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UNDERSTANDING ISIS'S DESTRUCTION OF ANTIQUITIES AS A REJECTION OF NATIONALISM


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ABSTRACT

This article argues that the campaign of antiquities destruction waged by the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS) should be understood in the context of the group's rejection of the nation-state. The Ba'athist regimes of Iraq and Syria used archaeology not only as a tool to promote national unity but also as an ideological narrative to portray their states as continual recapitulations of their pasts. As a result, the pre-Islamic past came to be associated with secular nationalism. Since the secular state demands obedience to secular law, ISIS views it as idolatrous as it demands allegiance apart from God. The group considers the secular sacralization of antiquities in support of nationalism to be an aspect of this form of idolatry that justifies their destruction. Future efforts at cultural heritage preservation in the region will need to take into account the decline of Arab nationalist movements which once supported them.

KEYWORDS: ISIS, Ba'athism, nationalism, cultural heritage, Salafism, *shirk*

The military campaign waged by the group known as the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS, also known as the Islamic State, the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant, or Daesh) in 2014 and 2016 brought with it an unprecedented campaign of destruction targeting the region's inanimate cultural heritage that brought the group significant global media attention. To date, attempts to understand the Islamic State's destruction of cultural heritage sites have focused on the shock value of the group's online propaganda or on their reliance on strict interpretations of Wahabi iconoclasm which take a hard line against graves and images as perceived *shirk*, or idolatry. In the popular formulation, ISIS destroys cultural heritage sites both to publicize the erasure of rival religious systems and to demonstrate its own power while highlighting the powerlessness of the West to stop them (Roberts 2015; al-Azm 2015; Felch and Varoutsikos 2016; Almkhtar 2016).

Yet, while Western media coverage has tended to focus on the destruction of pre-Islamic and Christian sites, the majority of sites destroyed by the group in what the ASOR's Cultural Heritage Initiative terms "performative deliberate destructions" are Islamic (Danti 2015: 138).¹ The erasure of Shia, Sufi, Yazidi, and Christian religious sites can easily be understood as part of the group's attempts to eliminate competing interpretations of Islam as well as other religious systems. Destroying these sites removes physical evidence of contemporary competing ideologies from the landscape.

But why destroy sites belonging to long-vanished cultures? The destruction of pre-Islamic sites has often been explained as simple religious iconoclasm. However, this does not explain why ISIS has spent considerable time and energy destroying sites which serve no obvious cultic purpose, such as the Ottoman citadel of Tal Afar, the arch of Septimius Severus in Palmyra, statues of the kings of Hatra kept in the Mosul Museum, lion statues in a public park in Raqqa, the Assyrian royal palaces at Nineveh and Nimrud, and modern reconstructions of the Adad and Mashki gates of Nineveh (Jones 2015a; Jones 2015b; Danti et al. 2016a: 93–104; Danti et al. 2015: 1–4; Cuneo et al. 2016: 8; Danti et al. 2016b: 107–22). Nor does it explain why ISIS officially sanctions the sale of supposedly idolatrous antiquities abroad (Keller 2015).

Academic discussions on the topic have likewise focused on the power of the image. Ömür Harmanşah views the videos produced by ISIS as a performance designed to re-enact historical iconoclasm as well as to annihilate the historical memory of local communities (Harmanşah 2015: 170–77). Eckart Frahm has questioned the simple iconoclasm explanation, noting that ISIS produces huge quantities of images and destroys many sites that are not actively being venerated. Their real goal, he argues, is both to provoke Westerners and to attack the formation of other identities that could form a threat to the group's ideology (Frahm 2015: 1–7). Chiara De Cesari has advanced the debate a step further, arguing that ISIS's cultural destruction should not be viewed in a vacuum but instead should be understood in the context of the entanglement of archaeology with both Western colonialism and postcolonial Arab nationalism. By destroying cultural heritage ISIS seeks to present itself as a radical new order annihilating the sins of the past (De Cesari 2015).

Building upon their efforts, I contend that previous attempts to understand ISIS's campaign of cultural destruction have not considered the full range of meaning which the group attaches to the concept of *shirk*. ISIS's campaign of cultural destruction should be understood in light of a strain of Islamist thought which defines *shirk* as encompassing not only polytheistic cult images and the veneration of graves but allegiance to any institution which claims authority apart from God. The modern nation-state itself is seen as a form of *shirk* since

it demands loyalty from its citizens and obedience to its laws, a duty that Muslims are supposed to owe to God alone.

This ideology turned on the region's antiquities due to the political utilization of archaeology in Iraq and Syria during the twentieth century, which created a strong association between the Middle East's pre-Islamic past and particularist forms of secular Arab nationalism. Archaeology, with its territorial and material emphasis and focus on identifying cultural-historical groups, proved to be a potent tool for nineteenth- and twentieth-century nationalism. The state, itself defined by control over specified geographic space, could assert its sovereignty over all archaeological remains located within its territory and thereby link the present to the past with tangible physical remains. Since their relevance to the present entity controlling the same territory was established by geography alone, such symbols could provide evidence of lengthy existence and past accomplishments. As such they could often be used to side-step contemporary political divisions and serve as symbols of a unifying national identity (Smith 2001; Shnirel'man 2013). In Ba'athist Iraq and Syria, the political use of archaeology went beyond simply promoting national unity and became an ideological justification for the existence of the state. Therefore, by destroying ancient artifacts ISIS sees themselves as attacking the very concept of the modern nation-state, re-capitulating a mythical past as they seek to deconstruct the present political order.

Nationalism and Archaeology in Iraq and Syria

Nationalism and Archaeology in Iraq

Pan-Arab nationalist thinkers of the first half of the twentieth century such as Sati al-Husri (1880–1968) and Michel Aflaq (1910–1989) were not heavily invested in the region's pre-Islamic past. Defining the nation primarily by a common language and shared history, they turned to the Umayyad and Abbasid periods as models for Arab unity and a means to resist Western colonialism. "Let the Arabs of today be Muhammad," wrote Aflaq in 1943, utilizing a secular and political interpretation of the Prophet to urge Arabs to restore a unified and powerful

Arab world stretching from the Indian to the Atlantic Oceans (Aflaq 1977: 56; Cleveland 1971: 63–69, 86–88, 95–99, 121–23; Devlin 1976: 24–25; Baram 1991: 26–27). Reacting against contemporary political movements such as Phoenicianism in Lebanon, Pharaonism in Egypt and Assyrian nationalism in Iraq, Aflaq warned against “a necessity to acknowledge every civilizational stage which passed over our country as a special nationality,” which, if carried out to its logical conclusion, would threaten the entire pan-Arabist project (Baram 1991: 27).

But pan-Arabist ideals quickly ran up against the obstacle of an Arab world that had already been divided into numerous states by foreign powers. Archaeology had once been part of the toolkit of colonial powers who conceived of the study of Mesopotamia as a journey east in search of the origins of Western civilization (Bahrani 1998: 160–65). After the First World War archaeology in Iraq and Syria was carried out under the auspices of French and British colonial authorities. Antiquities authorities were controlled by Westerners and most of the artifacts were removed from the region to be kept in Western museums (Bernhardsson 2005: 95, 118–29; Goode 2010: 107–8). As a result, by the time Iraq gained independence in 1932 domestic control of archaeology had come to be viewed as an important aspect of national sovereignty. In 1934 Iraq passed a law limiting the partage system that sent the majority of the country’s artifacts abroad and appointed al-Husri as Director of Antiquities. Although al-Husri assigned no special political significance to Iraq’s pre-Islamic past, his tenure as Director brought Iraqi archaeology into a close relationship with the political class. “Furthermore,” adds Magnus Bernhardsson, “given his pedagogical mindset, al-Husri’s policies helped ensure that archaeology did not become a concern primarily of the bourgeois Westernized elite, as was often the case in other Middle Eastern countries such as Egypt, but instead shaped the general school-going public” (Bernhardsson 2005: 155, 201–8).

Archaeology became further entangled with political ideology and national identity during the government of Abd al-Karim Qasim from 1958–1963. Intensely secular but also firmly opposed to the pan-Arabism of Egyptian leader Gamal Abd al-Nasser, Qasim promoted a particularist form of Iraqi nationalism as an antidote to Nasser’s

efforts to assimilate Iraq into the Egyptian-dominated United Arab Republic (Abdi 2008: 12–13). To this end, with the help of Iraqi archaeologists such as Taha Baqir, Qasim began to look toward Iraq’s pre-Islamic past as a source of national pride, which marked Iraq as a unique entity, culturally and historically distinct from the rest of the Arab world. Qasim introduced a new national flag prominently featuring the eight-pointed star of the goddess Ishtar (Fig. 1) and a new national seal featuring the symbol of Shamash (Fig. 2). Qasim’s program culminated in a parade held in Baghdad on the first anniversary of the coup which prominently featured floats depicting the invention of writing, the code of Hammurabi, the ziggurat of Ur, and a large portrait of Qasim accompanied by an Akkadian inscription equating him with the Sumerian god Dumuzi (Baqir 1959: 56–59 and pls. 1–5; Baram 1991: 28–29).

After Qasim was overthrown in a 1963 coup, the regime of the Arif brothers pursued a pan-Arabist course and paid little political attention to the pre-Islamic past (Goode 2010: 115–16). After the Ba’athists seized power in 1968, their ostensibly pan-Arabist ideology quickly grounded on the rocks of Iraq’s strategic situation in the Arab world. The party leadership had no intention of ceding their own positions of power or Iraq’s now-considerable oil revenues to less wealthy but more populous Arab states such as Egypt. Domestically the regime’s cadres were drawn almost entirely from Iraq’s Sunni minority, and Sunni-dominated pan-Arabism held little appeal to Iraq’s Kurdish and Shia populations. Therefore, the Ba’ath quietly abandoned pan-Arabism and instead focused on promoting national unity via



FIG. 1
The Iraqi flag under the regime of Abd al-Karim Qasim from 1959–1963, prominently displaying the eight-pointed star of the goddess Ishtar. (Wikimedia Commons.)



