hassan in Gabara, the shrine of Malak Fakhraddin in Sikeeniya, the shrine of Sheikh Abdul Qader in Hayali, the shrine of Sheikh Abdul Aziz in

Majnonia and the Baate shrine in Babire with its seven canonical spires among many others (Rashid, 2019). In the settlements of Bashiqa and Bahzani in the Sheikhan district, the terrorist network further carried out a campaign of total obliteration of Yazidi life and cultural legacy, ravaging between August 2014 and November 2016 at least 16 shrines including that of the sage Sheikh Bakir (14th century), and that of Sheikh Babik, along with the revered monument of the ‘Three Domes’ in the center of Bashiqa, which in turn hosted two places of worship dedicated to Sheikh Muhammad, Sitt Habibi and Sitt Hecici.



Sheik Babik shrine before and after Isis (Outlook India 23/06/2018)

In Bashiqa alone, the damage included the Pir Bub shrine and the Sheikh Hassan shrine, which were destroyed with bulldozers, and the Malak Miran shrine, which was dynamited and reduced to rubble. The 13th century cemeteries of Bahsiqa and Bahzani were plundered, with the tombs desecrated and abandoned in the open. And the list of irreparable losses for the cultural heritage of humanity could go on for several pages, but let the case of Bashiqa serve as an example of how the entire historical legacy, cultural references and symbols that made up the collective identity of a people were annihilated, leaving the Yazidis deprived of their heritage and the places of worship around which social and community life was structured, but also largely deprived of their spiritual life.

Pointing out precisely the patrimonial goods, what they intended from the IS was to annihilate their essential function in the social life and in the consolidation of the community identity and the sense of belonging of the different ethnic groups that were subjected to their yoke, who in many cases seeing their churches, schools or sanctuaries destroyed felt that there was no longer anything to keep them in their homes. To a large extent we can affirm, based on the statements of many witnesses who survived the barbarism, that the destruction of their cultural heritage was a catalyst for the final decision to leave their lands. A religious building is not a mere accumulation of materials and liturgical objects, but it is the cohesive pillar of the sense of belonging of the community that goes to them to pray; one does not only go to a church or a mosque, but in fact one belongs to it.

Heritage and sectarian contestation

These acts of genocide, desecration and cultural obliteration in northern Iraq cannot unfortunately be perceived as anomalous insofar as they are the culmination of two decades of nefarious management policies, if not cultural predation and destruction in which heritage has been instrumentalized and commercialized for the propagation of sectarian visions and politically and religiously exclusionary narratives (Kathem, Robson & Tahan 2022). This same phenomenon in which sectarian elites seek to instrumentalize and manipulate common historical legacy and identities as a means to enhance religious and cultural divisions, albeit to a greater extent, is equally threatening in the Syrian context, where a heterogeneous mosaic of ethnicities and religious beliefs with a deep-rooted sense of belonging equally coexist and in times of instability could seek to impose their political and ideological positioning and agenda on the others.

The impact of the muhasasa system (division of quotas of political power among the different sectarian branches) that was imposed in Iraq after the US invasion of 2003 has been tremendously harmful also in the field of cultural heritage insofar as it has materialized in a sectarian allocation of cultural resources, where religious and political elites have embraced ethno-nationalist currents and have embarked on a relentless economic competition regarding the division of cultural assets, whose control and maintenance is very useful to reinforce their presence and dominance over the territory. In the same way that Saddam did, after his fall, Kurdish and Shiite political groups have engaged in successive processes of manipulation and distortion of the historical legacy, with political parties encouraging social divisions along ethnic and sectarian lines in a strategy in which heritage, contrary to functioning as a cohesive element or mortar around which to build a national identity, in fact functions as a tool of division and confrontation.

Ensuring the control of monuments and sites of historical or artistic value by these sectarian elites gives them greater popular support while at the same time diminishing the authority of the central state. Religious sites are now controlled through the muhasasa system by the various ethnic and confessional groups that make up Iraq, so that cultural property is progressively perceived by society as belonging to a specific group or party rather than as a symbol of shared history and culture. This same negative impact is reflected in the tasks of reconstruction of monuments and places of worship, which have been assumed by sub-national institutions led by Christians, Kurds, Shiites, etc., obeying their partisan interests and disregarding all scientific criteria. In view of all this and considering the importance of heritage in the formation and consolidation of the social fabric of both Syria and Iraq, in our opinion it should also be understood as an essential element in the political and security road map of both countries in the years to come.

