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Iconoclasm: ISIS and Cultural Destruction

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Abstract

This paper examines utopian ideologies and their effects in motivating iconoclasm. Using the cases of Islamic State, the Nazi's destruction of Warsaw, and the Taliban's destruction of the Bamiyan Buddhas, this paper analyzes the utopian elements of each group's ideology that motivates iconoclasm. I argue that Islamic State engages in iconoclasm in order to promote a unified and ideal community rooted in their utopian religious ideology. They achieve this goal by destroying cultural artifacts and museums that clash with their vision. While most of the debate around Islamic State has focused on non-religious aspects like oil-backed finance, this paper attempts to reorient the debate around the religious character of Islamic State's actions. Given the salience of Islamic State and other similar groups in recent attacks globally, this paper attempts to analyze their operational motivations through the destruction of cultural artifacts.

Keywords

ISIS, Taliban, Iconoclasm, National Socialism, Terrorism, Bamiyan Buddhas, Utopianism.

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1. Introduction

When thinking of terrorist organizations suicide bombing, human rights abuses, and targeting noncombatants come to mind, not destroying cultural artifacts – known as iconoclasm. ISIS, IS, or ISIL, is different from other terrorist groups in that it controlled and governed approximately 82,940 km2 of land while procuring an income from clandestine oil sales, taxes, and even the selling of antiquities in 2015 (Strack, 2015). On February 26, 2015, ISIS released a video of its members destroying artifacts in the Mosul Museum in Iraq – one of the first instances of its campaign against museums and cultural artifacts, echoing the Taliban's campaign of cultural destruction in 2001. ISIS has since gone on to destroy sites and artifacts throughout Syria.

Why is the Islamic State, hereafter referred to as ISIS, destroying cultural artifacts in Iraq and Syria? I argue that ISIS engages in iconoclasm because museums and cultural artifacts are tantamount to idol worship and contradict their utopian vision for the world. My argument is an attempt to propose a broader hypothesis that iconoclasm will crop up when three criteria are met. First, when groups follow a utopian ideology. Second, when adherents to utopian ideologies engage in actions to assert their supremacy of identity by violently seeking to establish a unified ideal community. And third, when there are objects, sites, and spaces that represent an opposing meaning structure or practice that stand in the way of establishing an ideal community stemming from the utopian ideology. When these three variables crop up, I argue that iconoclasm will be a means used to establish a group's vision of an ideal community.

2. Definitions

The phrase I use to describe ISIS, and groups with similar ideologies, is Takfiri Salafists. To declare someone takfir is to declare them apostate, and takfiri is someone who declares another apostate. The key component that is critical to understanding ISIS as a Takfiri Salafist group is that they want to reestablish a community of Muslims that adhere to standards of the salafis – original followers of Muhammad. ISIS idealizes the salafis as the purest adherents of Islam, and the desire to reestablish this community, or nation, is a driving ideological motivation of Takfiri Salafist groups. Takfiri Salafists seek to eliminate what Mawlana Abdul A'la Mawdudi called the "modern Jahiliyya." Jahiliyya references the "time of ignorance" before Islam – the modern Jahiliyya being present day ignorance. This ignorance is broadly defined as "Western," Capitalism, and other forms of worship that do not adhere to a Takfiri Salafist interpretation of the Qur'an. Takfiri Salafists seek to eliminate the modern jahiliyya to establish tawhid – political and theological unity, the opposite of the separation of church and state, among a pure group of worshippers while eliminating kufr – disbelief in these tenets (Wiktorowicz, 2006, 210).

In the case of ISIS, they seek to establish this pure, utopian, community in order to prepare for Malahim – Armageddon or the Final Judgment – that will take place in the holy land of the Levant in the town of Dabiq – hence the title of their publically available magazine: Dabiq. This community will follow a single Imam, or religious, and in this case, spiritual, leader, and follow a strict and literal interpretation of Shari'ah. In order to prepare for Malahim, ISIS attempts to recreate a pure community and demarcate the distinction between those on the side of good and those on the side of evil who ISIS is

fighting, and will be fighting in order to bring about Malahim.

