



Destruction of cultural identity: ISIS and Cultural Destruction in Syria.

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Abstract

This project will deep into the motives and reasons behind cultural destruction. It will underline the will to entirely wipe off a distinctive group of population and its culture. Taking Syria as our main case given the events of the last decade; centring in the civil war where lives and art have been lost forever, together with the morale of its population, which fled to other countries in big numbers throughout the war.

As for the perpetrators, ISIS will be the focus of our project, guilty of intentionally destroying many monuments, especially in Syria. Before explaining and answering to the questions of the project regarding culture, it is more than mandatory to analyse Syria's history, tribes and regions.

After reaching the core of our project and describing the possible reasons behind these actions, the third part of our project, which focuses on the emotional sphere of the victims.

War brings with itself grief, loss, damage and destruction to a country and its material environment. To focus on the emotional attachment and emotional damage during this war shall be a matter of discussion nevertheless. We will not only analyse and discuss cultural destruction and the loss for humanity whenever perpetrators decide to damage forever something so important as our, as humans, common and singular past.

Table of contents

Abstract.....	2
Table of contents.....	3
Problem formulation.....	4
Methodology.....	4
Theory.....	7

Analysis

Syria up to the Civil War	10
Religion and Ideology.....	15
Monuments used as a weaponry (an extract).....	21
Cultural vandalism or the killing of a culture	23
Reconstruction of Cultural Heritage	28
UNESCO's Perspective	28
Conclusion	33
Bibliography	34

Problem formulation

How can we better protect and maintain monuments and artefacts and cultural heritage?

Destroying cultural heritage is an attack on humanity's past and present, what is lost in an ethnocide together with people?

What are the reasons behind this method when obtaining power from terrorist groups or new political regimes?

Methodology

Regarding the methodology of our project work, we have chosen the areas of "*critical realism*" and "*constructivism*" as methods to approach the topic scientifically and to combine analysis and reflections with empirical observations.

The questions that concern us are: what is real, what happened and what experiences were made?

Critical Realism is aimed at the areas of (social) ontology, epistemology, methodology, and ethics. It is particularly suitable for understanding the complexity of scientific question when developing the project. The main focus of critical realism is to understand rather than describing as it offers the ontology that can help us conceptualising reality. The theory is supported by this method and will help us applying it to the project when attempting to give a possible answer to our problem formulation.

"*To Understand*" is the key to sustain our analysis, especially to understand the complexity of the reality without being influenced by our bias.

Then, these following questions arises: *Why does this trend of the ongoing destruction of humanity's cultural heritage by the followers of ISIS exist? What makes them act in destructive rage? Why do they act the way they do?*

To find out the reason for this, we researchers, make use of diverse sources. Some empiricism is drawn from ISIS magazine "*Dabiq*", where followers of the IS could understand and practice the drifting reasons and their worldview as part of an international religious movement that ought to re-establish the ancient customs of a branch of Islam.

Together with this analysis of the aforementioned magazine we will also investigate the phenomena through other literary sources, using the books "*Cultural destruction by ISIS*" and "*Apocalypse and the end of history*".

Those theories, supported by these bibliographical accounts, and analysed through the lenses of critical realism will help us sustain our answer at the end of the project. To understand reality is the matter. *Have all these events happened as they are accounted? Are they still happening nowadays with a different shape?*

Unfortunately, the current political situation does not allow us to conduct research on the ground. The opportunity to do fieldwork then was not given. The possibility of change proposed by Critical Realism discourse is achieved through both fieldwork and analysis on repression and alienation; these said ways of research involved the presence of actors that shape and can even interfere to resolve certain social issues.

It is fundamental to understand the concepts and the research from their point of view. The method aims to reach and explain the concepts as if they were told from an insider and bring the reader to feel or understand them as an active member of the ethnicity.

As for the description of the people involved, to better understand Syrians and their culture, together with their perpetrators, we chose to use the qualitative research method and its grounded theory based on data and sources from the web and other empirical sources. This, without ignoring oral testimonies from the refugees or interviews found on the web. An ethnography of Syrians and ISIS will be included as well, in order to describe more precisely their culture and their ideology. Ethnography, the field where we dive is considerably pivotal for us as researchers.

Therefore, a chapter on the project would be entirely dedicated to the historical background of Syria, its cultural background on matters such as religious beliefs, ideology, and customs.

The use of media, as it portrays and extends our research scope is one of the tools, we shall employ to decipher the events that took place in the ISIS uprising. The notion of culture is (*in a broader sense*) the sum of all the heritage, way of life, language, religion, and history that conforms a particular social group. Here is where ethnographical research must be conducted to understand the terrain where the investigation takes place.

The phenomenon investigated here is of a such destructive nature that we are much more than obliged to first draw a description of the recording events to make ourselves the best suitable operating table when interpreting these events and the range of them.

The narrative research will greatly improve our comprehension because the testimonies given by both the perpetrators and victims in this cultural destruction setting will account for the events and how they were interpreted by these subjective individuals.

However, perception is influenced by one's life experiences and attitudes, resulting in a new interpretation of the situation.

This led us to question ourselves: Do humans perceive objective reality, or do they create their own reality?

How people perceive situations is completely different. Given the natural subjectivity found in human psyche.

In Constructivism there are different currents of thinking, such as the radical or the social one. *Radical constructivism* shows that every perception is subjective and therefore it is not possible to perceive reality as it actually is. According to the "SAGE Encyclopaedia of Qualitative research methods" "everything we know has been determined by the intersection of politics, values, ideologies, religious beliefs, language, and so on (p. 118)." How social phenomena arise and become reality, institutionalise and ultimately be shaped into traditions and cultures is part of sociological constructivism.

We investigate how people create and institutionalise social phenomena and transform them into traditions and cultures by passing them on to new generations. Social reality is a dynamic process that is constantly produced by human actions and their interpretations.

In our project work we will therefore focus on the *social constructivism*.

We will make use of the "Historical research method". This method often called "*historiography*" focuses on examining critically the data gathered without falling into conclusions or subjective opinions. It is necessary, for a precise historiography to avoid taking sides in the facts reported.

After analysing various sources, a key point is to be vigilant about including both the lack of relevant viewpoints, and actors involved in events. By helping us in developing the ISIS ideology and if there are any connections to be found in history this will contribute notably to the precision in the project construction.

To report history as objective and real as possible is challenging. This “objectivity” is given by the sources available. We reported those that we believe true and can be supported by different ones.

Theory

The Haitian historian Michel-Rolph Trouillot describes in his book *"Silencing the Past: Power and production in History "* the process of plundering the past to create a new sphere of power based on the annihilation of both memory and possibility to remember.

The historical analysis in this book's case is centred on various scenarios that developed across the Caribbean countries (most notably the Kingdom of Haiti and the slavery in the West) although contains a deep and meaningful analysis of the process of both power and its consequences on the storytelling of History.

Apart from this, the ruler class, while imposing their criteria and cosmovision, creates a division on the collective imaginary. This said division imposes the so-called *"one-sided historicity"*, a narrative only associated, constructed and told by the ones who *"historically won"*. This process of power is also problematic, mainly due to the historical positivism prevalence in the Western scholar society, where *"History"* is not conceived as a process of historical narrative but as a process of construction and consolidation of power.

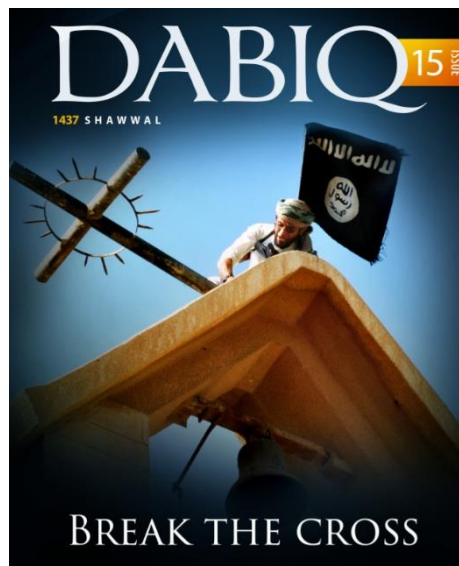


Fig 1. Fifteenth edition of Islamic State's 'Dabiq' magazine. Issued in 2016.

The author asserts that narratives are always the main configurators of processes of power; as in Islamic State's case, its imposing voice could not face a visible enemy that could threaten its discourse and actions towards the inhabitants of its controlled regions. This fact, whilst factual; demonstrates a double-sided truth: the lack of resistance was achieved by the use of a punishing narrative.

The employment of these strategies is a handy operational tool. It gave a certainly decisive impulse to ISIS campaign against both civilian and military lives; for their proposal was to establish a new reality in the conquered regions (the so-called *"Global Caliphate"*) there was a new need to gain the hearts and minds of the civilian population living in-between the Caliphate's borders.

Trouillot's categorisation of the process of power establishes three capable characters: agents, actors and subjects. ISIS case demonstrates that these three can be encapsulated in the same body. The aim of this certain group was to rule themselves through a radical view on religion, thus, assuming certain several mandates that aimed to be self-imposed. These restrictions on the behaviour were targeted to

fulfil the mandate of the “Jurisprudence of Blood”, a thesis, and declaration of intentions that intended to unify and show to the population what was the line of thinking and discourse that ISIS ought to establish across the globe.



Fig 2. Raqqa's Armenian Catholic Church of the Martyrs. Seized in 2013 and reconverted in 2017.

ISIS hostile and regenerative attitude towards the historicity and the meta-narrative was heavily display after the conquest of several cities (worth mentioning the cases of Raqqa and Mosul, located in Syria and Iraq respectively) where the occupation and later administration conducted a campaign of change and restitution of a forgotten memory (this being the more than reasonable roots of Islam and the fight to annihilate the infidels) inside the political and administrative pathway to achieve the instauration of their programme.

