

Iconic Socioclasm: Idol-Breaking and the Dawn of a New Social Order

CHRISTOPH GÜNTHER¹
Johannes Gutenberg University, Mainz, Germany

The Islamic State articulates its claim for legitimate authority through texts, audio messages, and still and moving images. In addition, among the practices employed to classify “genuine” Islam and its boundaries, the destruction of cultural properties has received much international attention. The movement has framed these sites as manifestations of idolatry and, consequently, their obliteration as a legitimate means for socioreligious purification. In this article, I argue that the Islamic State’s attacks on these properties are embedded in a comprehensive strategy of spatial, material, ideational, and intellectual purification of the socioreligious landscape. By destroying these sites, the movement targets integral elements of social identities of local and transnational communities and their individual members in order to build a new social framework on their ruins. I suggest understanding these acts as strategic “socioclasm.” Visualizations are part of this strategy and help render the Islamic State an effective force because they support the production of images in the minds of both the movement’s followers and adversaries, hence attesting to the Islamic State’s rise, ideology, and actions.

Keywords: ISIS, Islamic State, iconoclasm, socioclasm, cultural properties, cultural heritage

Ever since the Islamic State and its predecessors² began to contest the power of state authorities in Iraq and Syria and eventually announced the establishment of a caliphate in June 2014, still and moving images of its fighters and other representatives have been disseminated across the globe and have drawn attention to this Jihadi-Salafi movement. Using retail movie equipment and software, the Islamic State’s

Christoph Günther: c.guenther@uni-mainz.de

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² For the sake of brevity, I use the emic designation “Islamic State” to denote the group that announced the establishment of an Islamic State (*dawla islāmīya*) in July 2014/Ramadan 1435 AH. This includes all stages of the group’s organizational and denominational evolution, namely *al-Tawhīd wa-l-Jihād*, *Tanzīm qā’idat al-jihād fi-bilād al-rāfidayn*, *hilf al-muṭayyabīn*, *dawlat al-‘Irāq al-islāmīya*, and *al-dawla al-islāmīya fi-l-‘Irāq wa-l-Shām*.

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personnel and their supporters have produced elaborate and, at times, sophisticated videos that widely circulate online and off-line. The videos have helped the movement to create, structure, and give meaning to its imagination of a Manichean world order presented as a pristine Islamic alternative to any other form of organization of governance and society. Consequently, these images are an important part of the Islamic State's social-revolutionary project and constitute one of the various means of the movement's contentious politics, entangling symbolic and concrete competition.

In this article, I scrutinize the ways in which the Islamic State renders this competition meaningful through the destruction of cultural properties and the visualization of these acts in moving images. I argue that the movement's attacks on these properties are not simply iconoclastic acts and articulations of its opposition to distinct religious symbols and their veneration. Rather, in attacking these properties, the Islamic State's ideologues seek to prevent distinct social practices that are important constituents of social identities of local and transnational communities and their individual members—although such calculation may not be evident in the Islamic State's rationale, which is based on the Quranic dictum to “command right and forbid wrong” (*al-amr bi-l-ma'rūf wa-l-nahy 'an al-munkar*).

While iconoclastic acts always happen in social contexts, are shaped by sociopolitical (and not purely religious) agendas, and have social repercussions, studies of iconoclasm and iconoclasts have rarely made these perspectives fruitful for understanding attacks on cultural properties. I take the destruction of two Shiite sites as case studies to expand on the premises of these studies and develop the concept of “socioclasm”—a strategy of purification that involves the destruction of cultural properties because they are perceived as integral elements of social identities of local and transnational communities and their individual members. As a heuristic, socioclasm, I argue, helps widen our perspective from a sharp focus on the religious and symbolic to the ways in which these attacks manifest the Islamic State's aim for an all-encompassing spatial, material, ideational, and intellectual purification of the socioreligious landscape—and hence to comprehend the complexity of these actions and their manifold effects, repercussions, and dynamics.

With reference to the fact that the Islamic State extensively utilizes socioclastic actions to produce and disseminate still and moving images of these destructions, I propose a further theoretical expansion that I describe as “iconic socioclasm.” It accentuates the fact that many cultural assets have been destroyed not only to wipe them out but also to produce and disseminate images and keep alive the memory of the destruction. In other words, these sites were destroyed to annihilate elements of individual and collective memory and to create the memory of annihilation (see also Brubaker, 2013). These images thus signify, conjure, and testify to the Islamic State's power as it aims to construct social identities and build a new social framework on the ruins of destroyed monuments, obliterated social and religious practices, and killed religious authorities.