3. Structure and Format of the Paper

The first section of my paper will consist of a literature review on the current explanations regarding causal mechanisms of iconoclasm. I next expand on an argument proposed by Rebecca Knuth that groups engage in iconoclasm because it contradicts their ideological goals or revered doctrine. I, however, believe she omits the variable of a utopian ideology that requires an establishment of a pure, ideal, community within the boundaries of an indivisible sacred space. I will then compare the utopian ideologies of the Taliban, ISIS, using primary source data from the magazine, Dabiq, and National Socialism in Nazi Germany and examine the effects these ideologies have in driving iconoclasm. Finally, I propose a path forward that argues that religious ideas in extremist Islamic groups should be focused on as a causal mechanism of these groups' acts in order to better combat them through deradicalization programs. ISIS uses religion to justify their actions, and it is through using religious deradicalization programs that the ideological motivations fueling ISIS can be sufficiently combatted.

4. Literature Review

Many authors, before iconoclasm was seriously studied by social scientists, considered iconoclastic acts irrational, crazy, or due to ignorance. Most explanations were condemnatory and normative, not constructive to an understanding of underlying motivations. ISIS's attacks on cultural artifacts do not seem to fit within the characteristic attacks normally carried out by terrorist organizations and seem irrational to many. But ISIS is not a normal terrorist organization, and upon closer examination, their iconoclastic acts are rationally motivated.

In this literature review I will divide authors into three groups based on their arguments of different motivations of iconoclasm. In the first, Iconoclasm as Identity, authors argue that iconoclasm is a means of identity creation. The second group argues that iconoclasm is a means to establish power over another power structure represented through the destroyed object. This group is titled, Iconoclastic Power Politics. The third, and final, group of authors focuses on the elements of belief, ideology, and historical factors that motivate iconoclasm. These authors argue that iconoclasm is an act of religious belief in the necessity to eliminate anything having to do with idolatry, and eliminate objects that are viewed as impure based on a specific religious belief system. I have labeled this group, Ideology and Belief. The main weakness across the board is that most authors think of motivations as mutually exclusive from one another without including other factors in the motivations.

5. Iconoclasm as Identity

Authors in this subsection argue that creating an identity is what motivates iconoclasm. Allen and Greenberger (2006) argue that actors may engage in vandalism – used synonymously with iconoclasm – for the purposes of social identity (Knuth, 2006). The destruction of images and objects is not only destructive, but also constructive, or creative, because it is creating a space for new identities (Rambelli, and Reiners, 2007, 15-31). These authors put forth the idea of creative destruction – that in order to create a

new social identity, a group's individuals must destroy their previous identity internally, and/ or the identity of the outsider group that is at odds with their identity. Identity stems from destruction.

Other authors, such as Flood (2002), identify the museum as an institution representing an identity of the "community of nations" (Flood, 2002, 641-659). Attacking the museum – or simply shared spaces and buildings – is attacking not just the historical context, but also attacking identities. Flood (2005), specifically, in discussing the destruction of the Buddhas of Bamiyan by the Taliban, makes the claim that their decision was a reaction against Western governments imposing sanctions – Westerners cared more about the Buddhas than actual people (Ibid., 653). This, he claims, added onto the contempt the Taliban had for the Western world. Other authors claim that one identity that is at the heart of many iconoclastic attacks is the "Western" identity, represented in the art of museums that ties cultures together (Ibid., 652; Bevan, 2006, 12; Hassner, 2011, 23-35). These authors agree that objects taken out of their original context by placing them in museums, or considering spaces UNESCO World Heritage sites, are then placed within a new paradigm, or "Western" aesthetic (Rambelli, and Reiners, 2007; Ibid., 25; Hassner, 2011, 28) This aesthetic, or cultural identity can then be attacked to eliminate the opposing identity that the museum represents.