As one of the fairest and clearest examples (paired to Trouillot's case of “Sansouci Castle”) an observer may find; is the case of Raqqa's Church of the Martyrs. This building was a neuralgic centre to the Christian community inside Syria; knowing this ISIS posed their eyes on it and after the conquest of the Syrian city, their main goal was to first erase and then reconstruct it from its foundations to serve their ideological and narrative purposes.

However, the Church of the Martyrs was not reconverted as a mosque as it has been so many times the case (i.e., Hagia Sophia in Istanbul) but it was turned into a detention centre and a courthouse. The fact that ISIS turned a centre of religious performance into a centre of political (and what it is more essential) judicial power is the key to the kingdom. The way we can understand ISIS notorious behaviour and expression of their belief.

The destruction of another's group faith was not only the first step but it was used as a natural progression to their consolidation of power by the establishment of the law. The ruling of these cities under ISIS banner, given the testimonies of their inhabitants, enforced the power justification through lawful departments, using the judiciary system, such is the example of the justice courts that carry numerous trials and condemned civilians accused of impious crimes against religion to death penalty.

The righteous way to proceed according to ISIS, was to demonstrate that the loose faith these Syrian minorities were expressing was no more an existing matter; obliterating the building that act as a Christian bastion in the city and commanding its members, both judicially and psychologically to the loss of their identity as a religious group.

To promote a discourse of power, ISIS made use of interesting strategies of agit-pro. Its department of propaganda was successful to their aspirations. The rapidly gained control over the cities and the lack of resistance from its inhabitants obeys to a simple question: ISIS organised and professional propaganda network. The communication network was a well-oiled piece of machinery that

undoubtedly allowed the group to prosper, gain adepts and establishing a phenomenal strategic asset that made them feared to such extent that any kind of idea opposition was an ill-fated chimera.

The mass execution carried out by ISIS on the rests of Palmyra's amphitheatre could inspire these lines found in Trouillot's 1995 book 'Silencing the Past': "*Only in that present can we be true or false to the past we choose to acknowledge*"¹.

This present Trouillot refers to is the "*zeitgeist*" made by the precedent actions and course of circumstances a human can identify and reminisce. This is embodied by the dichotomy nature of the History; where both truth and lie are condensed and shaken under different creeds and sources. The silencing, as a whole, is nonetheless a process that contains several spheres that, interlinked between each other, function as a strategy that ought not only to subjugate others but to transform the concept of history and the way history is acknowledged and forged.

For it is a process, it involves three crucial aspects: control, erosion and re-imagination. These are the principles and actions that follow this process from begotten it to the establishment of it as an accountable reality; since this "silence" needs a voice that lay to rest others. The erosion on the other hand, is the artificial consequence of the sacralisation of a newer narrative, the one that will crack and recreate a new terrain, fertile ground to a new vision on history. The re-imagination will eventually encompass all the understanding and remembrance of the exploits and actions that can be profitable for a certain discourse. To interpretate is a production of history, the one that could set a suitable narrative for one side, one empire or one singular account.

The Japanese term "*Kintsugi* (golden joinery)" shall be use here as a footnote. It refers to the restoring of ancient, broken pottery with the use of gold, silver and other precious metals is indeed a work of silence and instauration of a new vision of a certain object. The raw philosophy behind of this way of restoring objects is to show and evidence that each object has an history on itself.

Metaphorically speaking and linking this practice with the way History is suppressed and rediscovered, the broken pottery, although broken, is way more valuable given the matter used as repair tools, and undoubtedly, it develops not only a new shape but a new value. ISIS contemplated and acted in many diverse ways to establish a new narrative: from making use of the alteration of History to the complete intentional vanishing of the past.

These historical silences are human created narratives that even if artificial, their long journey hand by hand with the Humankind footsteps have transformed the manner which the human eye sees them. Natural consequence of the passing of time, they are nevertheless a critical construction of the History and what shall be consider more important: silences are, as well, voices of what could have happened differently, in the case other voices would have not been suppressed.

¹ Trouillot, Michel-Rolph, 1995. Silencing the past. Boston, Mass.: Beacon Press. P. 151.

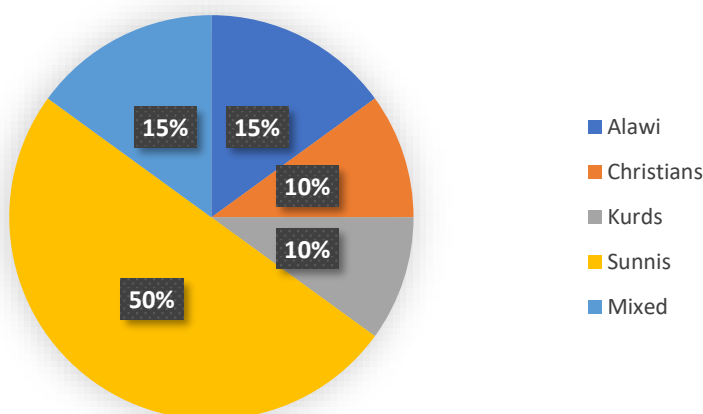
Syria up to the Civil War

Syria is one of the oldest civilisations in the world, with a rich artistic and cultural heritage and a complex and fascinating history. There are remains excavated on Syrian soil of a town from around 3000 BC, which is one of the oldest human settlements to be ever excavated. Its culture and strategic position made it important throughout History for different empires such as Egyptians, Sumerians, Assyrians, Greeks and Romans. Many other empires occupied and ruled Syria, and its importance was given as mentioned before, by its centrality in Eurasia, making it a strategic land for both war and commercial routes. Bathed by the Mediterranean Sea, and crossed by the Euphrates, Syria was a prosperous land. This explains also why some empires wanted to prevail in and occupy Syria. Its past is tumultuous, with different regimes taking over, and influencing it with their culture.

Even though the presence of many empires imposing its rule, Syria's ethnic composition has been majorly influenced by Arabia and Mesopotamia. This explains the Arab majority nowadays. Ethnically, they all descend from the same population. Within the linguistic difference we name the Kurds, Armenians and Turkmen and other minorities such as the Alawi.

Syria's past described, the focus will point at its most recent History and what led to the 2011 Civil War, which is still fought today. As mentioned before, Syria has always had different regions inhabited by tribes of different provenience. As in Iraq, for instance, the laic regime of Bath was followed and sustained by an Arab and Sunnis tribe, which was only the third tribe after Shiites and the Kurds. At the time, Ba'th movement had its roots within the Alawi's population, which descends from the Shiites, which represented only a small part of the population.

Fig 3. Syria's ethnic/religious pie chart. 2011.



Riots and protests started around the 15 March of 2011, following the events of the Arab Spring², demanding the end of the Assad regime. The protests, started in a city majorly populated by the Alawi's, Latakia. Russian forces, together with Iran and Hezbollah³, helped resisting the protests. Helping Assad from being "dethroned" thanks to other volunteers from the Shiites parties coming from Iraq and Afghanistan, the riots seemed contained.

At this point, after the first battles, radicalisation took place in the group of the rebels. The rebels were the ones who

² The Arab Spring (Arabic: الربيع العربي) was a series of anti-government protests, uprisings, and armed rebellions that spread across much of the Arab world in the early 2010s. It began in response to corruption and economic stagnation and was first started in Tunisia. – Wikipedia, 2022

³ Hezbollah (/ˌhezbəˈlɑː/; Arabic: حزب الله Ḥizbu 'llāh, lit. "Party of Allah" or "Party of God", also transliterated Hizbullah or Hizballah, among others) is a Lebanese Shia Islamist political party and militant group,[32][33] led by its Secretary-General Hassan Nasrallah since 1992. – Wikipedia 2022

started the riots, and which initially wanted to put an end to Assad and democracy, and now, after their initial defeat and a rise in radicalisation, intended to rule Syria following the Sharia⁴ law. The past five years; famine and a scarce agricultural production appeared due to a heavy drought.

In the past, from the first forms of civilisation, men and women have been protesting and incentivised to protest when the sources of food were low. Famine, sickness, and poverty led populations to riot against regimes in the past, and they do today too, even in democratic and industrialised countries. This drought brought a general discontent to the population of Syria. Some teenagers, under the influence of others, wrote some agitated sentences against the government to protest for the ill- management of the situation where Assad was blamed for. The teenagers were arrested and tortured, the news spread across the country, generating the first riots in Latakia in 2011. Hundreds of thousands gathered in the streets to ask “peacefully” Assad to resign from its position and reform the government and its constitution.

A few months later, around mid-2011, the Free Syrian Army (FSA) was born. Composed, still today, by rebels and ex-soldiers of the Assad regime. The fights and the protests reached the major cities of Damascus and Aleppo by the beginning of 2012. During the conflicts, the FSA grew in numbers, welcoming more volunteers from other countries which were members of the Jihad⁵. Supplies and reinforcements, both military and financial, came from Saudi Arabia and Qatar.

After a few months, with a respectable number of soldiers, Al-Nusra was created. Al-Nusra, as other militant factions, was created during the civil war, and it was affiliated to Al-Qaeda⁶. This faction did not last long, as they gathered forces together and decided later during the war to form a unified army of rebels “*The Army of Conquest*.” The attempt to put an end at the protests and war conducted by the Assad regime in 2012/3 had severe consequences for them and made the rebels even more eager to dethrone him.