Beyond videos and photo reports whose titles indicate the destruction of cultural properties as the main subject, one also finds imagery depicting the destruction of cultural properties deeply embedded in the Islamic State's general teleology. An example of such imagery can be found in a video published by the Islamic State in 2017 to polemicize against various renowned Sunni theologians opposing the movement's ideology (Al-Battar Media, 2017). In an introductory sequence praising the Islamic State's achievements is a short scene in which a voice-over asserts that the Islamic State has granted victory to monotheism and

destroyed idolatry (*naṣarat al-tawhīd wa-hadamat al-shirk*) while a partially animated montage is shown. Viewers see two simultaneous motions: On the right-hand side, the minaret of a mosque that remains unnamed collapses, while a man dressed in camouflage holding the Islamic State's black flag rises from the ground to the center of the image (see Figure 1).



Figure 1. Still from video *Quṭā' al-Turuq* (Al-Battar Media, 2017).

Although it is a short scene in a longer video produced to bolster the Islamic State's claim on the prerogative of an authoritative interpretation of Islam's holy sources, the six-second composition paradigmatically illustrates the way in which the movement conceptualizes its own position in between the dialectics of *tawhīd* (monotheism) and *shirk* (polytheism, idolatry). Presenting themselves as the vanguard (*ṭāli'a*) empowered by God to restore and preserve the pristine creed of the Prophet Muhammad's community among contemporary Muslims, the Islamic State's ideologues claim to establish divine ordinances and, accordingly, exert legitimate social, political, and theological authority. Consequently, they frame the establishment of "true" Islam as a social-revolutionary project that is part of an eternal fight between *tawhīd* and its antipodes. In their view, an implementation of true Islam consequently requires a violent purification of the earth from any material and immaterial manifestation of *shirk*, *kufr* (disbelief), and *ṭāghūt* (tyranny, literally juggernaut), leading to a complete transformation of all domains of society on both an intellectual and a material level. The short montage not only shows how one symbol replaces another; the scene illustrates the purportedly inevitable simultaneity of the emergence of a God-given order and the obliteration of its antipodes. The foundation of a purified society, represented by the warrior firmly holding the Islamic State's black flag, must be built on the rubble of those forces opposing pristine monotheism, represented by the collapsing minaret of the Shiite Jawād Husayniyya mosque in Tal 'Afar, which is thought to have been blown up in July 2014 after the Islamic State seized control of the city.

Commanding Right and Forbidding Wrong: The Construction of an Islamic State Identity

To render the destruction of cultural properties as acts that conform to divine ordinances, ideologues of the Islamic State and its predecessors have used a variety of media. Justifications of these acts are deeply interlinked with the group's premise to recover the essence of pristine Islam, construct a specific sense of true Muslimness, and clearly define its boundaries. In their view, it is among the essential duties incumbent on Muslims to dissociate themselves from all instances of *shirk* and *kufr*.³ The Islamic State's ideologues, bureaucrats, and fighters have built a force involved in a situation of conflict in Syria, Iraq, and other countries that emerges around theological claims, existential and ontological insecurities, and volatile social hierarchies. This situation of conflict thus far exceeds the system of violent struggles around social, political, and economic power between state and nonstate actors in the above-mentioned societies. Engaging in the construction and manipulation of social identities is therefore not ephemeral to the Islamic State's ideologues who seek to bolster the movement's military campaigns and guarantee the persistence of its social-revolutionary project (Perry & Long, 2016).

Categories of social identity such as Muslim, Sunni, Arab, Shii, Iraqi, and Syrian are resources that people use to make sense of reality. They provide short-cuts for (potentially complex) systems of beliefs, normative appeals, and orientations as they help people understand who they are, how they are related to others, and how they should behave in certain situations. However, the relation of these ontological resources to the sense of one's self is volatile, ambiguous, highly variegated, and determined, among other factors, by an individual's horizon(s) of experience in her or his social environment. The Islamic State's ideologues, whom I describe elsewhere as "entrepreneurs of identity" (Günther, forthcoming), use such categories as tools of communicative and cognitive structuring. They interlink these resources with their ideological framework to offer plausible and meaningful appraisals of social and political events and facts; "fortify" and essentialize specific categories of social identity; stimulate processes of social closure; inspire, shape, and orchestrate individual and collective behavior; justify a claim to power and various resources; and generate conformity to their vision of sociopolitical order.

Presenting the Islamic State as an elite force eager to establish a system of meaning and order that conforms to divine ordinances, the movement's ideologues have created a symbolic repertoire of concepts, social practices, and forms of cultural production. Its leadership appropriates and reinterprets specific concepts drawn from Islamic history such as the *shūrā* council, the oath of allegiance (*bay'a*), and "the caliphate in the prophetic method" (*khilāfa 'alā minhāj al-nubūwa*) to frame their vision of organizing governance and society in religious concepts. To activate the imagination of an ideal Sunni Muslim community, the Islamic State's ideologues have appropriated and developed social practices based on these concepts. Both concepts and social practices are reflected in and productive of a wide array of forms of cultural production such as poetry, vocal music, and new media (Hegghammer, 2017). The appropriation, creation, and dissemination of images play an important role because they appeal to various audiences across cultural and language boundaries and help the Islamic State distribute its messages in an emotionally effective way.

³ See, for example, various texts produced in the Islamic State's *maktabat al-himma* publication series.