The most important argument found here is that museums and UNESCO World Heritage sites represent an identity that ISIS vehemently opposes: Western identity and Western cultural values. However, the claim that iconoclasm is used as a means of identity creation needs to consider the role that

ideology and belief play in iconoclasm. While identity is an important component, one cannot neglect the ideological and historical realms when discussing ISIS as a Takfiri Salafist group – its identity is intertwined within the religious and ideological, not simply the social. When it comes to religious groups, the religious ideology is the most important component, and identity is inextricably tied to this component rather than divorced from it.

6. Iconoclastic Power Politics[2]

The literature in this group presents the argument that iconoclasm is a public claim to power in that the attacking group is making a claim of the impotency and powerlessness of certain sacred images, objects, or spaces. Rambelli and Reiners (2007), specifically, state that by leaving an object disfigured, or only partially destroyed, it is a clear sign of the impotency of that object (Rambelli, and Reiners, 2007). By destroying a statue – something that is publicly accessible – it serves as a monument of the powerful victors and the powerless authors (Gamboni, 1997). Even the desecration of a flag or a picture of an enemy is an iconoclastic act that claims power over an enemy (Perlmutter, 2006).

The destruction of an image, or object, that are public displays the newly created power structure stemming from iconoclastic acts – it is power that defines what is destroyed and what is preserved. Another key argument made is that attackers are not just simply attacking the image or object, but the meaning behind the image. Iconoclastic acts decouple the sign (the object itself) from the signified (the author/ creator/ or meaning attached) – and claim

[2] I list some authors from the previous Identity Politics group in the two subgroups in this section because they make separate claims on both identity and power politics as potential motivations and outcomes of iconoclasm.

new authorship: their power over the former author (Bevan, Ibid.; Ron Hassner, Ibid.; David Freedberg, 1983). In essence, iconoclasm is a politically motivated act to gain power.

Some authors argue as well that by attacking an image, building, sacred space, or object, the individual attacker is destroying the power represented by these objects or spaces – the political motivation is an individual quest for power. Actors engaging in iconoclasm may feel a lack of control in their lives and by destroying an image or an object they gain an element of control (Knuth, 2006) The act of destroying an image or object is not solely rooted in the group to assert their power over the authors of objects and images, but rather is also located at a lower level of analysis. These authors incorporate the idea that the personal is political. What this allows is a closer examination on a lower level of analysis. This humanizes ISIS and its recruits by rationalizing their motives through this approach of desiring control and power – it is potentially politically motivated, not just socially or irrationally motivated.

The shortcoming these arguments though, particularly those authors focusing on the individual, is the fact that no one discusses the differences between leaders and recruits at any level. The motivations between the two are very different. While making the personal political is helpful in analyzing iconoclasm as an assertion of power at a lower level of analysis, not differentiating leaders and recruits makes this subgroup's claim difficult to apply to all individuals within a terrorist organization. It is difficult to identify individual and group belief systems, and my paper cannot do this shortcoming much justice. Yet it is important to understand that there is a distinction that one should keep in mind when reading this paper.

Most authors are not discussing modern Takfiri Salafist groups, but rather iconoclasm in general, from the individual to larger groups. What is not mentioned by many of these authors is where the destruction of meaning comes from. While many authors in this section argue that it is the meaning behind an image that provokes an attack, they focus on the element of power and neglect the sphere of belief and ideology behind the attack on an image's meaning.

7. Ideology and Belief

Finally, in this group, authors posit that the meaning behind images and objects that are destroyed motivates their destruction, and that it is not fully a claim to power, but rather an act of belief, and combating ideological incompatibility. All authors within this section contend that iconoclasm, as an act of religious violence, is a means of establishing a purer land and connecting to the larger religious community. Further, an important nuance that these authors reveal is the coordination of religious violence with religious time.