Even if Syria was a member of the UN for many years, and aware of the implications and laws regarding CWC⁷, Assad decided to attack the rebels with chemical weapons ignoring completely the international

⁴ Sharia means “the correct path” in Arabic. In Islam, it refers to the divine counsel that Muslims follow to live moral lives and grow close to God. Sharia is derived from two main sources: the Quran, which is considered the direct word of God, and hadith—thousands of sayings and practices attributed to the Prophet Mohammed that collectively form the Sunna. – Cfr.org, Understanding Sharia, the intersection between Islam and the law

⁵ Jihadism is a neologism which is used in reference to "militant Islamic movements that are perceived as existentially threatening to the West" and "rooted in political Islam." Appearing earlier in the Pakistani and Indian media, Western journalists adopted the term in the aftermath of the September 11 attacks of 2001. Since then, it has been applied to various insurgent Islamic extremist, militant Islamist, and terrorist individuals and organizations whose ideologies are based on the Islamic notion of jihad. Jihad (/dʒɪˈhɑːd/; Arabic: جهاد, romanised: jihād [dʒiˈhɑːd]) is an Arabic word which literally means "striving" or "struggling", especially with a praiseworthy aim. In an Islamic context, it can refer to almost any effort to make personal and social life conform with God's guidance, such as struggle against one's evil inclinations, proselytizing, or efforts toward the moral betterment of the Muslim community (Ummah), though it is most frequently associated with war. In classical Islamic law (sharia), the term refers to armed struggle against unbelievers, while modernist Islamic scholars generally equate military jihad with defensive warfare – Wikipedia, 2022

⁶ is a multinational militant Sunni Islamic extremist network composed of Salafist jihadists. It was founded in 1988 by Osama bin Laden, Abdullah Azzam, and several other Arab volunteers during the Soviet–Afghan War. – Wikipedia, 2022

⁷ The Chemical Weapons Convention (CWC) is a multilateral treaty that bans chemical weapons and requires their destruction within a specified period of time. The treaty is of unlimited duration and is far more comprehensive than the 1925 Geneva Protocol, which outlaws the use but not the possession of chemical weapons. - Armscontrol.org

laws. The attack had tremendous effect on the city of Ghouta, where the use of Sarin gas killed more than one thousand and four hundred civilians.



Fig 4. A screenshot where the distinctive gas colour can be appreciated.

This created a more violent and ruthless conflict between Assad and the rebels, while worsening and generated a diplomatic one with western forces. The US, followed by the UK and France, threatened to intervene with force if the chemical attacks would not stop. The CWC, together with the UN security council with the collaboration of Russia as an Assad ally and the US, came to an agreement to only destroy and remove all the chemical weapons and storage facility which counted 1,308 metric tons of chemical agents, instead of intervening physically to stop Assad and discontinuing the use of chemical warfare weaponry.

ISIS Arrival in Syria

Around 2013, from Al-Nusra, more groups split and join ISIS. In June, ISIS started invading Syria, and by August 2014, after conquering Raqqa, they established their territory there proclaiming the Caliphate.

Many of its members were volunteers in the beginning. ISIS was fighting against everyone: the government, the rebels, Kurds, Alawis and everyone opposing them. A practice that still sustains nowadays. From September 2014, an international coalition formed by: USA, Jordan, Bahrain, Qatar, Saudi Arabia and UEC, started fighting and facing ISIS, especially in Iraq's reconquest of ISIS controlled cities and to sustain the Kurd population living in the northeast area of the country.

France and Russia helped one year later, followed by the UK few after them. The Syrian Air Force together with the Iraqi one started fighting ISIS from 2014. Airstrikes were used by each of the allied forces, and not just against ISIS. Russian forces especially focused on the Free Syrian Army, to assist and help Assad in retaking control over the country and win the war.

One of the most important outpost and area of interest was naturally Aleppo, which was freed from the rebels only in 2016. By September 2018, Assad's regime controlled 60% of the country's territory, backed from Russia and its allies; around 25% of the territory was controlled by Kurds, backed from the US.

Meanwhile, Turkey was sending against the Kurds the rebels which fled and joined their army at the beginning of the civil war. The battles were taking place close to the border between Syria and Turkey, around the northeast area. What was happening at the northwest border instead was a fight between Turkish forces and the FSA, trying their best protecting and defending their territory, even if heavily bombed by the Russians.

ISIS remained after few months only in-between the desertic area between Palmyra and Abu Kamal. The huge effort from the allied forces, especially the US special forces, helped in containing and

defeating ISIS throughout these years. However, as of today, 2022, they are still fighting them on Syrian soil.

During the Syrian Civil War, United Nations has sent various agents to control the Syrian crisis. Unfortunately, the conflict stills go on with no sight of an ending anytime soon. It is impossible to determine if others are going to be sent to substitute the current ones. During the war, the United Nations reported sixteen complaints for the use of chemical weapons. Only seven have been investigated and four have been confirmed, finding evidence of sarin gas on the relicts.

The report stated that storage rooms are under the control of both the regime and the FSA, making it hard to determine which of them have been using them, even if as mentioned before, Assad was declared guilty more than once. US Intelligence stated that the rebel forces have kept the chemical weapons safe without using them, though United Nations thinks that both parts are responsible even if the majority of the accusations are directed towards the regime.

All bombing and fighting between the different factions have reported severe consequences to the country's cultural heritage. ISIS, more than anyone else and intentionally, destroyed and damaged more than 290 sites.

Another aspect to consider is the ethnocide inflicted on the Alawi's group. One third of the 250.000 Alawi soldier have been killed. The human rights office of Syria reported that of the 94.000 men died under fire; 41.000 of them were Alawis. More than 400.000 Christians in Syria fled after being chased, persecuted and executed by rebels and ISIS. The FSA is held accountable of torture and ethnic cleansing against the Druze ethnoreligious group. All this without taking in account all the refugees fleeing in masse to Europe and other countries in North Africa and the Middle East. To the present day, there are at least 13.5 million Syrian refugees (more than half of the country's population) living outside their homeland.

This war, which seems to be far from over; brought destruction, suffering and cultural loss to all sides.

It was needed to have an introductive chapter with historical facts, so the reader could be aware of Syria's recent History to have a better understanding of the situation. In the following chapter, both ISIS and its History will be exposed. With the aim of explaining and attempting not only to understand the origin of the group, but also to explain its practises, ideology, and approach to religion.

The Roots of the Islamic State

ISIS (Islamic State of Iraq and Syria) was founded by the Jordanian Abu Musad al-Zarqawi in 1999. Rooted in Al-Qaeda's principles based on the Sunni branch of Islam; they distinguished themselves during the Iraqi insurgency following 2003 US invasion of said country.

The Islamic State (known as ISIL or Daesh) began operating in the territories of the Iraqi Republic in 2011. US invasion and later occupation created a unified sense of self-defence against a common foreigner enemy. This, among other circumstances, set a stable ground for ISIS to grow as an entity that could detach itself from Al-Qaeda.

This was possible thanks to certain differences between Al-Qaeda's most prominent Iraqis figures and Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, first leader of ISIS, who in 2013, cut ties with the Afghan organisation to gain sovereignty over multiple cells in Iraq and Syria. This was how modern ISIS was born.

Religion and Ideology

This paragraph including religion and ideology, is an analysis and theory I wrote based on the two books I have read⁸ including further research from various websites as you can see from the different sources cited in it.

One of the main differences between “Middle-Eastern” and “Western” people is their faith.

Religion, even if in western societies played publicly a bigger role in the past compared to today, is one of the key elements that shapes Arabs and people's identity, something that groups like ISIS use for their own purposes. To clarify this concept: ISIS's ideology follows a religious theory, ergo, it takes inspiration from it and applies it through religious rules and sacred words present in the interpretations from different scholars of Islam. This is what they say and promote in their propaganda magazine “Dabiq”, where together with their reports they include Islamic teachings from the branch of Islam they follow.

In order to understand precisely what their belief is built upon, it is important to underline that not every Muslim believes in what they do, only a minority does. Medias, newspapers, social medias, and people in Western societies have depicted the image of the “average Muslim” built on the acts and distorted belief of some terrorists, inciting hatred against them and indirectly putting Christianity against Islam. This enforced an already strong division between the mixed communities of Western countries, where people have been segregated and discriminated based on their religious beliefs. What is most surprising is that it seems as if we were describing one of the many periods in History of religious persecutions and holy wars. History repeats itself, and religion today still plays a significant role as a key of identity and cultural background.

After this brief introduction, some questions appear, questions such as: what does ISIS believe in? How does it differentiate from other branches and school of thought of Islam?

ISIS follows different school of thoughts of Islam which come from the Sunni branch⁹.

Sunnis represent the majority in Muslim's religion, reaching ca. 90% of the entire Islamic community. The school of thought followed by ISIS is a mix of Salafi and Wahhabi, which take their names from al-Salaf al-ṣāliḥ (translated to “*the pious predecessors*”) and Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahhab (a Saudi scholar and activist). These two schools of thought, differ in theory and in practice, even if they are often described as one. They are both puritanical and intend to bring back a “pure Islam”, by going back to practices and words from the prophet's teachings and traditions (*hadith*) in their own interpretation.

ISIS in this case, took most of their theories to integrate them in their own vision of Islam, identifying sometimes more with one and another depending on the situation. Contradictions can be found in some of the distinctive points between the two; i.e., Wahhabism does not promote the establishment of a new or global caliphate, it is historically against it.¹⁰ ISIS instead, promoted the idea of a global caliphate, which is the goal of Salafi's view on religion.

⁸ Cultural destruction by ISIS, Bridey Heing – 2017; The apocalypse and the end of history, Suzanne Schneider - 2021

⁹ Sunni, Arabic Sunnī, member of one of the two major branches of Islam, the branch that consists of the majority of that religion's adherents. Sunni Muslims regards their denomination as the mainstream and traditionalist branch of Islam—as distinguished from the minority denomination, the Shi'ah. – Britannica encyclopaedia, 2022

¹⁰ Kirkpatrick, David D. (24 September 2014). "ISIS' Harsh Brand of Islam Is Rooted in Austere Saudi Creed". The New York Times. New York City. Archived from the original on 6 October 2014.

Their ideology matches with the Wahhabi's theory in their extremism and intolerance towards fellow and non-Muslims. Wahhabis are known for their radicalism to convert or erase anyone who does not believe in their vision of Islam, defining every other a Kafir (*non-believer*) or a Takfir (*excommunicated, accused apostate of Islam*). By applying Sharia law¹¹, they execute everyone who does not follow their views on Islam, stating that only they are true believers of the Prophet's words. This extremism has been critiqued by Salafis often, which were contrary to the use of violence against fellow Muslims.