In the Islamic State's holistic understanding, the fate of humanity is, to a great extent, determined by the dialectics of good and evil. The collision of *tawhīd* and its opposites *kufr*, *ṭāghūt*, and *shirk*, then, becomes apparent in virtually all spheres of society and human action. To resolve these collisions of absolute monotheism and its material or immaterial antagonists, the Islamic State's ideologues propose a rigid application of the Quranic paradigm "to command right and forbid wrong".⁴ They appropriate and reinterpret this dictum according to their ideological framework, using it to classify group norms and boundaries as well as to substantiate their claim for political power. Consequently, the movement declares the intellectual and physical rejection of any violation of divine ordinances through material and immaterial manifestations of *shirk*, *kufr*, and *ṭāghūt*, its leading principle, extensively enforcing its radical interpretations in various spheres of society to create maximum conformity to the Islamic State's rule and induce wide-ranging attitudinal and social changes.

A powerful configuration of social practices underpinning the Islamic State's efforts to create broad social changes can be seen in the work of the administrative and bureaucratic structures by which the movement institutionalized a form of "rebel governance" (see, e.g., Lia, 2017) in cities such as Mosul, Falluja, and al-Raqqa. The Islamic State's administrative staff, followers, fighters, and members of the *diwān al-hisba*⁵ exert regulatory authority in the areas under the group's control by enforcing a strict code of conduct, pervading people's minds and day-to-day practices with the movement's ideology, and facilitating the intellectual rejection and material obliteration of any form of opposition to the Islamic State's claim for power and vision of a "genuine" Muslim society. In particular, the *muḥtasibūn* (those who enforce *hisba*) and their female counterparts in the *liwā' al-khansā'* have helped normalize the Islamic State's far-reaching interference into the sociolegal regulation of society, hence to stabilize its rule. Moreover, the work of these men and women has been documented in several photo reports and videos (see e.g., Nīnawā Province Media Office, 2015a), rendering the Islamic State's opposition to any deviation from its own ideal visible and tangible for local, regional, and global audiences.

Obliterating Manifestations of Idolatry

Beyond various forms of human action punished by the *hisba* as violations of divine ordinances, the Islamic State's *muḥtasibūn* acquired prominent roles in attacks on cultural properties, which the movement's ideologues had denounced as manifestations (*mazāhir* or *ma'ālim*) of idolatry. Internationally, the movement's attacks on ancient cultural properties (and their medialization in particular) have captured much attention (see, e.g., Cunliffe & Curini, 2018). However, attacks on internationally known ancient sites have been comparatively few. Several photo reports and videos show that the Islamic State has directed the power of its fighters against cultural properties that were primarily used by local religious communities, among them Christian churches and monasteries (Damascus Province Media Office, 2015a, 2015b); Sufi *zāwiyas* as well as graveyards (Maktabat al-Himma, n.d., 2014); Sunni mausoleums (Anonymous, 2016; Nīnawā Province Media Office, 2015a, 2015b, 2015c; ṣalāḥ al-Dīn Province Media Office, 2015); Shi'i

⁴ On the dictum and debates around it throughout Islamic history, see Cook (2002, 2003) and Van Ess (1991, pp. 387–390).

⁵ On *hisba* as an institution and its use by the Islamic State, see Günther and Kaden (2016).

mosques, shrines, and graveyards; and natural objects such as trees (al-Furāt Media, 2015).⁶ The choice of cultural properties targeted by the Islamic State indicates the extent to which the movement prioritizes certain levels of conflict: Mostly affected are sites of Shiite religious practice and Sunni communities whose tenets and religious practices the Islamic State's ideologues denounce as heresy. By turning against these objects rigidly, the movement seeks to promote the idea of "pristine" Islam that must be recovered and (re)enforced by the vanguard (*ṭālī'a*) that is the Islamic State in its self-conception.

I will discuss the implications of this strategy below, but it is important to note that the movement has framed its attacks on any site considered a manifestation of idolatry in largely similar terms. It does not differentiate between wider concepts of veneration, honor, or respect but rather subsumes them under the rubric of "worship" (*ibāda*), regardless of whether the cultural property attacked was an ancient temple complex, a monastery, a mausoleum, or any other site used for religious practices, from graveyards to trees. In its videos, the Islamic State uses a documentary mode to show the destruction of cultural properties. Most videos present a male Islamic State official who, standing on-site during the ongoing operation, frames the necessity for the destruction in religious language. The official emphasizes that, by following the divine ordinances and the example of the Prophet Muhammad, the Islamic State is left with no choice but to destroy these properties, because they are manifestations of polytheism. Furthermore, the viewer experiences a multisensory account of the obliteration. The videos show footage of the respective sites before the destruction and then document the destruction itself. The speakers' verbal explanation, specific *anāshīd* that are used in almost all such films, as well as the sounds of the destruction substantiate and aurally complement the visual documentation. In these videos—and in several texts and audio files—the movement's ideologues and representatives use the attacks as an opportunity to link their claim for "classificatory power" (see Müller, 2018) to the call to destroy these sites. They define and appraise characteristics of "genuine" Muslims adhering to *tawhīd* as opposing traits of those communities that practice *kufr* and *shirk*.