CHAPTER 6. Conclusions

Based on the research and analysis carried out in the previous lines, we come to the following conclusions:

1. The attacks against pre-Islamic heritage belonging to polytheistic civilizations obey both dogmatic and pragmatic motives in which religious imperatives regarding the destruction of idolatrous objects and productions, within the framework of a clash of civilizations that IS wishes to wage against the West, merge with other claims of a pragmatic nature. The massive dissemination of these attacks through social networks and the media testifies to the capital importance that the propaganda factor assumes as the undisputed protagonist of the acts, and the desire to film and reproduce the attack can even become the fundamental catalyst for it.

This diffusion is key as part of the psychological warfare against the local population to be subjugated, causing them anger, shock and despair on scales difficult to bear while they consider themselves more legitimized to hold power over even any previous Sunni ruler. Within these pragmatic considerations, one cannot exclude the economic motivations underlying the illicit trafficking of antiquities and archaeological artifacts extracted from the excavations, which were not destroyed in response to this religious fundamentalist imperative, but duly guarded for their subsequent commercialization. Finally, the disappearance of great architectural complexes of world renown, many with the highest category of protection by UNESCO, would certainly prevent the return of Western tourist flows, at least in the short-medium term, an influence considered harmful to the terrorists in their prerogatives of cultural cleansing, purity of faith and social restructuring.

2. On the contrary, the destruction of buildings of local worship, churches, shrines or synagogues or places of special symbolic significance for the communities (statues, cemeteries, trees, fountains, etc.) that are still in use and frequented by the population does not respond to a religious mandate but to a systematic exercise of social engineering aimed at irreversibly altering the demographic fabric of what was once a rich mosaic of ethnicities and religious beliefs. The deprivation of the legacy and heritage implies in turn the annihilation of all nationalist sentiment, identity ties and collective memory in a clear process of cultural obliteration that requires not so much a massive diffusion and propaganda at a global level since the primary purpose is to terrorize and subdue the local population, who are the only witnesses that IS therefore needs.

Social domination and permanent changes in the religious landscape cannot be understood without the physical domination of the landscape and environment, which is invariably linked to the cultural heritage in the same way that the residents of each area are deeply bound to their traditions and buildings of worship, the latter being also the trunk from which population clusters have proliferated in different places and moments in history. Culture as a shaper of meanings, perceptions and intra-community relations is a great obstacle that totalitarianisms need to eliminate along with collective memory and ancient cultural precepts.

3. The methods and procedures used for both types of attacks against heritage also differ markedly in terms of the instruments used, because while for pre-Islamic heritage and archaeological property the terrorists carried hammers, axes, drills or even their own hands in a purely human effort to emulate the acts of Muhammad at the Kaaba, for the destruction of churches, shrines and mosques of local worship they resorted to another means that required less effort and allowed a much faster result, such as surrounding the buildings with explosives and dynamiting them. They did not need high-impact photomontages of great visual quality and technical complexity showing the militants desecrating reliefs and statues in detail. In fact, most of these attacks are not filmed, and when they are, they are home-made recordings taken with cell phones or from an aerial shot with poor definition and a few seconds of duration that show the shocking moment in which the building collapses in a cloud of dust after an explosion.
4. Although the heritage belonging to pre-Islamic civilizations (Assyrians, Chaldeans, Babylonians, Romans...) is much better known and studied globally and especially in the West insofar as the Mesopotamian region is where we locate the origins of our civilization and we are therefore in some way irremediably linked to it, the intentional destruction by the IS of shrines and local heritage has reached much higher levels although they have received little coverage by the international press. It was the local media and newspapers that progressively published the various attacks as they took place, knowing of the waves of conflict and sectarian violence that could potentially

be unleashed, as happened when the extremists blew up the Al-Aksari mosque in Samarra in 2006 during the Iraqi civil war, triggering a terrible outbreak of inter-sectarian violence that claimed hundreds of lives. Therefore, although the pre-Islamic legacy is much more recognized and studied and its attack is equivalent to attacking the values of the West, those shrines, mosques and churches that do not appear in art history textbooks and are not studied in Western universities have an unquantifiable value for those minorities that deposit in them the core of their spiritual life and their community ties.