Another aspect of ISIS ideology is the approach of Wahhabism towards culture and people. To them (Muslims included) everyone has gone back to the pre-ignorance before Muhammad and have lost their path by praying and finding Allah in the wrong things. By following this creed, they should get rid of all of them which will not convert immediately. Salafis are instead more interested in following the old traditions of the predecessors without the use of violence, but instead following strictly and purely their teachings only.

There is no easy way to describe and concretise ISIS's "religion". They side themselves with the Sunni, the Salafis, and Wahhabi communities even when not precisely following their theories. They consider themselves Sunnis, or what Sunnis should be.

In their propagandistic approach to fellow Muslims, they seem not to theologise about certain theories of Islam but instead, talking exclusively about Sharia law and Jihad, their only interest seems to be address power and dominance, justifying it behind God's will, and as we will read later in the text, we can find similarities within the Wahhabi's movement.

Salafism as mentioned before is not about radicalisation and violence, they care only about religion and do not want to be involved in politics¹². There is a difference in wanting to follow God's word by precisely following the Qur'an and instead considering every innovation (*bid'ah*) and tradition within the Islam community post Salaf (predecessors) a heresy to be eliminated.

The two sects, out of seventy-three, have a lot in common even if they differ in some others, one of them in which they are similar is for example the concept behind God's uniqueness and the following of Salafis. Wahhabism comes from Salafism, Al-Wahhab, considered himself and his followers Salafis before his ideology and action became a sect of its own.

This comparison and association between the two sects today is something that puritans of Islam do not approve, wanting to take distance from their actions in the name of God. By analysing the various sources, both from the web and from academical texts, we can find one of the possible determinant factors behind the schism of the two sects:

Salafism and Salaf existed before al-Wahhab was born, the ideology of following a puritan and literal approach to religion has always existed in every religion, Christianity has its own.

What al-Wahhab did differently, and made his ideology an Islamic phenomenon, has been his political and martial approach to Salafism. Wahhab, in Saudi Arabia has been previously expelled from his hometown for blasphemy when attacking tombs of early Muslims considered "fakir" before rising to power. When he moved and seek asylum in another town near Riyadh (Wahhabism hometown today), he managed to make a pact with the king Muhammad ibn Saud. Wahhab himself promised to support and provide him with military aid from him and his followers in exchange for his vision of Islam to be the only to be followed.

¹¹ Shari'ah, also spelled Sharia, the fundamental religious concept of Islam—namely, its law. The religious law of Islam is seen as the expression of God's command for Muslims and, in application, constitutes a system of duties that are incumbent upon all Muslims by virtue of their religious belief. – Britannica encyclopaedia, 2022

¹² Contextualising Salafism and Salafi Jihadism – VA, edited by Magnus Ranstrorp - 2020

After Saudi Arabia's conversion, other "missionaries" were sent to neighbour countries to convert them too. The Jihad was driven against Muslims that were not willing to adopt this new Salafi approach to Islam. Wahhab mentioned that King Saud, the main supporter, was the chosen monarch from Allah himself to rule and bring back this pure Islam. We can see how ISIS, are nothing but an imitation of this religious-political movement, by self-declaring their superiority towards others and proclaiming their sovereignty. It is a product, like others, of Wahhabism.

What Wahhabism has evolved into through the decades, is the Arab version of Nationalism, to be more precise: Islamic Nationalism.

This was fundamental for the Saudis to take back their power after the Ottomans conquered their land and unify Saudis and "true Muslims" tired of being ruled by others (it is not a coincidence that before the war, Wahhab described them as the anti-muslim per antonomasia). This movement also helped the "Muslim brotherhood" develop in Egypt when Muslims were turning to the Soviet sphere in the 60's.

When the Soviets took power of countries such as Afghanistan, Jihad and Wahhabism were used to coalesce and gather every fellow believer to riot and take power over foreigners and fight together as brothers in the name of God, and re-establish Islam in every Arab country firstly, and then globally.

Well known is that US has been funding the Saudis and the other fighters which freed Afghanistan from the soviets, because of their conflict against the USSR. What they did not know, is how this support could turn into in the years after and how it helped developing movements like Al-Qaeda. These ideas which were firstly used locally in Arab countries to become united, with a purpose, became later a problem they found in their own country. Totalitarianism and nationalism are destructive, Wahhabism and the terrorist groups that followed this movement are the clear example.

The final questions now are purely philosophical: Who is to blame for it? Is it something that would have happened eventually? Have we influenced them with our past in Nationalist movements to become like us? If the US had not aided them with military supplies and incited war, would Wahhabism have stayed forgotten? Much would be needed to answer those questions, though we can now try to understand better what ISIS Ideology is.

In this final paragraph we are going to give a description of ISIS modus operandi.

Ideology

Describing these branches of Islam was fundamental before reporting what their ideology is. This is because even if, as we will notice in the analysis I am about to give, their acts might seem pure evil and irrational, they are instead justified by their religious belief and always proclaimed in the name of Allah and their personal Jihad. What seems to be interesting is that these misinterpretations of the Qur'an are merely excuses behind a thirst for power and control over what they call *Takfir* and are not to be considered *pure Muslims*. The Sunni community itself wants to differ from them by saying that they are nothing like them and they are wrong in what they do.

Their ideology is shown and put into practice under the following concepts: Destruction, Religious radicalism, propaganda, cultural cleansing.

If we were to only read the last sentence, we could assume we were about to talk about any other extremist or totalitarian regimes of the past. What seems to be a unique way of operating is instead something we have already experienced and probably forgotten. Practices used and propagandistic methods as the ones applied by them are core to previous extremist regimes. The "middle class" has a purpose, is incited through propaganda and speeches to gather and turn around the current government as it happened in the past. This constant distinction between "pure Islam" and Muslims, reminds me of the racism present in totalitarian regimes. Even the first leader of what was called al-Qaeda, Al-Zarqawi, started labelling everyone different from their ideology and religious creed as apostate or *takfir*. To be

precise, ISIS, ISIL, Al-Qaeda etc. are all part of *Daesh*, which is in fact the Islamic state. He was the founder and the martyr, the ignition that started what we call today: ISIS.

The strategy is understandable, as putting Muslims against each other seems a *Divide et impera* of the theological kind. Divide the population to conquer your common enemy. Find a minority that threatens your population as the scapegoat of the problems and erase it from the face of the planet. What has started initially as a foreign enemy such as occupying forces as it happened in other cases, became later everyone except them, the only to have the right to rule and to live on the sacred land ruled by Muhammad, as they were the only ones living by the rules given by the prophet, excluding fellow Muslims which disagreed with them in belief and lived harmoniously with others before then.

One of the strategies seen in the past to establish power and control over a land or a population has been the one of violent force. Fear, hatred are the cogs that make the engine run and to get the population to do what you want. Violent force is not in this case only used on people, but on monuments, artifacts, history of this population they want to take control of. Their strategy to achieve control over them is to destroy what is different from them and considered a heresy. Destroying the culture, past of a population is needed when the new regime wants to erase history and re-write its own. We have seen how they impaled people in Raqqa to make a statement, by showing the others what would have happened if they did not follow them. We have seen how they executed archaeological experts and destroyed the monuments they considered blasphemy to show the world that their school of thought is the only one to follow. People have been beheaded in front of everyone as a clear statement of what was to follow in, they did not fall into line.

Their radical Islamification in their caliphate made everyone understand that there was no option but to convert, otherwise you would die. Women were enslaved, non-Sunni and later non-Wahhabis or other religions were rejected and forced to convert immediately. They did not want to convert forcibly only the minds and souls of the population, that is why monuments and culture have been included. When you erase the options and their *blasphemy* and you leave them with only one option, then it is easier to manage them and this form of binary thinking and put it into practice.

What shocked the western countries has not been only the use of these medieval techniques, but also how they used them in their propaganda to gather more followers and militant to join their Jihad. Sometimes, the cinematic, quality of the videos and picture they use to promote their self-established caliphate and ideology looks as if they came out from a Hollywood production. Sometimes they have been so well made that people were confused about the truthfulness of the content. Unfortunately, sources have confirmed that every single shot and take are real and not part of a videogame or tv-series. Walter Benjamin said in 1936: "...Fascism sees its salvation in giving these masses not their right, but instead a chance to express themselves..." this can be interpreted by saying that this spectacle is needed to boost their morale, showing the ones who join what they can do, meanwhile showing what they can do to others and forgetting about the regime they are under.

Like any totalitarian regime, punishments and impositions are used to keep control over the population and the society. Sharia law is the legal interpretation of Islam, this means that any impure acts or crimes committed, must be punished by the council, *fatwa*. There are many ways of applying the sharia law into a country's legal system. The one usually used in Islamic countries, or with most of the population being Muslim, is to use for everyone pertaining to the Muslim community for personal matters or crimes, or acts that go against the rules of Islam in life and related to society. For all the other crimes committed that do not have a rule or an explanation in the Qur'an, the civil war is applied. The civil law must be applied also to people of other beliefs. In countries ruled by an Islamic regime, like Iran or today's Afghanistan or Syria when ISIS was in power of a certain part of the country, no other legal system than sharia was present.