The verbal and visual narration in these videos defines "landmarks of idolatry" (*ma'ālim al-shirk*) as epitomes of eternally powerful forces, which lead people astray from the "right" path of *tawhīd*. The destruction of these sites is thus conceptualized as an essential precondition for the establishment and dissemination of monotheism and "the right creed" (*al-'aqīda al-ṣaḥīḥa*).⁷ The rationale presented by the Islamic State's ideologues thus frames their endeavors as reformative acts aimed against any site, object, and practice that could be interpreted as worshipping of icons or idols instead of the one God. Focusing on

⁶ It is not possible in this article to provide a comprehensive overview of the destruction of cultural properties at the hands of the Islamic State. Isakhan and González Zarandona (2017) as well as Beránek and Ťupek (2018, pp. 178–186) offer surveys on incidents and point to further literature. Detailed information on single incidents can be found at <http://monumentsofmosul.com>, <http://www.asor-syrianheritage.org/> and <https://gatesofnineveh.wordpress.com/>.

⁷ The Islamic State's ideologues use the notion of the timeless struggle between monotheism and its antipodes to identify their own thinking and action as a continuation of what God's prophets have done before. This is particularly evident in their reference to Abraham (see Nīnawā Province Media Office, 2016), which was also a prominent trait of the destruction of the Buddha statues in Bamiyan at the hands of the Taliban (Elias, 2013).

such a rationale that is grounded in religious terminology, much scholarship has scrutinized such deeds in both the past and present in a field of study in art history called *iconoclasm*. Studies in iconoclasm and iconoclasts examine historical events, modes of behavior, ideologies, and attitudes toward images with various agencies, motivations, and intentions in relation to different historical periods, incorporating diverse meanings from the simple hiding and “whitewashing” of images to their complete destruction (see Chapman, 2018, pp. 3–31).⁸

Iconoclasm in its modern understanding refers to the destruction of images and initially denoted a period in Byzantine history in the seventh and eighth centuries CE. Both the term and the concept have long been associated with discursive and material struggles around the value, meaning, and attributed power of images in the domain of religious (mainly monotheist) doxa, practices, and imaginaries (Brubaker, 2012; see also, e.g., Aston, 1988/2003). For this reason, iconoclasm is often understood as “a religious phenomenon generated from a position of belief and right action as defined within that belief system” (Apostolos-Cappadona, 2005, p. 4282) that centers on “the intentional desecration or destruction of works of art, especially those containing human figurations, on religious principles or beliefs” (p. 4279). Boldrick (2013) takes a more general approach and highlights the embeddedness of such acts in a symbolic order, suggesting that iconoclasm can be understood as “the deliberate breaking or infringement of the physical integrity of culturally significant images and objects . . . including sites and landscapes as well as other objects and artefacts that possess a symbolic power” (p. 2).

Acts interpreted as iconoclasm can be traced throughout human history, where we see that “the history of an icon includes repeated and overlapping moments of contestation, appropriation, damage, restoration and amnesia” (Rambelli & Reinders, 2013, p. 40)—all of which affect an icon’s physical state, context, or meaning. Richard Clay (2012) also highlights this transformative function of iconoclastic acts and pursues a semiotic approach when he conceptualizes iconoclasm as “a form of material sign transformation with communicational intent” (p. 277), employed by “iconoclasts [who] were sophisticated coders, as well as decoders, of signs and spaces” (p. 240). As an act of communication, such transformative reactions to material culture often take place not only against a complex backdrop of cultural, economic, social, and political narratives, discourses, claims, and power relations; they are also primarily embedded in the intellectual framework of (and are comprehensible in relation to) these contextual factors (Elias, 2013) and are intended to be discerned and understood by others, calling them to react to the transformation of symbolically valued images, certain objects, and entire sites. In sum, ideas of representation and symbolism seem to be key to understanding the epistemological access that iconoclasm as a heuristic provides to human action and interaction.⁹

⁸ It is not possible in this article to provide an extensive survey of the rich amount of scholarship on the concept of iconoclasm. I will neither discuss matters pertaining to the history of images in Islam, Muslim debates on the tension between monotheism and the production of images, or even the cliché of Muslim iconoclasm—all of which have received ample attention elsewhere (e.g., Crone, 1980; Elias, 2012, pp. 100–138; Gruber, 2019; Hodgson, 1964; Naef, 2007).