FIG. 2

Coat of Arms of Iraq used under Qasim from 1959–1963, based on the radiant-sun symbol of the god Shamash. The legend reads “The Iraqi Republic” and “14 July 1958.” (Wikimedia Commons.)

an aggressively particularist cultural program focused largely on pre-Islamic history. By concentrating on the civilizations of ancient Mesopotamia, the Ba’ath could sidestep thorny political issues such as the Sunni-Shia split which were fundamental to the Islamic history of Iraq. Doing so allowed them to reinforce a national identity which emphasized Iraq’s independence from the rest of the Arab world while also presenting modern Iraq as a continuation of its ancient past, thereby justifying “the cradle of civilization” taking on a leadership role in foreign relations (Devlin 1976: 187–206; Baram 1991: 13–15, 38–39, 94–108, 121–35).

The result was a boon to the study of archaeology in Iraq, as the Ba’athists increased the budget of the Administration of Antiquities by 81 percent from 1968 to 1972. A 1974 antiquities law declared artifacts to be state property and banned their export. New museums were constructed in Basra, Nasiriyah, Madain, Arbil, Kirkuk and Mosul, and major reconstruction work was carried out at many sites. Government funding also founded the Iraq Fashion House, which promoted Mesopotamian-inspired clothing, poetry, sculpture, dance, and theater productions. Festivals were regularly held in Mosul, Ur,

and Babylon which highlighted Iraq’s pre-Islamic cultures with parades, floats, and artistic productions (Baram 1991: 33–57).

Politically, this cultural program sought to leverage the imagery of Iraq’s ancient past to present the Ba’ath regime as a continuation of Iraq’s past greatness and its enemies as the modern incarnation of various ancient enemies of Mesopotamian civilizations. During the Iran-Iraq War cartoons regularly appeared in the Ba’ath Party paper *al-Thawra* portraying Iraqi soldiers going to battle alongside Assyrian and Babylonian soldiers (Baram 1991: 78–80 and pls. 19–26). In September 1981, Iraqi officials gathered in Babylon to mark the first anniversary of the beginning of the war with Iran under the slogan “Yesterday Nebuchadnezzar, Today Saddam Hussein.” Iraqi Vice President Taha Muhyi al-Din Ma’ruf gave a speech in which he declared the Iraqi people were “grandsons of Nebuchadnezzar” and that the gathering’s slogan “establishes the link between the historical contributions of this country . . . and the heights of today and the flags of victory fluttering under the leadership of the fearless and inspired leader Saddam Hussein.” Ma’ruf went on to paint a picture of undying Iranian enmity toward Iraq stretching back four thousand years:

When the mighty kingdom of Akkad and Sumer was founded, as an expression of the first Iraqi internal patriotic unity in history, the Elamites attacked this kingdom, and this the first Iraqi kingdom to express the unity of the homeland was exposed to a hateful attack by the Persian Elamites . . . And when Iraq rose again, and the United Kingdom arose, and Sargon the Akkadian arose as the leader who united Iraq, the black [Persian] . . . lusts reawakened; but the Iraqi leader Sargon repelled them forcefully . . . your determined resolve was the mountain . . . upon which the dreams of the grandsons of Xerxes and Kisra were shattered. (Baram 1991: 48–49)

Such rhetoric especially sought to unify the Iraqi Shia against their co-religionists in Tehran. According to Lawrence Rothfield, “The Shia of southern Iraq were to cease thinking of themselves as tied to a Persian/Iranian culture and instead recognize their anti-Persian heritage as descendants of the Sumerians” (Rothfield 2009: 12–13).



FIG. 3

Saddam and Hammurabi gaze over the Ishtar Gate in this officially sanctioned artwork set up at the site of ancient Babylon.

(Photo by S. Altekamp, 1990.)

Similar readings of the past were used to write other minorities out of Iraqi national identity. The Kurdish national anthem described the Kurds as the “children of Medes and Cyaxares,” and so Iraqi textbooks reminded students that it was the Medes who sacked ancient Nineveh while describing the Kurdish language as a foreign Indo-European invasion (Kirmanj 2013: 142–43, 249). As early as 1971, the Mosul spring festival parade featured a float of the Babylonian king Nebuchadnezzar II leading Jewish prisoners from Jerusalem to Babylon accompanied by the caption “A Lesson for the Zionists” (Baram 1991: 48–49).

“The Jews of Iraq,” wrote Iraqi News Agency director Sa’ad al-Bazzaz (b. 1956) in his 1989 book *Gulf War: The Israeli Connection*, “proved to be a source of sabotage and destruction . . . motivated by vengeance for the Babylonian captivity.” The Jews, he argued, stole Iraqi myths such as the flood narrative and made them their own. They also had a long alliance with Iran, beginning with Cyrus’s edict ending the Babylonian exile and continuing from Jewish support for the Sassanids against the Byzantine Empire up to Israeli support for the Shah and secret arms transfers during the Iran-Iraq War (al-Bazzaz 1989: 17–22).

Saddam Hussein frequently bolstered his cult of personality with imagery from Iraq’s ancient past. Officially sanctioned artwork depicted Saddam leading Babylonian

troops to battle, looking over ancient Babylon alongside Nebuchadnezzar (Fig. 3), receiving laws from Shamash in the style of the relief from the Code of Hammurabi stele, being abandoned in a reed basket in the marshes as an infant in the style of the Sargon birth legend, riding in a chariot after the royal lion hunt reliefs of Ashurbanipal (Fig. 4), or taking on the life-giving roles of the gods Ea or Dumuzi. Babylon was famously reconstructed with bricks stamped “Rebuilt in the era of the leader Saddam Hussein.” Following the disaster of the 1991 Persian Gulf War, one of his favorite themes was to compare himself, and by extension the Iraqi state, to the dying and rising god Dumuzi, continually rising again in response to defeat (Makiya 1991: 53; Abdi 2008: 19–20, 28; Baram 2014: 307–8). In a speech given in 1999 to mark the eleventh anniversary of the end of the Iran-Iraq War, he expounded upon his interpretation of Iraqi history:

Babylon, Baghdad, Assur, Nineveh, Hatra and Ur were not neutral, in a middle distance between the foot of the mountain and the summit. Thus, when they behold the summit, firmly convinced of the truthfulness and honesty, in addition to other usual requisites, of the leaders, they run fast to it, and occupy it, so they become the uppermost lighthouse in the



FIG. 4
Saddam rides as a modern reincarnation of Ashurbanipal in front of the Nergal Gate in this billboard set up at the site of ancient Nineveh. The reconstructed Nergal Gate and its *lamassus* would later be demolished by ISIS. (Photo by S. Altekamp, 1990.)

surrounding, its radiance is visible at long distances, so that many people would be lit and guided, lest they should stray. (Ruysdael 2003: 83–84)

“Why was Baghdad destroyed in 1258 A.D? Why was Babylon destroyed in 539 B.C.?” asked Saddam. The answer was that while Iraqis had climbed to the summit “by means of endeavor and sublime morals,” in doing so they attracted the envy of those with lesser cultural accomplishments who sought to steal Iraq’s past for themselves, beginning with the expedition of the Elamite king Shutruk-Nahhunte in 1155 BC (who brought the famous Hammurabi Stele to Susa) and continuing with Cyrus of Persia’s capture of Babylon in 539 BC, the Mongol destruction of classical Baghdad in 1258, and the 1980–1988 war with Iran who “sought to destroy Baghdad in 1980 and to occupy Iraq, just as Cyrus had destroyed Babylon in collaboration with the Jews in 539 BC.” And yet the Iraqi people would always rise from the ashes, and win back the summit in “a victory of progress over backwardness, of faith and truth over falsification and of construction over destruction” (Ruysdael 2003: 83–88, 97–101).

Such rhetoric served to present the modern Iraqi state, the Ba’ath Party and its leader as a continual recapitulation of its past (Fig. 5). Iraq’s ancient past therefore became more than just a marker of sovereignty or a tool to promote national unity but became an ideological justification for the existence of Iraq as a nation-state. The unique past of Iraq and its people conferred pride of place in the Arab world and a special mission among the nations to preserve civilization against all enemies, Persian, Israeli, Islamist, and Western.

Following the American-led invasion of 2003 and the ‘de-Ba’athification’ efforts of the Coalition Provisional Authority, the link forged between the pre-Islamic past and Iraqi national identity nevertheless remained. The preamble to Iraq’s 2005 Constitution begins with the words “We, the people of Mesopotamia,” further identifying Iraq as “the homeland of the apostles and prophets, resting place of the virtuous imams, cradle of civilization, crafters of writing, and home of numeration.” There “the first law made by man was passed, and the oldest pact of just governance was inscribed.”² In October 2005 Interior Minister Bayan Jabr responded to criticisms of creeping Iranian influence leveled by Saudi Foreign Minister



FIG. 5

A ceiling mural from Saddam Hussein's palace built on top of the ruins of ancient Babylon provides an illustration of Ba'athist ideology in which the great artistic and architectural achievements of Iraq's ancient and medieval past present an unbroken stream of history leading up to the present. (Photo by J. Upperman, 2005.)

Prince Saud al-Faisal by retorting, "This Iraq is the cradle of civilization that taught humanity reading and writing, and some Bedouin riding a camel wants to teach us!" (*BBC News* 2005). During the military offensive against ISIS-held Fallujah in mid-2016, a political cartoon by Iraqi artist Nasir Ibrahim circulated widely on social media which portrayed an Iraqi soldier riding on a horse in the style of mounted archers shown in Assyrian reliefs, trampling an ISIS flag underneath in a Near Eastern artistic convention for portraying a defeated enemy (Fig. 6). A cartoon appeared at the same time in the state-run newspaper *al-Sabah* featuring a Gilgamesh-style figure seizing masked

ISIS fighters with the caption "The Liberation of Nimrud" (*al-Sabah News* 2016).