In the case of ISIS, they presented a document which can be understood as a constitution made of articles and laws to follow for everyone under the “borders” of the Islamic State. This is a fascinating yet complex concept, as they do when justifying their acts for destroying monuments via their interpretation of the Qur’an, they state that this violence is only legitimated when justified by law. In this case the state does not have only methods based on what is written in the holy book and reflects their belief. In this case, policies and politics are involved in the Islamic law as in any other state. When there are laws there is a state, this is what is necessary for them to be credible. The source of inspiration for this constitution is still the Qur’an, but in this case other rules are applied based on the interpretation they have about it that fuels their ideology. There is one confusing message within their publications, where they advised in one of the editions of *Dabiq* to:

*” Beware of shedding blood unjustly, unlawful bloodshed would be a short-term gain whose long-term consequences are weakness and helplessness, and by Allah, no case is reported to us involving the bloodshed of an innocent person from Ahlus-Sunnah that isn’t backed up by clear evidence of what he did to deserve his blood being shed.”*¹³

This idea of fairness is often debated by other Muslims, which find their punishments too harsh and unfair, for example the death by fire imposed on a pilot from Yemen which tried to bomb their area. The idea to set him on fire until death was to equalize the same harm he generated with his bombs. Al-Qaeda itself, a well-known group of jihadists, disagrees with them here too, finding their way of punishment deviant. One thing they agree on is the use of positive law, as for both the modern legislation is too pluralistic, and it deviates from the word and commandments told by God. They also mentioned that multiple laws and article present in a single law are analogous to polytheism, ergo blasphemy in their eyes. Everything should be binary, as is the word of Allah.

What ISIS did to have additional laws and duties for its citizen than the ones present in Quran, has been the “*Document of the city*”, a document with 13 articles, to be followed as commandments which mixed with the religious ones. Only 13 in total so not to be like those books of *positive law* with extended and unnecessary words. The article that proves the hatred towards *positive law* is the 12th one: “[God commands that we] establish Islamic governance and release the people from the shackles of rotten positive laws”.¹⁴

Under their regime, many of these punishments have been officially registered and have been used as proof to justify their evil acts.

Their will of cultural cleansing can be found also within their law book, religious belief and ideology. When something was declared blasphemy or parts of an apostate belief, it had to be destroyed, burnt, demolished or changed. We are not only talking about monuments and objects, but people also as we mentioned before where part of this cultural cleansing such as the *Yazidis* for instance. In this case, those people were not cited in any version of the Quran, under no interpretation was stated that they were apostate but the Islamic State itself declared them as such and they said after executing them: “there was no room for jizyah payment...and the Yazidis can only be given an ultimatum to repent or face the sword”.¹⁵

This is nothing new, Saudi Arabia in the past did the same with a cemetery which was built under the Ottoman empire.¹⁶ It makes sense to think that in Saudi Arabia, where we cited that the prevalent school of thought has been Wahhabism and where this Islamic ideology started, we would find some similar

¹³ Islamic State, “From Hypocrisy to Apostasy: The Extinction of the Grayzone,” *Dabiq*, vol. 7, cited in “The legal foundations of the Islamic State – Brookings EDU, Mara Revkin, 2016.

¹⁴ The legal foundations of the Islamic State – Brookings EDU, Mara Revkin, 2016.

¹⁵ Islamic State, “The Failed Crusade,” *Dabiq*, vol. 4, October 2014,

¹⁶ Cultural destruction by ISIS -

behaviours. Even if applied in a less aggressive way, it does not surprise us to see the same approach to culture as well as for the Islamic state.

In conclusion, after analysing and reporting ISIS's ideology and religious beliefs, we can have a better understanding at their motivations, and we were able to find some structure in their regime like in any other state. What seemed to be a medieval or barbaric group led by anarchy and violence, instead is a "well-organized" state, with its borders declared, book of law, religion, army, funds, propaganda, scholars and scientists, engineers. Regardless of the outcome, this IS had a different impact on society than Al-Qaeda, or others before him. They have not been hiding in caves, dressed in tunics and giving a message occasionally. They have been recruiting, torturing, invading, promoting online and on the streets and reported each of their "success" daily to impress and shock the masses. This method as I mentioned at the beginning of this paragraph is doing nothing but reminding me of fascist or dictatorial movements in their way of oppressing the masses and expose their success, imposing their belief and political agenda on the population and punishing who tries to revolt.

In the final part of the paragraph, I mentioned the term "cultural cleansing", we will now describe in detail what type of cultural cleansing we are talking about and especially which monuments we have decided to report in this project and to take in our case.

Monuments used as a weaponry (an extract)

Using monuments as weapons has a long tradition and goes back as far as 3000 years. Violence against buildings, pictures, artworks, statues and monuments already existed in ancient Egypt and extends beyond the Middle Ages, colonialism, the French and Russian revolutions, the Second World War to the present. In military conflicts, today's World Heritage sites are repeatedly targets of destruction, as this not only destroys the enemy, but also erases it from the face of the earth. Cultural destruction is effectively used as a measure that despises humanity and culture.

Cultural goods are repeatedly targeted because they have always been a great force for human identity. Whoever condemns and destroys the cultural assets of the enemy hits him in the marrow, because important reference points of his identity are thus lost.

In the case of cultural destruction, however, monetary interests are always involved. It is a sophisticated and very well-functioning network of perfectly organized, mafia-like structures. Starting with the farmers who loot locally, through small stealers who buy up the items to smugglers who take them to Lebanon or Turkey. After all, the objects end up with distinguished representatives and auction houses in the Western world. The fact that terrorists can finance themselves with archaeological finds works so well because these structures already exist.¹⁷

The places mentioned below are an excerpt brought about by the wave of destruction in Syria by supporters of ISIS as well as rebels and the Syrian Freedom Army. Some of them are also part of the UNESCO World Heritage Site, which has six historical sites on its list in Syria.

RAQQA (museum)

Between 2014 and 2017, the city, often referred to as the most beautiful city in the Middle East, was the capital of the jihadist organization *Daesh* before it was liberated by the Syrian army and the help of international alliances. Two-thirds of the city was destroyed by bombs and the Museum of Archaeology, symbol of often the population's cultural diversity, almost disappeared. It was home to artifacts and excavations in and around Raqqa. Between the end of 2012 and the beginning of 2013, many of the 6000 articles were looted by sabotage and destruction and only 1300 remained, some of which were in a very bad condition.

Various groups in control of the city engaged in the looting and sale of the artifacts across the Syrian border. The museum itself was misused by using it as a butcher's shop and renting out washing machines and refrigerators in the backyard. A group of young residents of the city founded an NGO which, along with two others, has helped restore the cultural heritage and ensure that the museum has become identical to the original one. The organization is not only concerned with preserving memories and thoughts, but also with showing this heritage.¹⁸

ALEPPO (The Great Mosque and bazaar)

In the first 13 months of the Syrian conflict, the city was spared destruction by IS and rebellious combat troops. After that, the centre of the medieval city was razed to the ground. The area of the old town with an extraordinary number of souks and khans around the great mosque got directly between the front lines. Massive damage took place in the heart of the old town. In October 2012, the Islamist group *Jabhat al-Nusra* captured the grand mosque and intense firefights developed in the surrounding souks. During one of these battles, a substation caught fire and exploded, causing the mosque's important library in the northeaster courtyard to catch fire. Only half a year later, the large minaret, also known as the Guardian of the City, collapsed and it is not clear whether the collapse of the 45-meter-high tower

¹⁷ Parzinger, Hermann. *Verdammt und vernichtet: Kulturzerstörungen vom Alten Orient bis zur Gegenwart*. C.H. Beck, 2021.

¹⁸ Aliph Foundation. Accessed May 28, 2022. <https://www.aliph-foundation.org/>.

was the result of explosions inside the building or by artillery shelling. The 12th century building was carefully restored in the last century and its loss is an immense blow to the city. Fortunately, many stone blocks have been preserved and a reconstruction is already in full swing.¹⁹

Even before the destruction of the mosque, a UNESCO World Heritage Site was massively destroyed in the ancient city. A firestorm raged in September 2012 through the bazaar of Aleppo, the largest and by many also called the most beautiful in the Islamic world. Since its construction in the 16th century, the *souk* has hardly changed, which is why it has also been called a place of 1000 and one night. Of the more than 1000 shops and market stalls in the 40 courtyards, more than 700 have been burned out.²⁰ For many people, it is a great loss and a tragedy. However, since the vaults of the bazaar consist mainly of stone and masonry, the bazaar may one day be able to return to its original splendour through restoration.

MAR ELIAN (monastery)

The small settlement is found in the triangle of Damascus, Homs and Palmyra. In the 4th century, a stone church dedicated to the holy martyr *Eliau of Emesa* was built. A century later, an Orthodox monastery was built, which was closed 300 years ago. In 2007, the monastery was founded and was to be a meeting place for Christians and Muslims.

Father Jack Murad is a Syrian priest who was held by Islamic State militants for nearly three months and threatened with execution. He was abducted from the central Syrian town of al-Qaryatayn along with a volunteer at the ancient Mar Elian Monastery. Both were blindfolded and had their hands tied and kept as prisoners for 84 days. The militants he met would scare prisoners, telling them they would be killed if they refused to convert. The priest said the experience only strengthened his faith, although at the time he expected to be beheaded. About his kidnappers he says *"They know everything, every detail. We tend to think of them as uncultured Bedouins. The opposite is true. They're clever, educated, with university degrees, and meticulous in their planning"*.²¹ 5

During his captivity, the monastery had been confiscated by IS as a spoil of war during the battle for al-Qaryatayn and was destroyed by bulldozer. There are plans to rebuild the monastery.

PALMYRA

The Islamic State, which conquered Syria from Iraq in 2014, captured the 2,000-year-old city in the heart of the Syrian desert a year later. For months, the self-proclaimed warriors have raged in a senseless act of destruction in this unique site. Especially for their staging of fear and terror, the supporters of the IS have abused the backdrop of the desert city. In addition to the spectacular demolition of the Bel Temple and its central shrines, jewels of Roman architecture from the second century AD, and the temple of the Phoenician god Baalshamin, 12 very well-preserved tombs were also destroyed, representing an extraordinary collection of unique Roman tombs. The triumphal arch, which had neither animal nor human figures as decoration, also fell victim to the demolition.²²

¹⁹ Anas AL KHABOUR. "RAQQA: A HISTORY OF THE DESTRUCTION OF CULTURAL HERITAGE." In *Heritage in Conflict*, 57:183–. Peeters Publishers, 2021. P. 116.