5. Assuming then the postulates of the new paradigms of security and securitization of the heritage that are being imposed together with the pre-existing paradigm that stressed its value as an artistic, historical and cultural asset, it is evident that these buildings of local worship must have a specific and significant presence in the design of the different protection strategies, because de facto they can cause major outbreaks of instability and inter-sectarian violence to a greater extent than those attacks against archaeological complexes inscribed on the UNESCO World Heritage List. The latter also have much more funds and economic aid for their reconstruction from international foundations and organizations, while in the case of sanctuaries, mosques or local churches this money is provided by the sectarian elites in each region, who end up appropriating the use and significance of heritage properties in an exclusive manner and not as a shared resource with which the different ethnic and religious groups of the nation can identify.

The reconstruction tasks undertaken jointly by the different ethnic groups as occurred with the restoration of several Mosul churches razed by IS is a truly effective means of healing wounds and reestablishing the bonds of community solidarity, in view of which we consider that the restoration projects carried out by external actors, although always welcome, must also fully involve the different national actors in a joint effort regardless of divisions of ethnicity or creed, since the absence of such tasks will not only keep the wounds open but will also impede future economic development.

6. The design of the various mechanisms and strategies for the protection of cultural heritage in the event of armed conflict, especially in the Middle East, must be based on a local significance and perspective (Arab, Kurdish, Islamic, etc.), since experience has repeatedly shown the threat that the destruction of the cultural property of a particular ethnic group or religious minority poses to the social cohesion of an entire country. This requires not only planning and research work carried out from offices in Geneva or New York, but also direct contact with the communities and the social reality on the ground, so that the root causes and consequences of attacks on heritage can be understood in depth in order to design effective counter-strategies.
7. As a final note and bearing in mind the enormous complexities of the issues related to the destruction of cultural heritage, where diverse aspects such as the illicit trafficking of antiquities and international terrorism are intermingled, it is necessary to adopt a multidisciplinary approach in which the teams in charge of its protection, including the military, have a consistent body of expert advisors in the fields of art history, archaeology and cultural management. In our opinion, it is definitely imperative to give the armed forces a more relevant role in heritage protection, which should materialize in the creation of a militarized corps with the capacity and authority to manage a cultural emergency, accompanied, of course, by increased funding and sustained international cooperation.

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Resumen: En este ensayo nos proponemos analizar los actos de destrucción patrimonial llevados a cabo por el ISIS que, lejos de ser meros estallidos de barbarie, fueron plenamente deliberados y ejecutados como parte de su agenda estratégica y de acuerdo a una doble instrumentalización. Mientras que la destrucción de enclaves arqueológicos de miles de años de antigüedad de época preislámica responde a motivaciones tanto propagandísticas como económicas bajo un falso imperativo religioso, la eliminación de lugares de culto todavía frecuentados por las minorías (santuarios, iglesias y sinagogas) y que son menos conocidos en Occidente forma parte de un esfuerzo premeditado para alterar el tejido demográfico mediante la completa aniquilación de toda diversidad étnica y cultural, cuyas consecuencias en el ámbito político, social y de seguridad han resultado devastadoras y se perpetuarán en los años venideros. Es por ello que nos referimos a una instrumentalización de doble vía.

Abstract: This essay examines the heritage destruction wrought by ISIS across Syria and Iraq which, far from mere outbursts of barbarity, these crimes were deliberate and carefully executed within their strategic scope according to a double instrumentalization. While the destruction of archaeological sites thousands of years old belonging to pre-Islamic times obeys propagandistic and economic motivations under a false religious mandate, the elimination of places of worship frequented by minorities (shrines, churches, synagogues) less known in the West, is part of an effort to alter the demographic fabric through the complete annihilation of all ethnic and cultural diversity, whose consequences in the political, social and security fields have been devastating and will continue to be perpetuated in the years to come. Here we speak about a two-track weaponization.

Palabras clave: Estado Islámico, terrorismo, patrimonio, propaganda, iconoclastia, minorías, nacionalismos, identidades.

Keywords: Islamic State, terrorism, Heritage, propagand, iconoclasm, minorities, nationalisms, identities.