Nationalism and Archaeology in Syria

The political use of archaeology in Ba'athist Syria has received comparatively less scholarly attention than in Iraq.³ Facing similar challenges as their Iraqi compatriots of uniting a religiously and ethnically divided country, the Syrian Ba'ath likewise turned to the pre-Islamic past. Textbooks portrayed Syria as the cradle of civilization, emphasizing the "firsts" invented there compared



FIG. 6

An Assyrian cavalry archer dressed as a modern Iraqi soldier rides over a crumpled ISIS flag in this political cartoon posted on Facebook and Twitter by Iraqi artist Naser Ibrahim. The cartoon was published on June 1, 2016 as the Iraqi Army was launching a major counterattack against ISIS forces in Fallujah. (Drawing by N. Ibrahim.)

to other countries. Antiquities director Ali al-Bahansawi once declared that the Early Bronze Age archives at Ebla “constitute proof of the antiquity of the Arab nation and the depth of the roots of its culture. After all, this and other kingdoms that existed for almost more than 4,500 years were all Arab.” Leaders and intellectuals also drew parallels between Syria’s modern allies and enemies and those of its ancient past, such as in 2001 when Bashar al-Assad alluded to the Syrian-Iranian alliance by presenting Pope John Paul II with a statue of the Syrian-born Roman emperor Philip the Arab along with a statement claiming—incorrectly—that he had been the first Roman emperor to sign a peace treaty with the Persians, or when Ba’athist professor and historian Muhammad Harb Farzat drew parallels between modern Syria and the first millennium BC Aramean kingdom of Damascus which had frequently fought against ancient

Israel (Zisser 2006: 180–81, 192–93; Valter 2002: 126, 137–40, 155–61, 325).

While Hafez al-Assad maintained an extensive cult of personality, he refrained from linking himself personally to ancient figures (Weeden 1999). His political situation after taking power in 1970 was somewhat different from his Iraqi counterparts. Syria’s unsuccessful experiment with Nasser’s Sunni-dominated United Arab Republic a decade earlier had caused Syria’s religious minorities to flock to the secular Ba’ath. As a result, as in Iraq the Syrian Ba’ath regime was minority dominated, but unlike Iraq the dominant minority was Alawite rather than Sunni. Syria under Assad would be firmly against Arab unity, for the Alawites had nothing to gain and everything to lose from a pan-Arab union which would lead to even greater Sunni majorities (Pipes 1990: 21, 149–56; Gillot 2010: 7–8; Roberts 1987: 27–28).

Instead, Assad turned the Syrian Ba'ath towards a close relationship with the idiosyncratic theories of Lebanese political writer Antun Sa'adeh (1904–1949) and his Syrian Social Nationalist Party (SSNP). Sa'adeh had been executed in 1949 following a failed plot to overthrow the government of Lebanon and his party was officially banned in Syria until 2005. Nevertheless, the party counted many members in influential positions in Syria, including the family of Hafez al-Assad's wife Aniseh (Pipes 1990: 101–03, 149–50; Tibi 1997: 192–98). Unlike al-Husri and Aflaq, who defined the nation based on a shared language and history, Sa'adeh explicitly discounted both factors as unimportant and instead conceived a theory of the nation rooted in geography alone.

The natural borders of Syria, he argued, covered the entire Fertile Crescent from the Taurus Mountains east to the Zagros and south to the Sinai and the Red Sea, encompassing all of Syria, Lebanon, Iraq, Transjordan, and the British Mandate of Palestine (Fig. 7). Sa'adeh credited geography and climate with creating the “common life,” which in turn defined the nation. Therefore, since religious and linguistic differences were unimportant compared to geography, it was only a lack of political will which prevented the creation of a “Greater Syria” that could stand up to Western imperial domination (Sethian 1999: 99–103; Walker 1999: 164–67; Roberts 1987: 11–15).

Sa'adeh's secular irredentism proved politically useful in fractured Syria, appealing to ethnic and religious

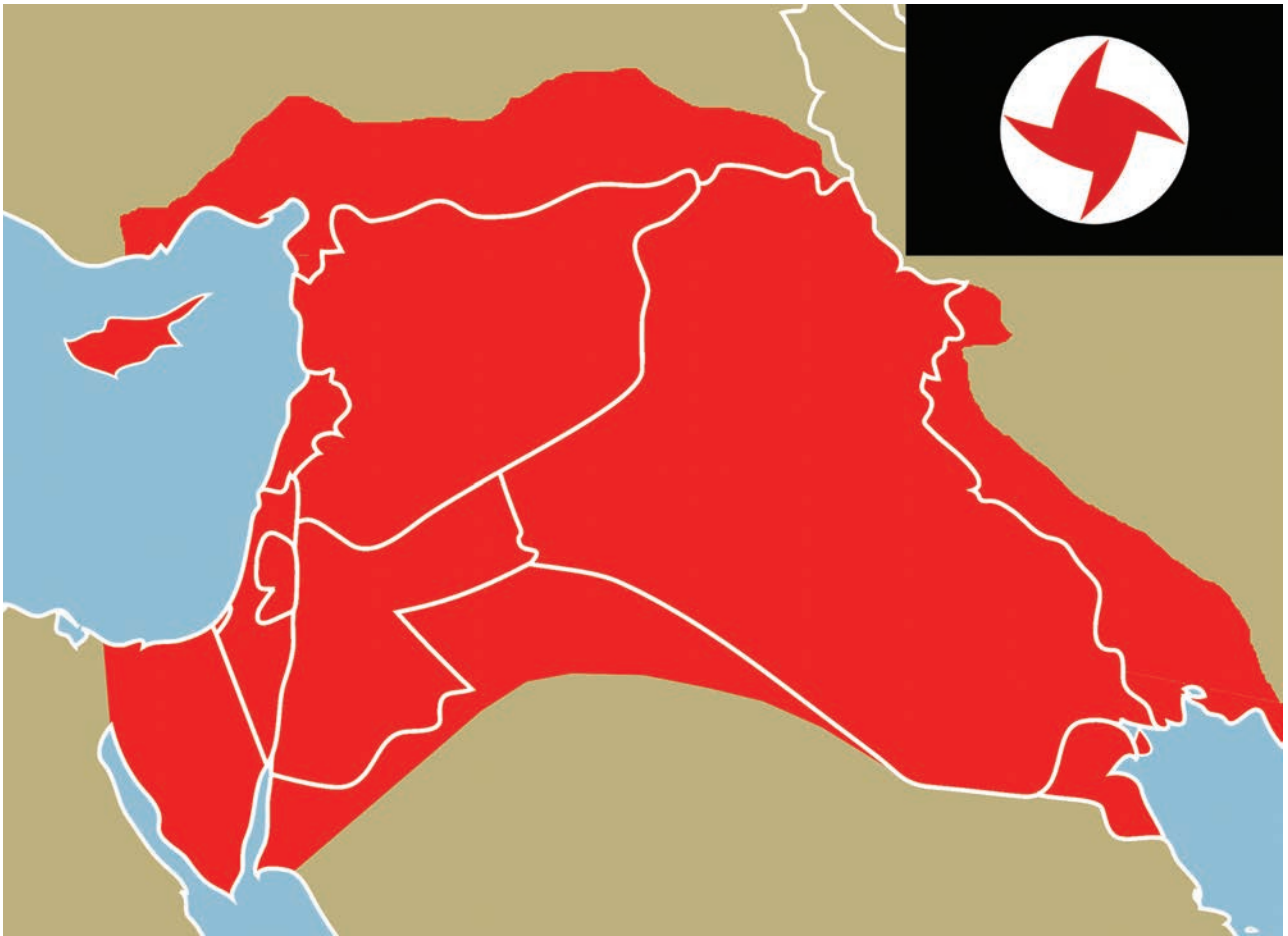


FIG. 7

The natural boundaries of Greater Syria according to Antun Sa'adeh, with the flag of his Syrian Social Nationalist Party in the upper right corner. The proposed boundaries resemble those of the Assyrian empire at its greatest extent in the seventh century BC.

(Map by C. Jones.)

minorities while providing a tool to unify a heterogeneous country around a geographic rather than ethnic or religious ideal. Assad began to promote Greater Syria as a step towards eventual Arab unity. He frequently cited the doctrine to justify Syria's 32-year occupation of Lebanon, broke off relations with the Palestine Liberation Organization in 1976 amid claims that Palestine was "South Syria," and in 1981 began calling for the overthrow of the Jordanian monarchy. Of course, actually annexing any of these countries to Syria would have defeated the purpose of embracing Greater Syria. Just as Assad's much-touted enmity towards Israel masked forty years of peace along their shared border, Greater Syria was a concept meant for internal consumption in order to unite the nation against perceived external enemies (Pipes 1990: 43, 110–19, 129–56, 187–88; Valter 2002: 96–101).