²⁰ Chimelli, Rudolph. "Letzter Fundort Für Bilder Aus 1001 Nacht." *Süddeutsche.de*. Last modified September 30, 2012. <https://www.sueddeutsche.de/kultur/basar-von-aleppo-bilder-aus-1001-nacht-1.1483012>.

²¹ "The Syrian Catholic Priest Who Escaped IS Captivity." BBC News. Last modified October 28, 2015. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-34639058>.

²² Anas AL KHABOUR. "RAQQA: A HISTORY OF THE DESTRUCTION OF CULTURAL HERITAGE." In *Heritage in Conflict*, 57:183–. Peeters Publishers, 2021. P. 119.

Palmyra, which is located on a formerly important caravan route and described by UNESCO as a "heritage with outstanding universal value", people from different countries with different religions once met. The coexistence between Christians and Muslims, who formed a community, was peaceful. All the more frightening is the fact that the fighters of ISIS did there during their reign of terror.

Sad highlights of the terror in Palmyra were the executions that ISIS conducted in the ancient sites. The large Amphitheatre, which was still very well preserved, served as a theatrical backdrop for mass executions. A shock wave struck the Western world when ISIS released a video showing the execution of 25 Syrian soldiers by child soldiers. On the stage of the Amphitheatre, the flag of the IS flew as a stage set, while the captured soldiers knelt on the floor with their hands tied behind their backs and child soldiers stood behind them, ready to kill the prisoners with a shot in the neck. The spectacle was crowned by the presence of spectators. In the stands sat men and boys who witnessed the cruel spectacle.²³ It was macabrely reminiscent of the bloody "bread-and-games" performances in the Colosseum of Rome.

Of the hundreds of destroyed sites and artifacts, none has touched humanity as much as the destruction of Palmyra. For people who are rooted in this place, it is a great emotional wound. Zenobia, daughter of the archaeologist Khaled al-Asaad, who was head of antiquities at Palmyra for 40 years, was named after the Palmyrene queen. *"When I was a little girl, I remember sitting in the car with him, driving from our home in the modern part of Palmyra over to the ancient sites. We would walk around together, checking on things, laughing, talking, and the way he talked about Palmyra made me love the city even more, because I know he loved it. He would explain what some of these things once were - this was a temple, this was a tomb, this city was the place where Zenobia was from, who I'm named after"*, she memorizes proudly.²⁴

Khaled al-Asaad was the chief archaeologist in Palmyra for over 50 years. When ISIS captured the city, he was captured and tortured to tell the holy warriors where to find more buried treasures to sell on the black market to finance their war. He, however, was apparently willing to die defending these artifacts from abuse. Since Khaled refused to tell his torturers what they wanted to hear, he was publicly executed. Purportedly, his body was hung from a lamp post with his severed head placed beneath the dangling feet of his corpse. His glasses were still on his face. Over his chest was hung a sign recording all his alleged crimes. *"I was born here; I will die here"* Khaled once said. His prophecy has been fulfilled.²⁵

Cultural vandalism or the killing of a culture

The intense and excessive attacks on cultural goods influence the collective identity of people, religions or nations that should not be underestimated. Especially regarding identity, they form a social unit and its personality.

Symbols can play a vital role in the process of a society's reaffirmation of its identity from generation to generation. Symbols also represent belonging to a group and can trigger strong feelings. Through this, a group can narrate its story and its importance. In general, storytelling through symbols, historical

²³ "IS Video Appears to Show Mass Execution in Ancient Palmyra Theatre." ABC (Australian Broadcasting Corporation). Last modified July 5, 2015. <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2015-07-05/is-video-shows-mass-execution-in-syrian-city-of-palmyra/6595644>.

²⁴ "Khaled Al-Asaad: Hero of Palmyra Slaughtered for Protecting the Ancient Treasures of Syria." Ancient Origins | Reconstructing the Story of Humanity's Past. Last modified August 19, 2018. <https://www.ancient-origins.net/history-famous-people/khaled-al-asaad-0010571>.

²⁵ Tharoor, Kanishk, and Maryam Maruf. "Museum of Lost Objects: The Temple of Bel." BBC News. Last modified March 1, 2016. <https://www.bbc.com/news/magazine-35688943>.

sites, monuments, works of art, paintings or buildings can give a group the opportunity to share information about their shared norms, a common suffering, old glory, or other experiences with others. Shared memories are fundamental to the collective cultural identities' continued existence.²⁶

The wanton destruction of cultural property can be divided into several areas:

Religious: the prohibition of pictorial representations of God and image worship

Political: the destruction of cultural assets as a means of war to weaken the morale of the opponent and deprive him of his cultural possessions or to humiliate the defeated enemy

Ideological: the destruction of monuments, churches and monasteries or the destruction of written testimonies and the deliberate and targeted destruction for ideological reasons for propaganda purposes

Economic: in the form of large-scale state robbery (looted art) or individual petty vandalism

However, the targeted destruction of cultural property is by no means a barbaric act that is completely alien to Europe or America but is familiar as a war strategy and weapon of war. The Prussian military handbook "*Kriegsbrauch im Landkriege*" (War Customs in Land Wars), published in 1902, reports that in a modern war the destruction of cultural property is also part of the struggle: "*A war waged with energy can not only be directed against combatants of the enemy state and its fortifications, but it must seek in the same way to destroy the entire intellectual and material resources of the same*".²⁷

For ISIS, these are places from the time of unbelief. But against all reason, destruction sometimes even has something good about it. By blowing up the mosque of Mosul, rare archaeological treasures were discovered in tunnels below the mosque. The remains of a millennia-old palace over which the mosque was built, with the largest throne room of the Assyrian Empire and other numerous historical treasures. Without the demolitions by ISIS, the researchers would never have been able to reach the archaeological remains, because excavations under a mosque on the built-up hill would have been impossible.²⁸

ISIS uses the destruction of cultural heritage as a kind of "*cultural cleansing*". Especially in the culture of Iraq and Syria, as all religious shrines and archaeological sites are considered idolatrous. To legitimize their proclaimed caliphate, they destroy idols, as the Prophet Muhammad did. In Iraq and Syria, several important sites have been destroyed. Each of these sites has incredible cultural-historical relevance and their destruction represents a great loss for humanity and can be considered a "*war crime*".²⁹ For this reason, the crime of "*cultural cleansing*" resulting from the destruction of cultural heritage should be regarded as a human crime, for cultural heritage in its many forms is wilfully eradicated by militant groups.

One can certainly use the term "*culturicide*"³⁰, since ISIS not only destroys art and cultural sites, but also tries to destroy the common culture of the Middle East. Anything that is different and beyond their control is seen as hostile and must therefore be fought. It does not matter whether it is culture, faith, view of life or race. The "*other*" is a condition that must be combated. The self-proclaimed holy warriors want to rewrite world history in a way that legitimizes their rule. All means are right for them and

²⁶ Turku, H. (2017). The destruction of cultural property as a weapon of war: ISIS in Syria and Iraq. P. 77.

²⁷ Generalstab, Germany. H. The German War Book, Being "The Usages of War on Land" *Kriegsbrauch Im Landkriege*. 1902.

²⁸ "IS-Zerstörungen Machen Größten Thronsaal Des Assyrischen Reiches Zugänglich." DER STANDARD. Accessed May 26, 2022. <https://www.derstandard.at/story/2000116842251/is-zerstoeungen-machen-groessten-thronsaal-des-assyrischen-reiches-zugaenglich>.

²⁹ Caitlin V. Hill, Killing a Culture: The Intentional Destruction of Cultural Heritage in Iraq and Syria under International Law, 45 Ga. J. Int'l & Comp. L. 191 (2016). P195-196, 198

³⁰ Armendariz, Kaitlyn K. *Culturalcide: The Systematic Destruction and Rewriting of World History at the Hands of ISIS*. 2017. P. 27.

everything that stands in the way of their long-term goals is mercilessly destroyed. The long-term effect of the destruction has an impact on history, art history and future art, and this attack is a powerful tool in attacking a community. In addition to art, it is also about economic interests, as tourism plays a significant role in these regions. Cultural heritage is inextricably linked to people and is important for tourism. Each of these destroyed sites had a unique role in the common history of the Middle East and was significant to the numerous ethnic and religious groups as it brought together people from different strata who have a communal bond.³¹ Since these ancient cities and sites, with their rich art, architecture and glorious past, still exude national pride and are thus symbols of the achievements of earlier cultures, they stand in contrast to ISIS's long-term goals and must therefore disappear from the map of history.

ISIS is radical in the fight against "*Takfir*" and everything that they believe is not Islamic. UNESCO also speaks of the fact that with this strategy, IS denies the existence of other cultures and thus erases the cultural memory of humanity. It is also commonly referred to as "*cultural cleansing*". It is a unique trail of devastation. Since the history in former Mesopotamia is over 10,000 years old, this region of the world is also called the cradle of civilization and has great significance for the international community. These sites are unique and with their destruction they are inevitably lost and thus a piece of human history. The unprecedented disrespect for everything else and the basis of the civilizational development of humanity is often difficult to cope with.³²

The terrorist militia systematically destroys and plunders these culturally rich sites of antiquity. It is not just about religion, but primarily about power and money. After ISIS's sources of revenue from oil fields dry up because of their bombardment by Allied forces, the organization must use another way of raising money. The systematic rummaging through known and unknown archaeological sites in search of valuable antiquities: statues, jewellery made of gold and silver, roll seals or cuneiform tablets. There are aerial photographs of huge sites that consist only of craters, one next to the other. And anyone who ploughs through layers of finds in the Orient with bulldozers and other heavy equipment irretrievably destroys the historical context.