⁹ This is not to negate the works of many scholars who draw attention to, for example, the inherently creative, constructive, and performative dimension of historical and contemporary (particularly artistic) acts

While iconoclastic acts always occur in relation to social contexts, are shaped by sociopolitical (and not purely religious) agendas, and have social repercussions, studies of iconoclasm and iconoclasts have rarely made these perspectives fruitful for understanding attacks on cultural properties. I propose the concept of socioclasm to discuss some examples of the destruction of symbolically valued images, objects, and entire sites by followers of the Islamic State. Building on, rather than seeking to replace, the notion of iconoclasm, I develop socioclasm as an expansion of what I have identified as the main epistemological traits of studies of iconoclasm and iconoclasts. I expand the focus from the realm of the religious and symbolic to the social representative quality of these signifiers. My proposal centers on the significance of concrete objects and sites for specific social practices—hence for the establishment, retention, and transformation of people’s knowledge about who they are, how they are related to others, and how they should react in certain situations. I argue that the concept of socioclasm accentuates the ways in which processes of discursive sign transformation and material sign transformation (Clay, 2007, 2012) are related to the domain of the social. Moreover, it allows for a comprehensive understanding of the social implications of acts intended to transform the socioreligious landscape through the destruction of properties whose material and symbolic qualities are integral parts of the social identities of a given community, thus preventing specific social practices that are inextricably linked to specific sites.

Targeting Manifestations of Idolatry as Integral Elements of Social Identities

Earlier I described a glimpse at the destruction of one such site: the Jawād Ḥusaynīya in the town of Tal ‘Afar in northwestern Iraq. This holy site had been one of several places of worship that were destroyed by the Islamic State in and around Tal ‘Afar between June 24 and June 26, 2014 (Danti et al., 2015, pp. 54–89). Probably named after its donor, Muḥammad Jawād al-Barzanjī (b. 1952),¹⁰ the mosque was adjacent to a complex that housed a shrine designated to the memory of Sa’d b. Muslim b. ‘Aqīl¹¹ and a cemetery. As spaces used for communal prayers and religious learning, both sites were vital elements of local Shia Muslim religiosity and social life. Furthermore, they had a specific significance for Shiite community building that extended beyond a purely local context. Parts of their complexes were also allocated as *ḥusaynīyāt*, which are spaces that usually provide a special setting for the collective mourning of the martyrdom of the third imam of the Shia Ḥusayn Ibn ‘Alī (d. 680), mourning the deaths (or celebrating the birthdays) of other imams, offering space for a wide range of other religious and social practices, and serving as hostels for pilgrims to Shiite shrines (Sindawi, 2008, p. 365).

The complex that harbored these sites is exemplary for many other properties that were targeted by the Islamic State, because we can identify it as a space where social function and symbolism amalgamate in the realm of religious practice and community formation. Such sites provide a space where members of a religious community—a social collective “that is tied to neither blood nor locality” (Turner, 1974, p. 201)—manifest role and status and create personal bonds of *communitas* during services, prayers, religious

of iconoclasm (see Fleckner, Steinkamp, & Ziegler, 2011; Gamboni, 1997; Münch, Tacke, Herzog, & Heudecker, 2018).

¹⁰ The site is also named *jāmi’ al-sayyid Jawād al-Barzanjī*.

¹¹ According to unverifiable local Shia sources, the shrine was probably erected in 1142/532 AH and is designated to the memory of Sa’d b. ‘Aqīl b. Abī Ṭālib.

education, charitable activities, and much more.¹² Architectural elements and other visible characteristics demonstrate that these sites are built, preserved, and visited as “signs of belonging in shared memory” (Mieth, 1988–2001, p. 135). Soon after it blasted the complex, the Islamic State issued a photo report capturing the destruction of both sites, describing the attack as “destruction of the Ḥusaynīya temple” (*maʿbad ḥusaynīya*; see Danti et al., 2015, p. 55). On the surface, this caption provided the justification for the sites’ obliteration; in the Islamic State’s view, the sites were used for idolatrous forms of worshipping Ḥusayn and must be obliterated in accordance with the principle of *al-amr bi-l-maʿrūf wa-l-nahy ʿan al-munkar*. In emphasizing their designation as *ḥusaynīyāt*, however, the authors asserted that the meaning of these sites for the Shia extended beyond the realm of the symbolic since they provided spaces for assemblies that linked individual believers to their immediate social collective and helped shape their social identities as members of a wider community. This suggests that the Islamic State’s ideologues had a sense of the value of such sites for the cohesion of the Shiite community at large and the social identities of its individual members.

Because the sites were used as *ḥusaynīya*, they also were destinations of pilgrimages and attracted people from various locations. Pilgrimage sites in general are of great value for both the collective identity of religious communities and the social identities of individual believers. In this sense, small sites with local significance as well as places that are visited by people from across the globe all “matter to *people* because they tell the story of who we are, where we’ve come from, and who we wish to be” (Mulder, 2016, p. 6; emphasis in original). These stories are shaped by religious authorities and institutions who “ground themselves in sacred sites and gain power and prestige by promoting certain religious narratives through the embellishment or creation of holy places” (Pinto, 2017, pp. 64–65) as well as through the formation and medialization of bodies of knowledge that evolve around these places. A case in point is a twin shrine in the Syrian town of al-Raqqā, which was destroyed by the Islamic State after it seized control over the city in early 2014 (Reuters, 2014).