But Greater Syria's greatest flaw was that despite its allegedly natural borders such a political entity had hardly ever existed, and when it did, it had been governed by persons originating from outside the modern political boundaries of Syria (Roberts 1987: 13–14; Valter 2002: 133–38). Greater Syria had been united under Assyrian, Babylonian, and Abbasid monarchs from modern Iraq, Persians from Iran, Seleucids from Greece, and Romans from Italy. There had been only two periods when the region was united under rulers from Syria. The second was the Umayyad Caliphate whose kings ruled from Damascus from 651 to 744. Syrian nationalists promoted a secularized version of Umayyad history as an Arab golden age while reflecting negatively on the succeeding Abbasid dynasty (Valter 2002: 55–57, 170–74). The first was the reign of Queen Zenobia of Palmyra, who briefly united most of Greater Syria under her control from 267 to 273 before being defeated by the Roman emperor Aurelian.⁴ The Assad regime heavily promoted Zenobia and the story of her revolt against Rome as an example of Syrian resistance to Western imperialism. In 1985, Syria's longtime defense minister Mustafa Tlass (b. 1932) published a biography of Zenobia in Arabic (later translated into both French and English) in which he presented her as an anticolonial heroine resisting Western domination:

The importance of the historical experience of the Palmyrene Queen emerges as a searchlight which is capable of robbing the Roman civilization of its

deceiving virtues and it proves that it is an impotent civilization, a robber not a contributor, barren and unproductive . . . Aurelian's victory over Zenobia is not a civilized victory, but it is a victory of forces, and the Roman Army's victory over Palmyra and its destruction is not a civilized victory but [an] anti-civilization victory. Is there anybody who can say that the victory of the Europeans in the East and their continuous destruction of it is a victory of the Western civilization on the Eastern civilization? (Tlass 2000: 8–9, 224–25)

Tlass was an enthusiastic supporter of Greater Syria, at various times reiterating Hafez al-Assad's statements that "the Golan Heights are in the middle of Syria" and declaring that "Lebanon belongs to our great Syrian family" (Zisser 2006: 187; Pipes 1990: 119). Politically, he grouped the Palmyrenes alongside Phoenicians, Nabateans, and "Canaanite Arabs" as peoples of Greater Syria united by opposition to Romans and Jews. In his concluding chapter he makes the link between past and present politics explicit:

Perhaps the nearest example to be quoted is the similarity between the Arabs of Palmyra and the Arabs of today. Did the Roman garrisons which were constructed near Petra, Damascus and Palmyra for protecting the Roman interests differ from the Israeli garrisons in the occupied territory of Palestine? Then, is there any difference between the civilized challenge which Palmyra faced and the civilized challenge which the Arab Nation faces in its struggle with the Zionist state? Therefore, is it not possible that every day a new Petra and a new Palmyra will fall down, or even a new Phoenicia, since Lebanon represents Phoenicia? (Tlass 2000: 230)

Tlass advanced the idea that the Jewish people hold a special animus against Palmyra by citing passages from the Talmud which suggest that Palmyra contributed archers to the Babylonian and Roman armies during their respective sieges of Jerusalem in 586 BC and AD 70, thereby supplying a motive for eternal Jewish enmity towards Palmyra (Tlass 2000: 29–31). Palmyra museum director Walid al-As'ad (whose father Khaled al-As'ad had been beheaded by ISIS after the capture of Palmyra)

echoed those statements in a September 2015 interview, arguing that the destruction of the ruins of that city by ISIS was part of a Jewish conspiracy to erase the ancient history of the Arab people (MemriTV 2015c). The parallels being drawn were clear: the enemies of Assad's Syria are the same as the enemies of ancient Palmyra, and

vice versa. As in Iraq, Syria's present was presented as a recapitulation of its past.

The link from Zenobia's Palmyra to the Assad family's Syria was frequently reinforced in official media. Zenobia's face adorned money (Fig. 8), and a 1970s Syrian TV series about her life has been described as a



FIG. 8

Representations of Zenobia adorned the Syria 500 pound note used from 1998 to 2010, along with depictions of the theater, tetrapylon, and arch of Septimius Severus from Palmyra. The reverse shows the Tabqa Dam on the Euphrates River, juxtaposing the ancient past with the Syrian state's modern achievements. (Courtesy of C. Jones.)

“thinly veiled” allegory for the Israeli-Palestinian conflict (Sahner 2014: 133–35). A guidebook to Palmyra published by Khaled al-As’ad and Adnan Bounni featured a map of Zenobia’s conquests which included Syria, Lebanon, Israel, and Jordan but omitted her conquest of Egypt, a territory not considered part of Greater Syria (Bounni and al-As’ad 1988: front cover). Even during the midst of civil war in 2015 the regime spent time and money erecting a bronze statue of Zenobia in Umayyad Square in Damascus (RuptlyTV 2016).

Archaeology as a Tool of Power

How could Assad and Saddam embody resistance to Western colonialism while ruling over states whose boundaries and national identities were determined by colonialists? The two particularist nationalist Ba’athist regimes solved this conundrum by presenting the modern states of Iraq and Syria as a continuation of the heritage of past civilizations located within their modern geographic borders, thereby forging a link between the pre-Islamic past and the modern state. This was reinforced by a political program that equated their modern enemies with these civilizations’ past enemies and their modern leaders with the great leaders of the past.

By doing so they aimed to do more than simply unify their diverse populations around a secularized national identity. Rather, the ancient past became an ideological justification in itself for the existence of Iraq and Syria and for the foreign and domestic policies of their leaders.

As a result, antiquities became a tool of state power. All antiquities in Iraq and Syria were declared state property, kept ensconced in a few state-run museums and used to tell a story that linked past glories to frequently loathed modern regimes. As Syrian-born archaeology professor and opposition activist Amr al-Azm said in a 2014 interview:

Anything to do with your cultural heritage in Syria belongs to the Assad family. That kicks back if you’re rebelling against the state and the regime. Anything associated with them becomes an acceptable target. Syria had some of the most stringent laws in terms of antiquities ownership. If you’re plowing your field and you hit a stone and discover a mosaic, you must

inform the state. The state will come, surround the area, rip out the mosaic and it will disappear. You’re not a stakeholder. All he sees is a valuable item removed from him and taken by a kleptocracy. He says, Why should I let the state have it? (Felch 2014)

The first signs of a backlash against the identification of ancient heritage with the state came during the March 1991 revolts in Iraq, during which nine of Iraq’s thirteen regional museums were targeted by looters. International sanctions in the 1990s caused a dramatic increase in the looting of archaeological sites. Unable to adequately protect sites, the regime turned to brutal methods in an attempt to deter looters. In one case, ten men from Mosul who had smuggled an Assyrian *lamassu* head to Jordan were beheaded and the executions broadcast on television (Rothfield 2009: 15–20; George 2001). Draconian measures imposed during a time of severe economic deprivation can only have served to deepen resentment of the management of cultural heritage among some sectors of the population.

The losses only worsened after 2003, when thousands of objects were stolen from the Iraqi National Museum and archaeological sites in southern Iraq suffered devastating looting.⁵ The practice of funding militant organizations via the sale of illicitly obtained artifacts began during this period. Radical Shia cleric Muqtada al-Sadr openly challenged the government’s authority, declaring that the state owned nothing legitimately and therefore looting was permissible so long as a 20 percent *khums* tax was paid to his movement. Other worshipers at Sadrist mosques in Najaf reported being told that looting archaeological sites was permissible if the proceeds were used to build mosques or buy weapons. Archaeological sites in the south were eventually secured by government guards and looting decreased (Rothfield 2009: 119–21, 149–54; International Crisis Group 2006: 8; Green and Ward 2009: 618; Cockburn 2008: 129–30; Kila 2010: 56).

In Syria, the ongoing conflict has seen large-scale looting of archaeological sites in regions under the control of every faction (Casana 2015: 142–52). In areas under the control of nationalist elements of the Free Syrian Army projects have sometimes been undertaken to reappropriate cultural heritage from promoting Ba’athism toward promoting a unified Syrian state without Assad.

For example, after capturing the ancient city of Bosra al-Sham in March 2015, rebels turned the Roman theater, which had once hosted government-sponsored cultural festivals, into a new type of civic space, replacing the large portraits of Bashar al-Assad, which once hung in the theater, with a massive black, white, and green banner of the Syrian opposition and a poster with the words “Russia is killing us” written in five languages (Zekavat 2017).

The Islamist Response

Although ISIS is often portrayed as a new and especially malevolent force, the group is heir to over a century of Islamist political thought stemming from movements reacting against the *Tanzimat* reforms of the Ottoman Empire in the mid-nineteenth century, Western domination of the Middle East after World War I, and the abolition of the religious institution of the caliphate by Mustafa Kemal in 1924.

Responses by Muslim thinkers to the abolition of the caliphate varied widely. Some sought to re-establish the caliphate through peaceful means, while others suggested it be interpreted metaphorically or even that it should be done away with entirely.⁶ The Islamist position, as first articulated by the Pakistani jurist Abul A'la al-Maududi (1903–1979), sought to re-establish the caliphate as a political institution, which would govern according to Islamic law. As God's unity means that God holds complete sovereignty over the universe, true freedom comes from submission to the will of God. God entrusts this sovereignty through a viceregency to one man in order to exercise his authority on earth. (Liebl 2015: 250–53; al-Maududi 1977: 3–6, 126–39, 149–50, 166–72, 217–18; al-Maududi 1948). Al-Maududi was an important influence on the Egyptian Islamist Sayyid Qutb (1906–1966), who became one of Islamist political thought's most articulate proponents (Choueiri 2010: 100). Arguing against secular nationalists like Aflaq and al-Husri who saw Islam as a uniquely Arab cultural phenomenon, he argued that “Islam is not a heritage of any particular race or country,” but is rather “a way of life ordained by God for all mankind” (Qutb 1990: 60–62). Anything apart from this divinely ordained political order was therefore a challenge

to the authority of God. Because Islam is a practice and not just a belief, obedience to laws is an acknowledgment of sovereignty and therefore a form of worship. Since obeying laws other than those ordained by God is a form of worship, this makes the secular nation-state idolatrous (Qutb 1990: 47–50). Qutb wrote:

A Muslim's fatherland is where the Islamic faith, the Islamic way of life, and the *shari'ah* of God are dominant. Only this meaning of “fatherland” is worthy of the human beings. Similarly, ‘nationality’ means belief and a way of life, and only this concept is worthy of man's dignity. Grouping according to family and tribe and nation, or race and color and country, are residues of the primitive state of man. These *jahili* groupings are from a period when man's spiritual values were at a low stage . . . *jahiliyyah* is the worship of some people by others, that is, some people become dominant and make laws for others, without caring about the use or misuse of their authority, and regardless of whether these laws are against injunctions of Allah. In Islam, on the other hand, people worship God alone, and derive concepts and beliefs, laws and regulations, and values from Him, freeing themselves from servitude to God's servants. (Qutb 1990: 109–12)

The term *jahiliyyah* (literally, “ignorance”) had traditionally been used in Islamic thought to refer to the polytheistic societies of pre-Islamic Arabia, but here Qutb expanded the concept to include “any society which rejects God's law,” that is, any power structure which existed apart from *shari'ah* law. In his conception it was the duty of all Muslims to expand Islam at the expense of *jahiliyyah* by removing these power structures, which distracted from or interfered with the practice of Islam (Qutb 1990: 111–20; Qutb 1999, 8: 50–52).