J.J. Elias (2007) counters Flood's (2007) argument that the destruction of the Bamiyan Buddhas was due to a reaction to Western sanctions (Flood, Ibid. 16). The destruction of the Buddhas was committed on Eid al-Adha. Elias argues that their destruction was because this day signifies the willingness of Abraham to sacrifice his son; the Taliban were willing to sacrifice a part of their cultural and national heritage, symbolizing their moral connection to Abraham (Elias, 2007, 12-29). Davis (1973) argues that, similar to the religious day having a significance in the Bamiyan incident, 16th century iconoclastic attacks in Gien and Rouen, France occurred after a

sermon mentioning Deuteronomy 12:1-3, which states other religious altars and images should be destroyed (Davis, 1973, 51-91). Both Elias (2007) and Davis (1973) contend that these acts were acts of purification – they establish, or seek to establish, a connection to a larger and purer religious community, among believers by timing religious violence to religious time.

On a similar line of thought, Noyes (2013) argues that in Wahhabi thought, Takfiri Salafists that engage in iconoclasm are doing so as a means of establishing a unity of God and the land (Noyes, 2013). King (1985) further adds to this in a historical account of the Umayyad Caliphate by arguing that Muslims, early on in Islam's founding, attacked religiously incompatible objects (1985, 267-277). Muslims did not attack saints or icons of Christians, but rather the crucifix because it represented The Trinity, suggesting that Jesus is on the same plane as God, not simply his messenger – worshipping someone other than God: shirk. These authors claim that iconoclasm is a means of reestablishing a pure land that is free from shirk. Deeper than this, the editors of Iconoclasm and Iconoclash, argue that the attacking of objects and images is not only iconoclastic, the breaking of material images, but also an act of iconoclash – the destruction of ideas based on the elimination of an impure form of worship (Van Asselt et al., 2007, 1-47).

These authors open up the discussion of the role of beliefs that my paper will follow – iconoclasm is not simply an act of power politics or identity creation, but a belief in the necessity to censor the apostolic belief system behind an image, whether it is the religion behind an image or the culture represented by the museum the image is housed in. These are useful case studies to focus on because it opens up the discussion of iconoclasm within the paradigm of belief systems that are behind religiously motivated

iconoclasm, not just the sociological and political realms of identity and power. Particularly important is the consideration of religious time and its involvement in motivating iconoclasm.

However, the idea that religion and belief are causal mechanisms motivating iconoclasm falls short on several accounts. The first being that belief and religion, as broad terms, do not fully explain why a group may engage in iconoclasm, just like religion and belief do not fully explain why religiously motivated groups engage in terrorism or warfare. Religion and belief are not causal mechanisms on their own. The second point that needs be made is that the lack of a clear causal mechanism fails to provide a generalizable hypothesis that can be tested. Religion is a motivator in certain cases of iconoclasm, but it is neither sufficient, nor necessary, as an explanation. Specificity in determining the precise causal mechanism within a religion or ideology is lacking in the above explanations. A belief in the impurity of an object does not justify iconoclasm as there are many groups and individuals who see many objects as impure, but do nothing about it. This group of authors lacks a clear ability to generalize when iconoclasm will occur.

Much of the literature within this review has accomplished the tasks of opening up the dialogue of iconoclasm by making the personal political, showing that identity creation can stem from destruction, and that by destroying the meaning behind an image a group is attacking the power behind it or its religious incompatibility with their own beliefs. Within the first grouping, authors contend that attacking sacred objects is a means of establishing a social identity within the group, and that by doing so an individual is recreating their identity. They would argue that ISIS is engaging in iconoclasm as a means of establishing a social identity. Others in the group argue that by attacking

the museum, iconoclasts are attacking the system of Western cultural values behind museums – an identity that is antithetical to the iconoclasts'. One of the main shortcomings of this group is that many of these authors do not look at the historical contexts, ideologies, and belief systems that motivate these groups. While identity is a critical component in explaining iconoclasm, leaving out the underlying motivations leaves a major gap in truly understanding motives.

The second group of authors contends that by attacking sacred images, particularly those in public, the group is making a claim to power. This group would argue that ISIS engages in iconoclasm as a means of establishing dominance over other groups and people. At the lower level of analysis, the individual engaging in iconoclasm is asserting a personal control over a life they may feel that they have little control over. One gap within these arguments is the lack of consideration of the different motivations of leaders and recruits, and the inability to test this. This is an important nuance, but due to the inability to test this hypothesis, I will not spend much time on it. Further, another lacking component that many of the authors neglect is the same component that the identity section neglects: ideology and belief systems motivating the claims of power through iconoclasm.