According to Arthur Tompkins "*A long and increasing list of archaeological sites, museums, mosques, churches, monasteries, libraries, artefacts, and objects have been destroyed, stolen, displaced, or lost [...] Savage attacks on, and sometimes brutal public assassinations of, the guardians of the memories and remnants of the ancient Fertile Crescent cultures have triggered outrage and anger*".³³

The destruction of cultural heritage is more than material damage – it is the destruction of humanity's cultural achievements. These losses are particularly large if they could not previously be scientifically recorded. Their secrets are thus lost forever. This loss cannot be made up for with anything.

What is cultural memory and heritage and how can it be protected and preserved?

"...any damage to cultural property, irrespective of the people it belongs to, is a damage to the cultural heritage of all humanity, because every people contribute to the world's culture..."

– Preamble of the 1954 Hague Convention

In recent decades (also due to the media), a greater awareness of cultural heritage has become entrenched in people's minds.

³¹ Ibidem p. 30.

³² Tagesschau.de. "IS in Syrien Und Im Irak: So Gefährdet Ist Das Weltkulturerbe." Tagesschau.de. Last modified June 7, 2021. <https://www.tagesschau.de/ausland/faq-zerstoerte-kulturgueter-101.html>.

³³ Tompkins, Arthur. *Plundering Beauty: A History of Art Crime During War*. 2018. P. 168.

The numerous studies on this topic show how important memory and cultural heritage are for communities and everyone to form a collective identity.³⁴ The importance of cultural property for the stability of societies should not be underestimated since it is the identity and memory of a people or community.

In the course of history, there has been repeated destruction due to conflicts of an ethnic and religious nature. In genocides and during wars, the destruction of cultural property has always been an excellent weapon. This instrument of warfare is very suitable for frightening people terribly, financing criminal activities and stirring up hatred.

The basis of international law for the protection of cultural property in the event of armed conflict is the Hague Convention of 1954, supplemented by a Second Protocol in 1999. This international treaty, which currently binds 132 states, regulates the definition and labelling of cultural property, the protection of cultural property through measures of protection in peacetime and respect in war, the implementation of standards in national armed forces, evacuation of endangered cultural property, repatriation of looted cultural property, punishment of violations of norms or questions of jurisdiction, Prosecution and extradition.³⁵ In addition to the Hague Convention, there are other bases for the protection of cultural property:

- **Doha-Statement and Proceedings of the Conference of ‘Ulamâ on Islam and Cultural Heritage**
- **UNESCO Conventions on the Prohibition and Prevention of the Illegal Import, Export and Transfer of Ownership of Cultural Property**

The Doha Statement emphasizes that *"the tolerant nature of Islam demands respect for cultural heritage in general from every Muslim, regardless of the sources, forms and manifestations"* of cultural heritage, and refers in this regard to the long history of Islam, in which Muslims have always preserved cultural heritage in all its diversity, and especially pre-Islamic cultural heritage, and only then a large part of the pre-Islamic cultural heritage of the world to this day has been preserved. The preservation of cultural heritage in all its diversity is defined as a genuine Islamic value and as a fundamental Islamic position that results directly *"from respect for immanent human values and respect for the faith of others"*.³⁶

ISIS uses the trade in antiquaries and artifacts to further finance its terror. Even if larger objects are destroyed because they are unsuitable for transport or because they are too difficult to sell on the black market (e.g., those that are already recorded and catalogued by museums), they are sacrificed in a media-effective manner. One of the perpetrators describes the destruction as follows: *„These antiquities and idols [...] were from people in past centuries and were worshiped instead of God. When God Almighty orders us to destroy these statues, idols and antiquities, we must do it, even if they are worth billions of dollars”*.

And indeed, according to the earlier estimates, the profitability that refers to the income of ISIS from the antiquities trade is enormous. In May 2015, Iraq's ambassador to the UN estimated the damage in his country at \$100 million. Half a year later, the U.S. Department of State concludes that it is *"several million dollars [...] mid-2014"*. And the Russian ambassador last told the UN in 2016 that it amounts to \$150-200 million a year.³⁷

³⁴ Apaydan, Veysel. Critical Perspectives on Cultural Memory and Heritage Construction, Transformation and Destruction. London: UCL Press, 2020.

³⁵ <https://plus.google.com/+UNESCO>. "1954 Convention for the Protection of Cultural Property in the Event of Armed Conflict." UNESCO. Last modified October 10, 2021. <https://en.unesco.org/protecting-heritage/convention-and-protocols/1954-convention>.

³⁶ "Zerstörung Des Kulturerbes." News | ICOM. Accessed May 27, 2022. <https://icom-oesterreich.at/news/zerstoerung-des-kulturerbes>.

³⁷ Turku, H. (2017). The destruction of cultural property as a weapon of war: ISIS in Syria and Iraq. P. 48-49.

The fight against illicit trade is difficult, as smaller antiquities can often be traded inconspicuously and are also quite easy to hide from civilians before they are traded on the black market.

Theft, looted excavations, import and export, the illegal acquisition and placing on the market of cultural property and the destruction or damage of cultural heritage - the fight against the illegal traffic of cultural goods is like Don Quixote's fight against windmills.

Reconstruction of Cultural Heritage

UNESCO's Perspective

The world organization for education, science and culture has taken Syria and its monuments under its WH list even more after the civil war which took place all over the country. In a dedicated journal, they try to debate on how to, and especially, what to reconstruct. Before proceeding with their solution and debate on how and what to reconstruct, it is important to understand how certain sites and monuments become part of the WH list.

First, UNESCO defines cultural heritage as:

*Monuments: architectural works, works of monumental sculpture and painting, elements or structures of an archaeological nature, inscriptions, cave dwellings and combinations of features, which are of Outstanding Universal Value from the point of view of history, art or science;*³⁸

What is important, it is not the national value, as the monument itself must go beyond the national boundaries and be a piece that can be important for all humanity. UNESCO's mission, even if metaphorically or philosophically speaking, is:

"To encourage the identification, protection and preservation of cultural and natural heritage around the world considered to be of outstanding value to humanity."

While the monuments, to be defined as a World Heritage Site, must be of Outstanding Universal Value, it must demonstrate international significance, and to:³⁸

"Transcend national boundaries and be of common importance for present and future generations of all humanity"

as mentioned by the operational guidelines in 2012.

Since this importance could be debatable by the current socio-political situation, or by different factors, UNESCO demands for the monument to meet at least one criterion out of the six:³⁸

1 - To represent a masterpiece of human creative genius;

2 - To exhibit an important interchange of human values, over a span of time or within a cultural area of the world, on developments in architecture or technology, monumental arts, town-planning or landscape design.

3 - To bear a unique or at least exceptional testimony to a cultural tradition or to a civilization which is living, or which has disappeared;

4 - To be an outstanding example of a type of building, architectural or technological ensemble or landscape which illustrates (a) significant stage(s) in human history;

5- To be an outstanding example of a traditional human settlement, land-use, or sea-use which is representative of a culture (or cultures), or human interaction with the environment especially when it has become vulnerable under the impact of irreversible change;

6 - To be directly or tangibly associated with events or living traditions, with ideas, or with beliefs, with artistic and literary works of outstanding universal significance. (The Committee considers that this criterion should preferably be used in conjunction with other criteria);

³⁸ <http://whc.unesco.org/archive/opguide12-en.pdf> - Operational guidelines for the cultural heritage (2012)

This description and criteria can help us understand better how those monuments get selected and enter under the protection of the UN. Regarding reconstruction, the same values must be fulfilled again. They all must address the OUV of each site as they did to become one, but this time, within the vision of a recovery from which the community and the economy could benefit from. In other words, especially in the case of Syria, the monuments must be reconstructed if the community asks for it and if it does not interfere with other socioeconomic questions of more urgency.

How and what gets to be reconstructed? The solutions are not easy to find as the community finds itself split into two main groups: on one side, we have the one who would reconstruct the monuments to restore the emotional devastation, and others who would rather commemorate the loss by substituting or making a new monument instead. Regardless of the general idea of reconstruction and the implications that come together with it, Syria is a case of its own. Its cultural heritage has been intentionally destroyed to bury their identity together with their past. People have sacrificed themselves to protect those sites, and the community remembers together the rest of the world what impact this destruction of cultural heritage and identity had on everyone.

The final decision will be taken by the Syrian authorities together with UNESCO's supervision, and many years of research, reflection and study will be needed before officially starting with the restoration. The restoration itself will take additional years to the ones mentioned above, as experts together with local workers will need to cooperate and find a way to reconstruct those sites. Without a clear debate on how to proceed with the restoration and reconstruction on such monuments, the estimated time for the sites to be restored keeps pushing further away, making the project never start totally. As it seems now, the community's majority would like to restore these monuments, to show to the perpetrators their resilience, to reaffirm their identity, and together with the monuments restore the dignity and heritage lost.

Culture in this case is not only a physical object, but it includes the souls and the identity of an entire population. The monument can be a symbol of resistance, renaissance, rebirth from the ashes in which their fellow citizens fell under. That is why a part of the population distances itself from the majority, wanting to leave the monuments as they are, to commemorate and remember the loss of both people and culture.

Before the civil war, every monument in Syria was the result of more than a hundred years work from literates and government's authorities, to differ from the ottoman empire and to establish the Syrian identity. Culture, served as an additional tool for establishing this Arabic renaissance, and helped in constructing socio-political movements for the last 150 years.

As mentioned above, Syria is a case of its own, considering the will of reconstructing a shared will by the entire population would be a mistake. It is especially because of the political situation that led to the war, where factions were everyday more divided, that we got to the situation we are seeing today. Since their cultural heritage has been intentionally destroyed based on different beliefs (political, religious), reconstructing these monuments will not delight everyone.