While Qutb showed no interest in pre-Islamic history, he dedicated significant space to the study of early Islamic history in search of a model to follow to restore political Islam as the highest authority. From this he developed a model of core and expansion, in which Islam is first established in one specific geographic location and invitations are sent out to neighboring lands to convert. If they refuse, military campaigns are mounted against

them just as the early Muslims embarked on campaigns against the various empires that surrounded them (Qutb 1999, 7: 37–61). The states of the international system are not to be recognized, for they are *jahiliyyah* and therefore *shirk*.

Qutb's writings were a major inspiration for Al-Qaida's chief strategist Ayman al-Zawahiri (b. 1951). In his part ideological manifesto, part history of the Egyptian Islamist movement titled *Knights Under the Prophet's Banner*, Zawahiri praised Qutb for showing the movement that the fundamental issue was whether legitimate authority was derived from God or from men (Mansfield 2006: 47). Zawahiri denounced the Muslim Brotherhood for participating in the political process, arguing that democracy was functionally a religion since it created authority apart from God and claimed legitimacy based on popular sovereignty rather than divine revelation (Kepel and Milelli 2008: 184–89; Mansfield 2006: 247–49).

A similar argument was advanced by the Jordanian Abu Muhammad al-Maqdisi (b. 1959 as Essam Muhammad Tahir al-Barqawi) in his book *Democracy: A Religion*. Al-Maqdisi cautioned:

Be careful not to limit the word 'religion' just to Christianity, or Judaism and so on, because you may follow the other void religions and go astray. It includes every religion, method, judgment system, and law that the creatures follow and adhere to . . . So every religious community within the disbelieving communities that agreed with, met with, or gathered to a system that contradicts Islam, that has become their religion. This may include Communism, Socialism, Secularism, and other such innovated methods, and principles, which men invented with their own minds, and then satisfied these ideas to be their own religions. (al-Maqdisi 2012: 25–26)

Maqdisi and Zawahiri agreed that the modern secular nation-state was fundamentally anti-Islamic due to being founded on principles set forth in a constitution rather than on principles of Islamic law (al-Maqdisi 2012: 12–13, 75–76; Mansfield 2006: 255–56, 240–42). Both of these men strongly influenced the first leader of Al-Qaida in Iraq, Abu Musab al-Zarqawi (Wagemakers 2012: 34–35,

41–48, 215–16).⁷ While Zarqawi never set down his political philosophy in writing, the strategy set forth in his letters made clear his goal of provoking sectarian conflict with the Shia in order to undermine the Iraqi state (Kepel and Milelli 2008: 251–67; Cordesman 2008, 1: 29, 93–95, 155–57).

The political ideology embraced by ISIS was forged by the Iraq War from 2003–2011 (Maher 2016: 17–19). Zarqawi was killed in June of 2006, but four months later Al-Qaida in Iraq merged with several other Sunni groups and renamed itself as the "Islamic State in Iraq," with the stated goal of establishing a caliphate and then expanding outwards (Liebl 2015: 250; Bunzel 2015: 15–18). Its new leader Abu Omar al-Baghdadi (who would himself be killed in a joint US-Iraqi raid in 2010) explicitly criticized the Iraqi state for placing national identity above Islamic identity, limiting Muslim immigration and giving equal rights to practitioners of all religions, saying that while Iraq's constitution gave equal rights to Christians, Yazidis and Muslims "our creed is that a Muslim is our brother even if he is a Filipino Asian and that the devil worshiper is our enemy even if he is definitely Iraqi." In another statement he declared that "secularism . . . such as nationalism, patriotism, Communism and Ba'athism, is flagrant unbelief, nullifying Islam and expelling one from the religion" and condemned Sunnis who participated in Iraq's political process as apostates (*Dabiq*, issue 8: 7–8; Bunzel 2015: 38–41).

After ISIS seized control of wide swaths of Iraq and Syria in the first half of 2014, Abu Omar's successor Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi gave a speech at the Great Mosque of al-Nuri in Mosul on June 28, 2014, in which he declared that the newly established caliphate would overcome the divisions caused by racism and nationalism through establishing a state where membership is based not on citizenship, ethnicity or language but on religious practice:

It is a state where the Arab and non-Arab, the white man and black man, the easterner and westerner are all brothers. It is a *Khilafah* that gathered the Caucasian, Indian, Chinese, Shami, Iraqi, Yemeni, Egyptian, Maghribi, American, French, German, and Australian. Allah brought their hearts together, and thus, they

became brothers by His grace, loving each other for the sake of Allah, standing in a single trench, defending and guarding each other, and sacrificing themselves for one another. The Muslims today have a loud, thundering statement, and possess heavy boots. They have a statement to make that will cause the world to hear and understand the meaning of terrorism, and boots that will trample the idol of nationalism, destroy the idol of democracy, and uncover its deviant nature. Therefore, rush O Muslims to your state. Yes, it is your state. Rush, because Syria is not for the Syrians, and Iraq is not for the Iraqis. (*Dabiq*, issue 1: 7–8, 11)

ISIS's English-language propaganda mouthpiece *Dabiq* further stated that "Indeed, the pan-Arabism of the Ba'athist regimes—including those of Bashar, Saddam, and Nasser—is beneath the feet of the Arab *mujāhidīn* of the *Khilāfah*" (*Dabiq*, issue 11: 19–20). *Dabiq* proudly trumpeted that ISIS had demolished the hated Sykes-Picot line that divided Iraq from Syria, erasing Western attempts to "break up Muslims' lands through nationalism." It referred to the flags of the Arab Revolt of 1917 as "the flags of *jahiliyyah*" (Fig. 9) (*Dabiq*, issue 4: 18; issue 9: 20–22). Al-Baghdadi further intoned that Western powers had tried to divide Muslim lands using the "dazzling and deceptive slogans" of "civilization, peace, co-existence, freedom, democracy, secularism, Ba'athism, nationalism, and patriotism" (al-Baghdadi 2014). *Dabiq* frequently employs terms from the pre-Islamic past as pejoratives for modern states, with Iraq's constitution described as "Magian" and the secular nationalist regime of Abdel-Fattah al-Sisi labeled "Egypt's New Pharaoh" (*Dabiq*, issue 8: 7–8; issue 6: 20). Within its territory the group ordered former lawyers and law students to report to an office to demonstrate their repentance for having practiced secular law (Fig. 10) (al-Tamimi 2016: specimen 29W).

Having rejected the Iraqi and Syrian states as *shirk* and *jahiliyyah*, ISIS was quick to appreciate the propaganda potential of attacking their symbols. The territory controlled by the group contained a large number of preserved and restored archaeological sites as well as Muslim, Christian, and Yazidi religious shrines. Most of these sites had been untouched for over 1,300 years of Islamic rule in the region, thereby increasing the propaganda value of their destruction by allowing ISIS to claim

that their actions showed they were more ideologically pure than all the Muslims who came before.

But ISIS's propaganda did not simply argue that archaeological remains were destroyed because they were idols. After all, unlike modern shrines destroyed by the group, the Assyrian and Hatrene statues and temples destroyed in locations such as the Mosul Museum, Hatra, Nimrud, Palmyra, and Nineveh had not been venerated in thousands of years. Many of the objects destroyed in the Mosul Museum were not cult images at all but statues of Hatrene kings (Figs. 11–12) (Jones 2015b; Cuneo et al. 2016; Danti et al. 2016b: 107–22). The Temple of Bel at Palmyra had even been converted to a mosque before the population of the town was relocated to modern Tadmor during French excavations at the site in the late 1920s (Bounni and al-As'ad 1988: 79, 86–87, 128). Rather, ISIS emphasized the ways in which the objects had been sacralized within their modern contexts in museums and cultural heritage sites (Mulder 2015). According to an article titled "Erasing the Legacy of a Ruined Nation" which appeared in *Dabiq* after the destruction at the Mosul Museum:

The *kuffār* [infidels] had unearthed these statues and ruins in recent generations and attempted to portray them as part of a cultural heritage and identity that the Muslims of Iraq should embrace and be proud of. Yet this opposes the guidance of Allah and His Messenger and only serves a nationalist agenda that severely dilutes the *walā'* [loyalty] that is required of the Muslims towards their Lord. (*Dabiq*, issue 8: 22–23)

The article's primary critique of these objects was not that they were condemned solely for being the idols of a long-lost civilization but that they were being functionally treated as sacred through being reconstructed and put on display in an attempt to promote a national cultural identity based on cultural continuity from the past to the present. It went on to argue that the proper purpose of ancient ruins was so that contemporary Muslims would "take a lesson from those disbelieving nations that came before us and avoid what led to their destruction, as opposed to unearthing and preserving their statues and putting them on display for people to admire." Visitors are "not to gaze upon them with