Finally, the third group brings the discussion of iconoclasm full circle and includes the elements of belief and ideology in the motivation of iconoclasm. These authors contend that it is the belief in the need to eliminate impure forms of worship that motivates iconoclasm. Further, they also argue that these religious groups are attempting to establish a connection to the wider community of their religion through the elimination of impure worshippers or objects. In answering my puzzle, these authors would argue that ISIS engages in iconoclasm out of a belief in the impurity of

those objects and a desire to send a message to the wider community that they are the purest form of worship. While the group does contribute to a conversation on ideology and belief in motivating iconoclasm, a clear causal mechanism is left out. The second shortcoming is that the lack of a clear causal mechanism fails to provide a generalizable hypothesis that can be tested.

All of these groups offer an important piece to answering my puzzle, but they need to be looked at in relation to each other, not simply as mutually exclusive from one another – it is impossible to separate belief from any political, social, or economic factors. Moving forward, I would like to bring these arguments together by using ISIS as a case study to test whether these arguments actually hold for ISIS. I believe that looking at ISIS's actions and applying the above arguments and past case studies can provide insight into potential motivating explanations for this particular case. What lacks in each explanation is specificity in determining when iconoclasm will occur. While these explanations are possible motivations, most do not establish fully when iconoclasm will occur. The social, political, and religious arguments explaining iconoclasm fall short on several accounts, and even together they do not fully explain my puzzle. I argue that it is a particular strain of ideology that motivates ISIS – a utopian ideology.

8. Utopian Ideologies, Museums, and Iconoclasm

In this section I expand on the argument that when the meanings behind objects and museums are antithetical to a group's ideology or belief system, that group will engage in iconoclasm. I begin this

section by adding that iconoclasm is not guaranteed to occur based on this argument. Many groups may believe that a site or object is sacrilegious or in opposition to their belief system, but do not engage in iconoclasm. Groups with a utopian ideology, however, will use iconoclasm to destroy antithetical meaning structures rooted in particular objects, sites, and museums. I divide this section into three parts. The first is an expansion on Rebecca Knuth's argument. The second section, Meanings behind Museums and Objects, is a discussion of museums and their meaning structures that are targeted.

9. Meanings Behind Museums and Objects

Rebecca Knuth's (2006) argument is valid, but the argument omits a causal variable. Knuth (2006) argues that biblioclasm, the destruction of books and libraries, will occur when books and libraries contradict a group's ideology and belief system, or threatens their revered doctrine (Knuth, 2006, 2). I would like to expand on the argument that when the meanings behind an object or a museum are antithetical to a group's utopian ideological desire to establish a utopian identity, they then become a target of iconoclasm. Museums are targets because they are an impediment to the utopia that a group wishes to establish. Museums' meaning structures represent an identity that is not compatible with a particular vision of the future.

Objects in museums are given new meaning through re-contextualization. The museum, in general terms, is a house of cultural artifacts – it protects these objects. From the perspective of a museumgoer, objects within museums are important cultural memories that represent a piece of history. At some point, an object is valued so much that it becomes fetishized, leading to the object's protection within a museum (Freedberg, 1983). Objects that are taken out of their original context and placed in a museum lose their original meaning and are "re-sacralized," embodying a new meaning structure – a quasi-religious one (Rambelli, and Reiners, 2007, 29). This quasi-religious context is embodied in the museumgoer's admiration and idolization of such objects. An object then becomes re-sacralized and "worshipped" in its new context through the museum.

When individuals and nations give meaning to objects like statues and historical sites, such as UNESCO World Heritage Sites for instance, the objects then have a new meaning and significance attached to them. It is precisely this new meaning structure that is attacked because the objects represent a significance that a group is opposed to. Depending on the group, one museum may be targeted while another is left standing, but it essentially rests on what the group finds incompatible with its utopia.