The twin shrine housed the tombs of Uways al-Qaranī and ʿAmmar b. Yāsir, who were contemporaries of the Prophet Muhammad.¹³ The shrine had been visited by local tribes who consider themselves descendants of Ḥusayn, whereas “intellectual circles linked to the traditional urban notable families [saw it] as a *lieux de mémoire* of Raqqā’s urban identity” (Pinto, 2007, p. 123). Similar to many other religious sites that were (re)built under the reign of Hafez al-Asad, the twin mausoleum had been “built by the al-Assad family, supported by the Ayatollah Khomeini, to honor the tombs of two seventh-century Shia martyrs from the First Islamic Civil War” (Hall & Noyes, 2014, para. 7). Although visits by local Sufi communities continued, under regime protection the shrines were “Persianized” in their exterior decoration and architecture and became an established site of pilgrimage for Shiites from across the region. The shrines grew into “objects of conflicting territorialities” (Ababsa, 2001, p. 647) as their expansion was resented by local notables who identified an appropriation (and resignification) of the mausoleum by the

¹² Both social modalities—that is, structure and *communitas*—are part of what Tönnies (2019) has termed *Gemeinschaft*. Also see Turner (1974, pp. 201–208).

¹³ It is believed that Al-Qaranī and b. Yāsir were killed at the battle of Siffin fighting on the side of ʿAlī against the Umayyad governor Muʿāwiya.

regime and “by a religious community they view as ‘foreign’ (the Shi’i)” (Pinto, 2007, p. 123; also Ababsa, 2001, 2005). The increasing stream of (mostly Iranian) pilgrims into the city also sparked socioeconomic changes (Ababsa, 2001, p. 648), so that an elaborate economic and social infrastructure evolved around the shrines, providing direct and indirect income-earning opportunities for the local populace. Such social infrastructure increases the outreach of religious institutions and authorities through the establishment of schools, community centers, and charitable institutions for the general population, hence establishing loyalties that extend beyond membership in a religious community. Furthermore, an intellectual environment is built around many such sites in the form of seminaries and other institutions of religious learning as well as book shops, which are also grounded in the “charisma” of the site and pilgrims’ activities.

As this and many other examples in Syria show, the Syrian regime and its Iranian allies used Shi’i holy places to build social identities around a sense of transnational bonds and commonality among Shiites across the region. However, in order for the appeals of these entrepreneurs of identity to be accepted (to a certain extent at least) by those people who likewise shape, circulate, appropriate, further develop, and animate these narratives, they must actively make the stories that are manifested in the site part of their self and embed them into their subjectivities and their own religious imaginaries. They are the ones who seek (and answer the call of) these sites, open themselves to the topographical and architectural configuration, experience with all their senses the religious sacra preserved in them, attribute a charismatic aura to these sites and objects, navigate their way through the “web of rules and representations that establish certain locations” (Pinto, 2017, p. 63), and process their interactions with other people en route and at the place itself.

It is through these encounters and human interactions that such sites become more than markers; they become meaningful elements of one’s social identity. Although people rarely set aside their social status during a pilgrimage, such journeys and the collective practices performed during them help dilute or attenuate social hierarchies between pilgrims, because they allow for shared emotions and experiences that establish bonds between individuals and groups of people visiting the same site at the same time, following similar routes, engaging in similar religious practices, wearing similar clothing, and buying similar accessories on-site.¹⁴ Holy sites, collective practices, and the environment surrounding them create “the experience of a diffuse solidarity that transcends social and cultural differences” (Pinto, 2007, p. 109) and help people construct bonds with and loyalties to other members of their community, both living and deceased.

Many of the elements I have described so far indicate that holy sites in general and sites of pilgrimage in particular are constitutional elements of the collective identities of religious communities. They provide spaces for a wide range of religious and social practices as well as social infrastructures that emerge around them. Operated by religious institutions and authorities and frequented by a broad variety of believers, the sites become embedded in an individual’s horizon of experience, intellectual advancement, and personal memories, shaping narratives about one’s spiritual journey as well as the development and consolidation of people’s “ontological security” (Giddens, 1991) in relation to a given social collective. They

¹⁴ One may consider this a process in which instances of linking social capital and bonding social capital (see Putnam, 2000) become entwined.

thus help produce a self-assertive power, which is nurtured and perpetuated by the experience of an identity-creating fusion of individual, place, and ritual through practices linked to the specific site. In this perspective, such sites cease to be mere symbolic or physical representations, but rather constitute the social collective to a significant extent, or even become the groups themselves.¹⁵

When Islamic State fighters destroyed the twin shrine on March 26, 2014, they attacked a site that displayed “a hybrid symbolic dimension of identity and religion” (Ababsa, 2001, p. 657) created through the expansion of Iranian religiopolitical influence in Syria since the early 1990s. Through the obliteration of the shrines, the Islamic State thus, albeit in reverse, acknowledged and reasserted the identification of the signifier (the mausoleum) with the signified (the Twelver Shia and its Iranian representatives) on a symbolic level. On a sociopolitical level, however, the attack aimed to repel “the hateful *rawāfiq*”¹⁶ by destroying the social representative quality of the site and the web of social relations between pilgrims and locals that had evolved around it. From the Islamic State’s perspective, targeting these sites, I argue, is thus equal to targeting the community at large, because members’ social identities are deeply entangled with (and built in relation to) these sites. The movement targeted properties that not only offer space for rituals and other practices, religious learning, and community building but also are valued for their significance for individual and collective identities.