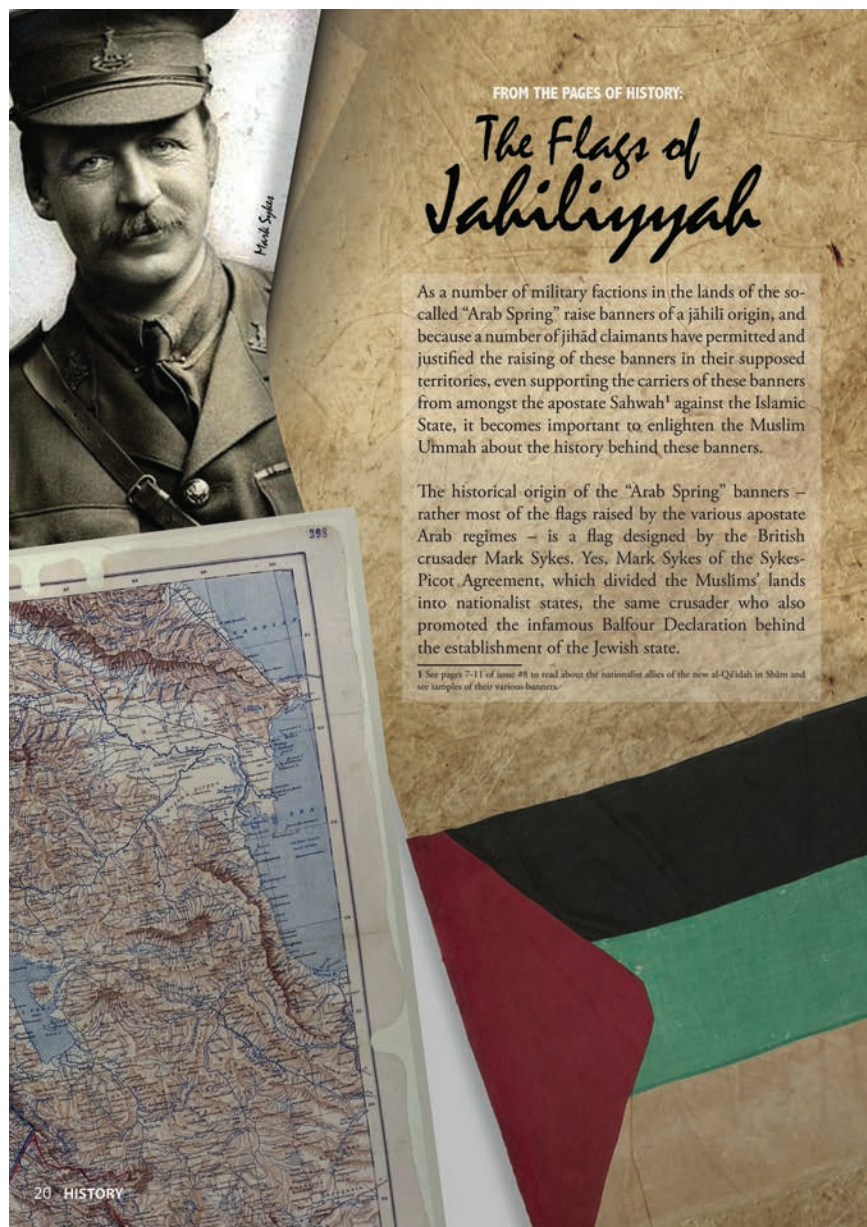


FIG. 9
 “The Flags of *Jahiliyyah*,” an article from the ninth edition of ISIS’s propaganda magazine *Dabiq*, credits “the British crusader Mark Sykes” with designing the flag of the Arab Revolt during the First World War, which in turn inspired all later Arab national flags. (*Dabiq*, issue 9: 20; source: <https://clarionproject.org/islamic-state-isis-isil-propaganda-magazine-dabiq-50/>.)

admiration, but to look at them with disgust and hatred, coupled with the fear of falling into *shirk* and being afflicted with the same punishment they had tasted.” The remains were destroyed, according to the piece, precisely because they were still valued by the enemies of the Islamic State, which in turn meant they were still functioning as idols for those who still considered them as part of their cultural heritage. The article concluded by imputing a link between past and present forms of *shirk*,

asking “May Allah cleanse all Muslims’ lands of the idols of both the past and the present” (*Dabiq*, issue 8: 22–24).

In a three-part series titled “Symbols or Idols” published in the secondary propaganda newsletter *al-Naba*, the group made even more explicit the links between nationalism, *shirk*, and ancient idol worship. “In this world there are many statues,” notes the author, but “the statue does not become an idol by itself, but rather through the presence of people who worship it.” The



FIG. 10

“Man-Made Laws: Under My Feet,” an image translated into multiple languages and distributed widely by ISIS supporters online as well as on billboards in Mosul. The figure in black treads on books representing heresies labeled “The Iraqi Constitution,” “Civil and Criminal Law,” “Positive Law,” “The Legislative Assemblies,” and “The Rule of Mankind.” (Source: <http://trendsinstitution.org/the-bondage-of-history-daeshisis-and-the-islamic-past/>.)

statue serves as an idol when it becomes a symbol, an object apart from God in which people place their trust. “Anything worshiped besides Allah is inevitably taken as His equal,” writes the author, “whether it is a prophet, a beloved king, a righteous worshiper, an arrogant ruler, a deceiving priest, an obeyed law, a grave, tree, or rock from which blessings are sought.” Since Muslims are called to unity under God, one of the foremost duties of Muslims is “hold the axe of Ibrahim to smash the symbols that people worship instead of Allah and to remove this ‘symbolism’ from those who are worshiped and followed” (*al-Naba* issue 25: 14–15; issue 26: 14–15; issue 27: 14).

ISIS’s performative destruction of ancient remains exclusively targeted artifacts that were on display in museums or archaeological sites that had been heavily reconstructed in the twentieth century. On the other hand, ancient artifacts in non-sacralized contexts were not destroyed. Sites such as Mari, Tell Ajaja, and Dura-Europos were heavily looted but were not featured in destructive performances. After the recapture of eastern Mosul Iraqi archaeologists discovered that the group had

tunneled into the mound of Nebi Yunus and uncovered a number of Assyrian reliefs. These objects were left in place and were not destroyed (Ensor 2017). The ruins of the pre-Islamic past were not meant to be erased completely but to remain in a state of decay as a warning. Reconstructions violated this principle, effectively sacralizing antiquities as symbols of the state.

While understanding ISIS’s destruction of medieval and modern Shia, Sufi, Yazidi, and Christian sites as an attempt to erase evidence of competing religious systems from the landscape is often relatively straightforward, in certain cases anti-nationalist motives may also be apparent. Ba’athist Syria and Iraq promoted secularized versions of their Islamic pasts along with the pre-Islamic past, with the Abbasids and Saladin given a special prominence in Iraq and the Umayyads given a similar position in Syria in order to emphasize each country’s particularism and avoid pan-Arabism (Baram 1991: 51–58; al-Gailani Werr 2014: 20; Zisser 2006: 186; Valter 2002: 55–57, 170–74). ISIS has systematically destroyed most of Mosul’s medieval architecture



FIG. 11
The destruction of the Mosul Museum shown in stills from a video released by ISIS. From top to bottom: Statue of Sanatruq II of Hatra (ruled ca. AD 200–240); statue of Nike from Hatra; two views of Assyrian *lamassu*s at the Nergal Gate at Nineveh. (*Dabiq*, issue 8: 24; source: <https://clarionproject.org/islamic-state-isis-isil-propaganda-magazine-dabiq-50/>.)



FIG. 12

The destruction of the Mosul Museum shown in stills from a video released by ISIS. Left: Statue of king Uthal of Hatra. Right: statue of an unidentified king of Hatra holding an eagle. (*Dabiq*, issue 8: 22–23; source: <https://clarionproject.org/islamic-state-isis-isil-propaganda-magazine-dabiq-50/>.)

(Nováček et al. n.d.). The group's efforts to destroy Sufi shrines in northern Iraq have often been aimed at sites linked to Kurdish ethnic identity, providing another example of targeting Islamic heritage for anti-nationalist reasons (Danti 2015: 137).⁸

ISIS also staged performative deliberate destructions of modern sites linked to nationalism and the Syrian Ba'ath in much the same manner as they destroyed ancient sites. A few days after the capture of Palmyra, ISIS demolished the nearby Tadmor Military Prison, the site of an infamous massacre of over a thousand members of the Muslim Brotherhood on June 27, 1980 following an assassination attempt against Hafez al-Assad. Photos of the destruction were posted online in the same manner as was done for ancient sites (Figs. 13–14) (Seale 1989: 328–29; Taleghani 2015). Likewise, ISIS demolished the Ottoman citadel of Tal Afar in December 2014, a historic building that had most recently served as the headquarters of the city council and the police (Jones 2015a; Choukeir 2017).

One of the leaders of ISIS's campaign against antiquities in Mosul appeared in a video prior to the destruction of the Northwest Palace at Nimrud in which he boasted

that ISIS would soon remove symbols of *shirk* from both Shia lands and the United States:

Whenever we take control of a piece of land, we remove the symbols of *shirk*, and spread monotheism in it. By Allah, we shall remove the symbols of polytheism, until we have destroyed the tombs of the Rafidites in their own land, until we have shattered the crosses, and until we have destroyed the Black House in the heart of the land of heresy, America. (MemriTV 2015b)

In this formulation secular national symbols such as the White House are grouped together with museums and ancient sites under the category of *shirk*, for they all represent systems of power apart from Islamic law as conceived by ISIS.