When considering about building a monument anew or renovate a damaged one, a debate takes place between the community, culture experts and the government. There are 4 approaches to build upon, UNESCO's journal indicates us they are³⁹:

- 1- Normative/Legal (appellations, forms etc.)
- 2- Debate about priorities of reconstructions (together with forms and designs)

³⁹ V.A., UNESCO's World Heritage Review 86 – (2018)

3- Philosophical debate (authenticity vs reconstruction)

4- Human and cultural debate

To describe them in short, we can say that the first approach is about the legal debate about reconstruction. Usually during peace time, and when the conflicts are over, the community together with the government starts to determine if the monument should be reconstructed, restored or rehabilitated. After this, they can first proceed with the project itself. The reconstructing part is cited in the article 86 of the Operational Guidelines for the Implementation of the World Heritage saying: “In relation to authenticity, the reconstruction of archaeological remains or historic buildings or districts is justifiable only in exceptional circumstances. Reconstruction is acceptable only based on complete and detailed documentation and to no extent on conjecture”⁴⁰.

The documentation can come from diverse cultures, even outside the one where the monument belongs. The cultural contexts to which it belongs though, will be prioritized always when debating what to be reconstruct and how, as the article 81 of the same journal says.

The second point underlines the priorities in which the monuments or which monuments should be reconstructed and why. As I mentioned before, it is the will of the community and the policies implemented by the new government that decide what past to retrieve and remember or commemorate. There are some factors to consider when deciding what to prioritize. One of them is the state of such site, by comparing the destroyed ones with the partially damaged ones, the priority is important without ignoring the technicalities involved in reconstructing or restoring such monument. Another factor can be the utility of such monument once reconstructed, the memorialization especially plays a vital role since with a completely damaged building the memories are erased together with it, building a new one even with the resemblance of the old would indeed make new memories, memories that maybe want to be forgotten.

The third point of debate is philosophical, as the authenticity is put against reconstruction, original vs copy. Once a monument lost its authenticity and a copy is put to substitute the original one, some of the value and the genuine state of the monument is lost with it. Should the copy be built exactly as the monument was before being destroyed or should it be reconstructed as it was when built in the first place? Will the emotional value and ideas will be lost with the state in which the copy is built? These in our opinion are some of the questions that can be asked by the community when thinking about it. There is an additional consideration to be made when the monument gets rebuilt, and it is the loss of legitimization of the artist. The masterpiece loses its value when copied by others, and with it the whole emotional/philosophical additional value with it. The last part of the philosophical debate, which is more adaptable for the conservation and restoration of certain monuments than reconstruction, is the use of modern tools when to preserve them. Some theorists say that certain monuments should be conserved by using the same materials used back in the days, so to not lose the authenticity and the spiritual value of the monument itself.

The fourth and last point in the debate is human and cultural, regarding the preservation of a certain culture and the human lives lost before reconstructing. For example, many Syrian cities and districts have lost thousands of people, and many others have been displaced to other areas or even country. How can a monument which identified such culture could be reconstructed if the people representing that culture are no longer there? Catholic churches for instance have almost no citizen to visit them today, as the same citizen fled to other countries. What sense would it have to rebuild something that does not belong to the actual population? Sometimes, the community have acted quickly in rebuilding certain areas, and the tragedies and loss have been dozed off instantly, substituted by collective memories, and a general feeling of belonging to the population when cooperating. Many theorists

⁴⁰ 2021 Operational Guidelines, WHC.21/01 - 2021

underline the importance of the locals to be involved in reconstructing and bringing back to life certain monuments as they would better understand the cultural value, uses and functions of certain monuments, together with embracing better than other external experts the spirit and feeling attachment to a certain monument. This last sentence is debatable, as experts can embrace and feel as attached to a certain monument or culture even if he has not lived there all his life, but this would require us digging into cultural appropriation and the psychology behind cultural identity and it would require another project by itself to answer this question.

In conclusion, we can see how hard it is to determine which monuments are prioritized when to be rebuilt, and how to. What stays, even though the collective memories and population and beliefs may change, is the passion and the emotional attachment to culture, and the will to reconstruct an identity after someone intentionally tried to take it away.

Alternatives and other reconstruction projects

Europa Nostra, Scanning Syria, and the ‘Rising from destruction’ campaign

Europa Nostra is a transnational European organisation who centres its performance in the preservation of both cultural and natural heritage. It has been described both as an independent NGO and as a consultant for cultural institutions such as UNESCO. As part of a broader conglomerate of entities that aimed to the defence and protection of heritage sites, it is nonetheless one of the oldest organisations of this type found in Europe (its origins go back to 1963) and it is also a representative of the interest and co-founded of the European Council and the European Union.

Stating this latter fact, it is undoubtedly that Europa Nostra advocates primordially for the maintenance, care and future perspective of both human and natural heritage found in European soil. With a strong purpose in mind such as strengthening the cooperation between diverse European organisations to achieve a certain grade of unity in what refers to the patrimony protection. Apart from that, its campaigns are directed to other countries and sites across diverse continents.

Encouraging and incentivising researchers and scholars to approach such difficult tasks has been one of Europa Nostra ways of promoting investigation and fieldwork. One of the examples is the “Scanning of Syria” project conducted by professionals from several Dutch higher institutions, which received 2020’s “Europa Nostra Heritage Award”. This project was conceived as a process of scanning and recreating objects (mainly Assyrian clay tablets) destroyed or lost during the Syrian conflict to digitally recreate and produce them using 3D printers.



Fig 6. Research subjects of the “Scanning of Syria” campaign. Project started in 2017.

It was not only a matter of scientific and cultural research but a path to promote awareness around the importance of recovering crucial artefacts for Humankind history; these being as ancient as 1200 BC. An undoubtedly living testimony of the germ of the first alphabet.

In 2016 the 'Incontro di Civiltà Association' launched its campaign 'Rising from destruction' in Rome; the aim of this campaign was to increase the awareness of the Western media about the damaging of cultural heritage across Europe and other neighbouring nations, such is the case of Syria. In this last case, the actions performed were aimed at the repatriation and restoration of two damaged busts found in Palmyra. Several actions were conceived apart from that, ranging from interviews and exhibitions to the making of a documentary meant to be shown by an Italian TV channel.

The Syrian proposal

The recapture of Palmyra was an operation conducted by the Syrian Army Forces advised by Russian strategy officials, Syria's Ministry of Culture and its Directorate-General of Archaeology and Museums declared that the liberation of the archaeological site was carried with extreme precaution, giving the risks that implied a full-scale military operation over the area.



Fig 7. Russian Federation's president Vladimir Putin addresses the public in a concert hosted in Palmyra after its capture by a joint operation of Syrian and Russian Army Forces. Syria, 2016.

After ISIS capitulation and later retreat from the area; work was intended to start. But the chaos ensuing the military operation brought a newer dilemma. The Syrian Ministry of Culture assured that the investigation and catalogue research was supposed to be one of the pivotal lines of the process of reconstruction of the archaeological site; however, one of its prominent figures, the Syrian archaeologist Khaled Al-Assad was murdered by members of ISIS after the fall of Palmyra in 2015.

This deprived the Syrian government of a figure that dedicated 50 years of his professional career to the study and protection of the Roman site. Therefore, the Ministry of Culture launched a call for archaeologists to sum up the effort of investigating and reconstructing the area. Several prestigious Russians were summoned up, most notably experts from Moscow's Pushkin State Museum of Fine Arts. The Syrian government relies on Russian specialists on archaeology to be both researchers and advisors on the process of analysing the endangered structures and the reconstruction planning.

The work has remained in a stalemate for several years, given the circumstances Syria finds itself nowadays. The nature of this enterprise and the turmoil that the Arab country confronts nowadays does not seem to facilitate either the reconstruction project. Reports state that the labour of reconstruction will start as soon as 2022; but further information has not been leaked nor announced by the Syrian Directorate-General of Archaeology and Museums.

Conclusion

After analysing our case, even when presenting the various theories and interpretations in each dimension chosen, a clear and linear answer seems possible yet hard and uncertain to give. The reasons that move groups like ISIS to adapt methods witnessed in the middle age era, where barbaric acts were used to achieve and establish the new regime in the claimed land is yet to be answered if we were to find the real socio-psychological reasons behind their actions. What we discovered and can confirm is that in their attempt to re-write history they tried, failing, to silence it. What has been unique, in the most macabre way and too far from what we can possibly remember as a society and collective, is their silencing of ethnic groups, people, monuments, art. Silencing history for them has not only included monuments and documents, but everyone that pertained to that culture up to that very moment.

As we started the project, we can confirm that their attempt to erase history finds its answers into their ideology and religious view. They have tried what others have in the past, to establish a new regime and leave no traces of previous ones. Thankfully, the global community reacted and managed to furtherly preserve the lives and culture of these minorities and people of Syria and the countries around it, even if much has been lost, both humanely and culturally speaking. The communities are now working to protect and restore what has been lost, unifying what was split and destroyed to begin with.

If ISIS ideology was just a masquerade to cover a thirst for blood and power over other rulers like many before them did, we will never have a clear answer on. What we can instead confirm is that in this case we have not been discussing of some anarchist group doing vandalism, but a well-structured regime with a purpose which resembles entirely nationalists and extremist movements of the past, just under new circumstances. Their hierarchy, propaganda, theology, economics etc. have been cogs in the machine that could potentially, and almost succeeded, achieve their objectives of sovereignty and expansionistic views. Only time will tell if this was just a phenomenon or if it is something that will happen again under a new name and agenda. Regardless of how and where it comes from, we can conclude by saying that the same thirst for power and control has been present in the past and it is present today, the will of certain extremist to take over through violence and obliteration of what is different from them is something that we are afraid will never cease.

We want to leave the reader of this project with these questions to reflect upon, which are the same that came to us while writing the project: Is this phenomenon original or is just fruit of our past or current politics or a modern version of it? Are we responsible for their actions given what we have previously done? Would their agenda have been different if we did not fund their predecessors? Will extremism cease? Will religion still play such an important role in the future world that will “excuse” groups like ISIS to justify their actions? Will we be able to preserve our common cultural heritage and not let anyone erase it forever?

We hope these final questions will find its answers one day and that whoever may read this project will reflect on them as we are.

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