As the above description of the cultural properties suggests, sites of pilgrimage often provide a setting for more than one rite of passage. The belief in the beneficent forces that permeate certain places (and the traditions upholding these beliefs) may not only bring people to conceive of their pilgrimage as a transitional process that transforms their self in relation to many dimensions of the religious and the social but also may prompt people to seek for a burial at these sites such that we find cemeteries often located near sacred places. Pinto (2017, p. 62), for example, notes that people from all across Iraq have their bodies sent to Najaf to be buried in the holy ground that is impregnated with *baraka*, a beneficent force that is transmitted through the Prophet Muhammad’s descendants and emanates from the belief in the physical presence of a human body that is both a symbolic and literal representation of a person and his or her traits. This belief potentially affects both the bodies and minds of visitors who can set themselves in relation to this person. It also reinforces links between the deceased and the whole Shiite community and amplifies the idea of its continuity throughout time. Importantly, this accounts for the bereaved to whom a burial is a social practice that is inextricably interwoven with her or his individual and collectively shared sense of memory, religious imaginaries, and sense of belonging to a community that continues throughout time.

By destroying shrines, graves, and cemeteries, the Islamic State targets both the veneration and the burial practice and their significance for the ontological framework of the respective communities (e.g., Maktabat al-Himma, 2014; ṣalāḥ al-Dīn Province Media Office, 2015). In some cases—for example, with the

¹⁵ In this regard, Elias (2012) draws on Gadamer (2004, p. 137) and reminds us of the ontological communion that any religious image has with what it represents. Hence, the affective relationships that people develop with the represented “are the ultimate determinants of the value of a religious image” (p. 41). On the fusion of the signifier and the signified, see also Freedberg (1991).

¹⁶ *Rāfiḍa* (pl. *rawāfiq*) is a derogatory term mainly used today in Sunni polemics against the Shia. However, the history of the concept reflects political issues and schisms within Shiite Islam itself.

destruction of the twin shrine of Uways al-Qaranī and ‘Ammar b. Yāsir in al-Raqqā—the Islamic State did not content itself with destroying the site of veneration. The movement’s claim for purification went so far as to exhume the mortal remains from the tombs and remove them before its fighters blasted the gravesite.¹⁷ Their purification strategy was all-encompassing. By blasting the gravesite and removing the remains of the saints, the Islamic State meant to temporarily prevent certain social and religious practices such as pilgrimages and saint veneration. In addition, by transferring the actual object of veneration to an unknown place, they aimed to do away with any worship related to a particular object or person at a particular place once and forever. By wiping out a shrine and graveyard, the Islamic State’s socioclasm aims to prevent the veneration of saints and adherence to beliefs in beneficent forces that induce the attribution of charisma to a certain site. Moreover, the attacks are directed against burials as social practices through which contemporaries can build a social identity by relating their sense of self to a wider community to which they are bound by neither blood nor locality.

Iconic Socioclasm

Visual accounts of destruction such as that described above may powerfully affect various audiences. Arguably, in situations of conflict in particular, still and moving images are not produced to simply symbolically represent or display reality but rather help sociopolitical actors create it in the first place.¹⁸ These images thus not only resemble the facts they represent and illustrate and reflect an established meaning. Additionally, images will only become powerful instruments with and through which people act if they evoke an immediacy of experiencing the depicted (reinforced by sounds and/or verbal messages), reduce the complexity of the context, and direct the viewer’s attention to specific messages. Thereby, images might help eliminate the conscious separation between image and object and hamper viewers’ reflection on the depicted practices and context. This, in turn, might impede the viewers’ ability to cognitively distance themselves from what is seen.¹⁹ In this sense, it can be argued that the Islamic State’s ideologues have designed and disseminated photo reports and videos in a particular way that they will be remembered for a lifetime by the respective public as formative images (Bredenkamp, 2003) that evoke immediate (re)action, because they contain a sense of presence of the Islamic State even if it is not physically tangible.