The links forged in the twentieth century between archaeology and national identity, deeply rooted in the Westphalian state system and sovereignty over territory, in which archaeological remains are controlled by the state, reconstructed and preserved by the state, and used as ideological symbols of the state, made them into prominent targets of those seeking to destroy the concept of the

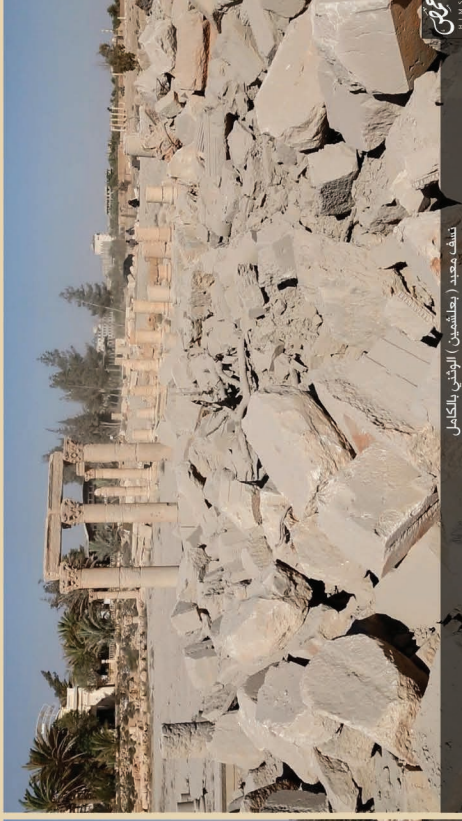
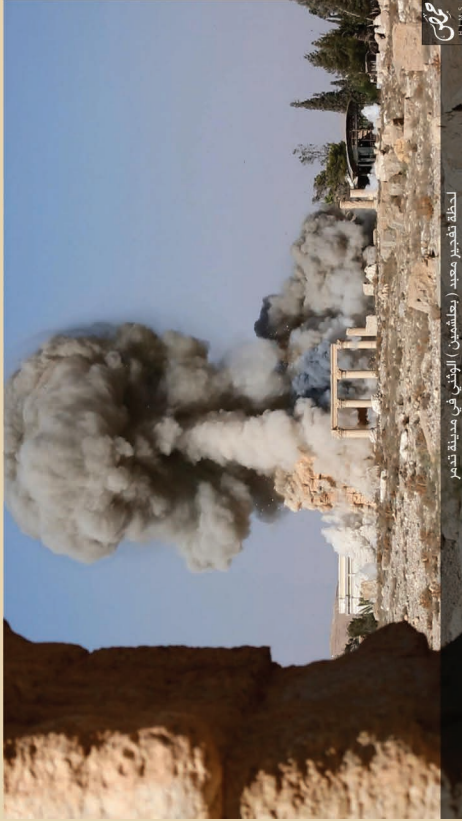
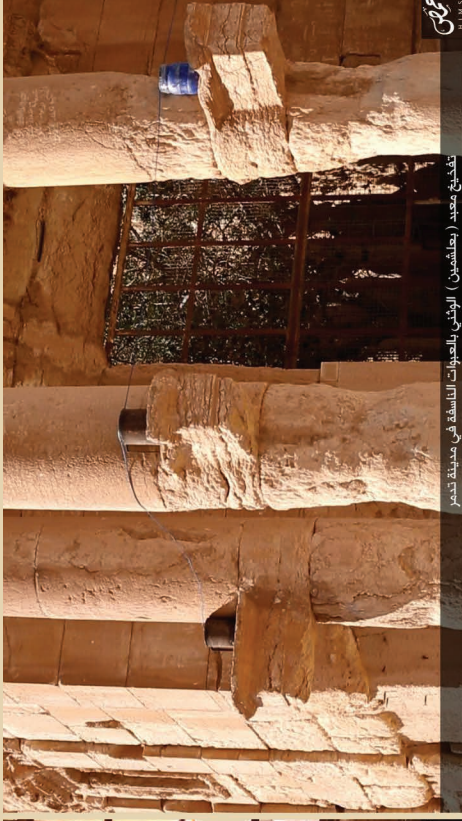


FIG. 13
 Photos released online by ISIS showing the performative destruction of the temple of Baalshamin in Palmyra, August 23, 2015.
 (Source: <http://www.latimes.com/world/middleeast/la-fig-palmyra-temple-destruction-pictures-20150825-photogallery.html>).

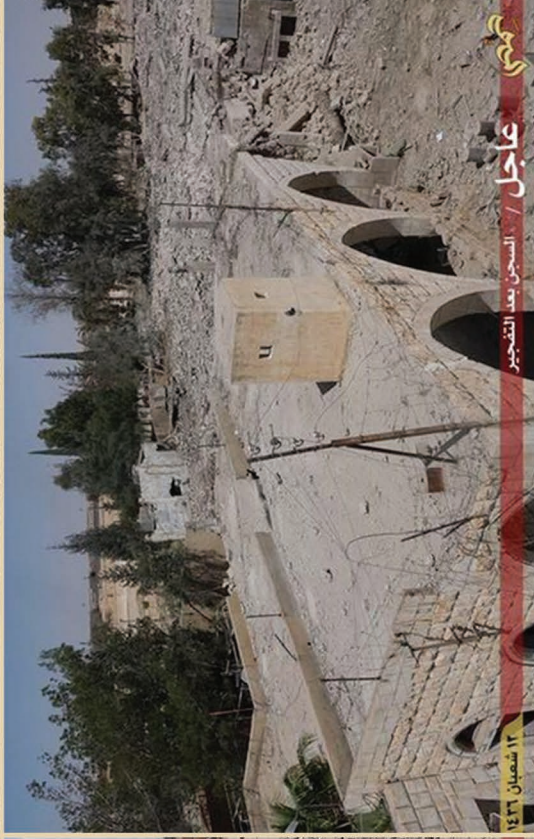
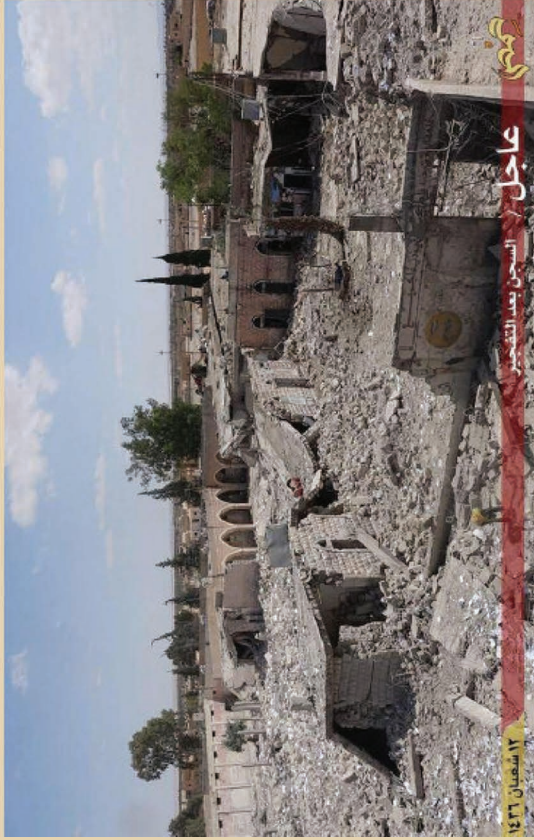


FIG. 14
Photos released online by ISIS showing the performative destruction of Tadmor Military Prison, May 30, 2015. Compare to Fig. 13 showing the destruction of a pre-Islamic temple.

state. By attacking the valued cultural heritage of Iraq and Syria, ISIS is rejecting the idea that sharing geographic boundaries with past civilizations makes them part of one's cultural heritage. In short, by doing so it is attacking the states themselves, constructions that it views as *shirk*.

Seen in this light, ISIS's involvement in the illicit antiquities trade is not evidence of hypocrisy but rather is entirely consistent with the group's ideology. Although the importance of the antiquities trade to the group's finances has been vastly overstated in media reports, documents captured by the American military during a May 2015 raid on the home of ISIS leader Fathi Ben Awn Jildi Murad al-Tunisi (better known as Abu Sayyaf) outside Deir ez-Zor demonstrated conclusively that ISIS was involved in facilitating and taxing the looting of antiquities (Jones 2016; Keller 2015).⁹ These same documents showed that ISIS oversaw antiquities looting through its *Diwan al-Rikaz* or Department of Natural Resources, the same division charged with overseeing the extraction of oil, minerals, and precious metals (Keller 2015).

Whereas Iraq and Syria both had strict antiquities laws declaring all ancient artifacts to be the property of the state, former Islamic State leader Omar al-Baghdadi had denounced the Iraqi government's control of natural resources, saying "they made the resources of Iraq—especially the water and oil—the property of those who possess Iraqi citizenship!" The land's resources, he argued, belonged only to Muslims of all national origins and should be utilized for their benefit (*Dabiq*, issue 8: 8).¹⁰ The internal structure of the *Diwan al-Rikaz* shows that ISIS applied these ideas to the looting of archaeological sites: The *Diwan al-Rikaz* licensed private citizens to dig in return for ISIS collecting a substantial windfall tax on the profits. ISIS propaganda videos have advertised digging for antiquities as a career path available to the otherwise unemployed (van Dam 2017: 77–78).

Antiquities that are dug up from the ground and sold on the market are not sacralized and are therefore not idols. Rather than being used as symbols of the Iraq and Syrian states, buried antiquities are instead viewed as a natural resource to be utilized for the benefit of the people of the Islamic State. ISIS considers the sale of these antiquities abroad to be the same as mining for gold or silver or extracting oil. Their sale is yet another attack on the nation-state, an assertion of sovereignty over a class

of objects once considered to be the exclusive property of the state.

Finally, ISIS sees itself as deconstructing the state through recapitulating the history of the earliest Muslims. The group portrays itself as heir to the Rashidun caliphs, fighting against *shirk*-practicing world powers to expand the boundaries of Islam (*Dabiq*, issue 10: 26–29). In videos and articles, the group's propagandists have compared the destruction of ancient artifacts to Muhammad's destruction of the idols kept inside the Kaaba following his capture of Mecca in 630. Later expeditions sent out by Muhammad destroyed pagan shrines and temples across Arabia. According to the narrator of the Mosul Museum video:

The Prophet Muhammad shattered the idols with his own honorable hands, when he conquered Mecca. The Prophet Muhammad commanded us to shatter and destroy statues. This is what his companions did later on, when they conquered lands. Since Allah commanded us to shatter and destroy these statues, idols, and remains, it is easy for us to obey, and we do not care, even if this costs billions of dollars. (MemriTV 2015a; cf. *Dabiq*, issue 8: 22)

ISIS consistently portrays itself as heirs to the legacy of Muhammad, hoping to legitimize their caliphate by demonstrating that it closely emulates the practices of the earliest Muslims. Many Western observers assumed that the videos were targeted at Western audiences as a demonstration of the group's power (Cambanis 2015; Zarandona 2015; Jenkins 2015; Wieseltier 2015). Yet even though ISIS has produced many videos in English, French, or German whenever it wishes to communicate messages to foreign audiences, the narrators in videos of antiquities destruction always speak Arabic and explicitly address their remarks to Muslims. Videos posted to sites such as Vimeo, Facebook, or YouTube are typically rapidly removed, so supporters generally must download them via peer-to-peer file sharing or other dark web sources (Gilbert 2015; Terban 2015; Berton 2015). All things considered, it seems that their intended audience for videos and photo spreads of antiquities destruction are not Western audiences but their own supporters, sympathizers, and potential recruits.¹¹

Therefore, ISIS's destruction of ancient sites can be understood as a form of ideological self-fashioning, a self-fulfilling prophecy aimed primarily at propagandizing its own members and dissuading those who may hold some residual feelings for the ancient cultures of Iraq and Syria. As a demonstration of the group's ideological purity, it has the double effect of emphasizing both the overthrow of the old political order of nation-states and the group's self-identification with the earliest Muslims. The statues were idols because they were used to support idolatrous nationalism. Muhammad destroyed idols, so in order to emulate him ISIS must find idols to destroy.

Implications for Future Cultural Heritage Efforts

Our current conception of cultural heritage preservation is thoroughly entangled with the institution of the nation-state. Diplomats and cultural heritage officials have often spoken of the vital role that they expect cultural heritage to play in post-conflict reconstruction. According to UNESCO director Irina Bokova, "to fight fanaticism, we also need to reinforce education, a defense against hatred, and protect heritage, which helps forge collective identity" (UN Press Office 2014). According to U.S. State Department Assistant Secretary Anne Richard, "When we help protect heritage sites or preserve cultural objects throughout the world, we also support a nation's efforts to restore its national identity" so that "citizens of all ethnicities, faiths, backgrounds, and economic stations can feel the pride and sense of national unity that comes with that" (Richard 2013).

Yet, in Iraq and Syria archaeological heritage was used for decades to promote national unity with only

partial success. As a result, that heritage became a target for those who wanted to destroy those states. As of this writing ISIS has lost control of nearly all of its territory, but Iraq and Syria have fractured along ethno-religious sectarian lines and political Islamism remains strong across the region. As Syria scholar Joshua Landis stated in a recent interview, "Islamism proved to be the only ideology capable of uniting Syrians on a national level, binding rebels together from north and south of the country" (Judis 2017). When states fail, alternatives to the nation-state will take root. While Islamists before ISIS mostly (with the exception of the Taliban in 2001 and Ansar al-Dine at Timbuktu in 2012) ignored ancient monuments, now other groups will follow ISIS's example and seek to prove their doctrinal purity through destroying antiquities as well, as the al-Qaida affiliate Ansar al-Sharia has already done in Yemen (Hardy 2015, 2016). Militant Islamism of the type represented by ISIS should not be dismissed as an atavistic throwback to the seventh century but understood as a response to the failures of twentieth-century Middle Eastern nation-states. Simply re-iterating the value of cultural heritage for the people of Iraq and Syria assumes that the end of the post-Arab Spring conflicts convulsing the Middle East will return Iraq and Syria to their pre-conflict state.

The end of the post-Arab Spring conflicts in the Middle East will not bring about a restoration of the secular regimes of the twentieth century nor restore the funding which they lavished on archaeological projects (Danti 2014: 639–43). Archaeology, in short, will have to come to terms with the fact that Arab nationalism is dead. Cultural heritage preservation efforts will need to engage with these issues or risk growing irrelevance and indifference in the region.

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Notes

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1. Michael Danti has defined a performative deliberate destruction as “scripted productions with ISIL militants delivering speeches and reciting religious passages on camera, purporting that the targeted heritage is idolatrous or heretical within their interpretation of Islam and unconnected to the cultural identity of those living within the ‘caliphate.’ These diatribes are followed by meticulously edited film sequences showing destructions of architecture and sculpture using explosives, heavy machinery, and hand tools. Videos and still photos are then posted on the internet with ISIL branding or are featured in the ISIL magazine *Dabiq*.” According to data collected by ASOR between early 2014 and September 2015, 39 percent of sites destroyed in performative deliberate destructions were Shia, 17 percent were Sufi, and 8 percent were Sunni. Christian sites made up 9 percent of the total and ancient pre-Islamic sites only 3 percent (Danti 2015: 138).
2. Available online in English and Arabic at https://www.constituteproject.org/constitution/Iraq_2005.pdf as well as <http://www.wipo.int/wipolex/en/details.jsp?id=10027>.
3. The most complete account of the political use of the ancient past in the construction of modern Syrian national identity, largely utilizing the work of modern Syrian historians, can be found in Valter 2002. Other discussions of aspects of the use of archaeology and heritage management for political purposes can be found in Zisser 2006; Gillot 2010; Kastrinou 2016: 130–61; Sahner 2014: 133–35; Seale 1989: 459–60.
4. Secular Arab nationalists’ fascination with Zenobia predates the al-Assad regime by a hundred years, with numerous novels and poems being written about her. Despite the notorious unreliability of the later biographies in the *Historia Augusta*, depictions of Zenobia in Arab nationalist literature have relied almost exclusively on this source rather than on the very different and negative portrayal offered by classical Arabic historians such as al-Tabari. The image of Zenobia as an exotic Eastern queen defeated by a Western emperor can easily be flipped to depict Zenobia as an anti-colonial heroine representing Eastern resistance to Western imperialism. Not so with al-Tabari’s presentation of Zenobia as emblematic of pre-Islamic ignorance and depravity. See Woltering 2014. For Western views of Zenobia as an exotic eastern monarch, see Winsbury 2010.
5. For a full account of the looting of the Iraqi National Museum and of archaeological sites in Iraq post 2003, see Rothfield 2009; Emberling and Hanson 2008; Stone and Bajjalay 2008. For an account of the destruction of Ba’athist monuments by Iraqis as well as American and British troops as part of a symbolic erasure of the regime, see Isakhan 2011.
6. For movements seeking to establish the caliphate through peaceful means, see Taji-Farouki 1996. For the interpretation of the caliphate as a metaphor for humanity’s relationship with God, see Kersten 2015. For Ali Abd’ al-Raziq’s arguments that the caliphate has no basis in the Qur’an and should be abolished, see Ali 2015.
7. Maqdisi would later break with Zarqawi, considering him too eager to condemn other Muslims as *kuffar* rather than engage with them. However, Maqdisi’s former student Turki al-Bindi is a prominent Islamic scholar within ISIS. See Bunzel 2015: 11.
8. ISIS has more recently carried out attacks on Sufi mosques in Pakistan and in Egypt, claiming that Sufi religious practices constitute *shirk*, an innovation from correct monotheistic practice, and *jahiliyyah* (Saeed 2017; Green 2017). However, in all the group’s statements on the matter there is nothing to suggest that Sufis are being targeted for anti-nationalist reasons. The group appears to target Sufis solely based on disputes over their interpretations of Islam and does not seem to be using the term *shirk* to describe nationalism when using it in reference to Sufis.
9. Several methods are possible for estimating ISIS’s revenue from antiquities sales. Comparing the receipts captured from the Abu Sayyaf raid with other documents detailing ISIS revenue sources in Deir ez-Zor province suggests that antiquities sales represented only 0.5 percent of the group’s revenue from that province. The other method, following the work of Rick St. Hilaire, is to examine the increase in imports of cultural property from Syria, Iraq, Turkey, and Lebanon. Even if one assumes that all such antiquities originated with ISIS, after accounting for markups by middlemen, comparisons to the overall revenue figures from Deir ez-Zor still show that antiquities sales make up a very small percentage of the group’s total revenue. The leading sources of revenue for ISIS are oil and gas extraction, direct taxation, and confiscation of property from the local population. For a more detailed discussion, see Jones 2016.
10. “They made the resources of Iraq—especially the water and oil—the property of those who possess Iraqi citizenship! . . . These people are those who said, ‘Iraq is for all the Iraqis and its resources are the property of all the Iraqis.’ Yes, for all of the Iraqis, even if they are from the Yazidi devil worshippers or Sabian Mandaeans. All of them according to them have equal rights whether he is a *Sunni* Muslim or *Rāfiḍī* Magian! It does not concern him whether this Iraqi worships our Glorious Lord or a rebellious devil. His right will be protected!” (*Dabiq*, issue 8: 7–8).
11. See Winter 2015. Winter analyzed 1,146 distinct pieces of ISIS propaganda disseminated over a one-month period and found the group’s propaganda is primarily aimed at its near enemies and against internal dissenters.

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