Images of these destructions are thus not merely “symbolic sites of struggle” (Maasri, 2009) or “artefacts of ideological discourse” (Harmansah, 2015, p. 173); nor do they resemble the dominance gesture of a “symbolic sectarianism” (Isakhan & González Zarandona, 2017), which ought to demonstrate the Islamic State’s power and its opponents’ vulnerability. Rather, the Islamic State seeks to produce formative images that have such powerful and immediate effects on the targeted audiences that they cannot be

¹⁷ Another example of an exhumation can be found in the case of the tomb of Ḥujr b. ‘Adī al-Kindī. In this context, Chapman (2018, p. 21) reminds us of the similarities between attacks on the human body and on images.

¹⁸ Flood (2016) succinctly characterized the image operations of the Islamic State around destructions of cultural heritage as “idol-breaking as image-making.” Bredenkamp (2016) also argues that the destruction of the Palmyra amphitheatre and the executions that were filmed there were primarily done to produce images and create a certain reality in the first place.

¹⁹ Bredenkamp (2015, pp. 60–64) and others refer to this process as “image act.” See also Feist and Rath (2012).

ignored. These images support the Islamic State's narrative of an intractable and everlasting conflict between Sunnis and Shiites, further tendencies of dehumanization and deindividuation, and feed into preexisting fears and prejudices.

These (moving) images are part and parcel of the Islamic State's socioclastic actions and strategy. They manifest the "subconscious reconquest of identity" (Campion, 2017, p. 36) embedded in the group's visual, verbal, aural, and textual rhetoric that is employed in the display of violence against cultural properties. Presenting itself as an authority striving for a comprehensive purification of the socioreligious landscape, image production around these obliterations is itself a vital part of a strategy that aims to make social and religious practices impossible once and forever and quash the ideas and intellectual debates evolving around them. The Islamic State does not view the spatial, material, and ideational dimension of deviant practices as mere representations. Rather, such practices are understood as integral elements of the respective religious communities, which constitute themselves as a social group through collective practices, religious assemblies, pilgrimage sites and their social infrastructure, shared symbols and historical memories, and the intellectual reflection thereof. Similarly, this applies to the function of clerics and religious scholars who are indispensable for the collective identity and self-conception of religious communities as mediators of religious knowledge as well as through offering guidance and counsel to believers who might identify with them. The destruction of cultural properties, the killing of these people, and the (albeit indirect) obliteration of social infrastructure creates, at least temporarily, a void impacting the respective community on a social level. The Islamic State produces images of these destructions to etch the memory of these effects and the sense of their fatality into the minds of individual members of the affected community who define their social identities in relation to holy sites.

Conclusion

The Islamic State understands the establishment of its rule as being based on a missionary, social-revolutionary impetus and the claim to an absolute assertion of its own interpretation of Islam as the only "genuine" representation of divine ordinances. To enforce this claim on an intellectual, practical, and material level necessitates an all-embracing purification of society. During its heyday, the Islamic State's ideologues not only defined the caliphate as a distinct form of organizing authority, society, and human conduct in contrast to forms of socialization deemed illegitimate. Taking the Quranic dictum "to command right and forbid wrong" as a guiding principle, they also called to physically turn against any material and immaterial manifestation of monotheism's antipodes *shirk*, *kufr*, and *ṭāghūt*. Consequently, as it seized control over vast territories in Iraq, Syria, and elsewhere, the movement also started targeting ancient sites, sites of religious practices of religious minorities as well as mosques, shrines, tombs, natural objects, and surrounding infrastructures that serve social and religious practices deemed deviant.

Taking the Islamic State's attacks on Shiite holy places as a case in point, I have proposed that the attacks suggest the group's recognition of ontologically relevant attributions of cultural properties and of an ontological communion at work in the interactions of people at and with these properties. Attacks on these sites can hence be understood as attacks on the self-understanding of the attacked community and its individual members. Consequently, threats to the group may also be perceived as threats to the self.

I have argued that attacking these sites therefore not only annihilates certain architectural landmarks and changes the spatial composition of a city or village. In addition to targeting the material manifestation of a certain belief system and the place of its manifold ideational, performative, and affective expressions, the assaults targeted cultural properties, social practices, and the various forms of social infrastructure created around holy sites, whose function as an integral element of individual and collective identities was well understood by the Islamic State's ideologues despite their religious rationale. These attacks aimed at eroding the material manifestation of (and the provision of space for the establishment and experience of) senses of belonging and collective senses of memory among local, national, and transnational communities.²⁰ Such a desecration of sacred spaces and their eventual obliteration ought to affect aspects of the self of each individual member of the respective community, unsettling their ontological security and shattering their intragroup bonds.

As a communicative concept that connects the religious and the symbolic to the material, spatial, and social, socioclasm builds and expands on the perspectives of studies in iconoclasm and iconoclasts. I suggest that the notion of socioclasm can help incorporate these above-mentioned variables, pay heed to the significance of religious systems of meaning, and draw attention to the social representative quality of sites, objects, and specific practices that are vital for building social identities.

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²⁰ I rephrase Harmansah (2015) here, who characterized attacks on archaeological heritage sites as attacks that aim "to annihilate the local sense of belonging, and the collective sense of memory among local communities to whom the heritage belongs" (p. 170).

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