For Takfiri Salafist groups, in particular, museums and cultural artifacts are participatory in idol worship. This type of museum "worship" is seen as shirk – museumgoers fetishize these objects, which then makes museumgoers complicit in idolatry, making the objects idols, and those individuals apostate. The meaning structure behind museums is then at odds with a reestablishment of a Salafi-based community of pure worshippers because it is valuing and worshipping something other than God.

When meaning structures are at odds with a utopian ideology and stand in the way of constructing an identity rooted in this ideology, these meaning structures will be destroyed through iconoclasm. It is not just museums, but also any object that these

groups believe represent an opposing meaning structure. By destroying museums and cultural or religious objects, the power structure and identity represented in them is also destroyed. Destroyed monuments and sites represent the powerlessness of those meanings, power, and identity structures, while creating new meaning out of the destruction (Gamboni, 1997; Rambelli, and Reiners, 2007, 18). It is this meaning that groups attack (Hassner, 2011, 27).

10. Nazis, the Taliban, and ISIS

In this section, I argue that the utopian ideologies of the Nazis and the Taliban's and Islamic State's Takfiri Salafist ideology necessitates iconoclasm as a means of establishing a utopian identity. I begin this section by analyzing the similarities between National Socialism and ISIS. Obviously both groups are very much products of their respective times, economic contexts, and political situations, but both share interesting similarities in their ideologies. I chose the Nazis as an example because they have also engaged in iconoclasm, share a similar ideology, but differ in their historical context, which I believe gives credence to a wider phenomenon of iconoclasm due to utopian ideology.

11. National Socialism

National Socialism was an ideology that necessitated iconoclasm in order to establish a pure identity of Aryan volk. One of the key elements of this ideology was the reestablishment of a racially pure community of Aryan people – an ideal identity. Nazism portrayed modern culture as too decadent and corrupt. This was an ideology rooted in the peasantry and racial inequality of people – it was the blood of the volk that made Germany. The expansion of the Lebensraum, "sacred land" in Europe, through conquest was therefore justified to give peasants necessary land (Noyes, 2013, 125). Concurrently, as is well known, Hitler incorporated a Manichean worldview of good and evil into Nazism – the Nazis and the Jews (Heywood, 2012, 220). Much of the propaganda of the time focused on vilifying Jews, through such characteristic vocalizations that "international Jewish world finance" was planning on carrying out its long planned attack on Germany and its people (Noyes, 2013, 127). What these elements gave way to was a belief in the necessity to establish a pure utopian community of an Aryan volk in the Lebensraum by destroying the enemies that impeded this ideal.

In an effort to spread these ideas the newspaper, Der Strurmer, would promulgate messages such as, "...crush the head of the serpent Pan-Juda beneath their heels. He who helps to bring this about helps to eliminate the devil. And this devil is the Jew."[3] Julius Streicher, a prominent Nazi party member and publisher of Der Strurmer wrote, "...that in this war not the Aryan race will be destroyed, but the Jew will be exterminated. What ever else this struggle may lead to, or however long it may endure, this will be the final result."[4] The goal of establishing a land free of Jews and Jewish heritage drove the Holocaust. The establishment of a utopian nation of a pure volk, who are the good in the fight against evil, justified the extermination of all those who were considered an impediment to this goal.

However, not only were Jews

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[3] Leading article by Streicher from "Der Strurmer" No. 39, September 1936, p. 7

[4] Article signed by Streicher in "Der Strurmer", No, 12, March 19 1942, p. 1-2. 31 Ibid. 133 32 Ibid. 127

targeted, but their culture as well. From Kristallnacht to the degenerate art exhibition, any symbol or object of Jewish culture or historical legacy was targeted by Nazis as a means to erase idolatrous and antithetical culture. The destruction of Warsaw, for example, was due to the idea that it was an icon of Jewish and Slavic culture – its meaning structure was antithetical to establishing a pure Aryan land (Ibid. 133). It could not exist alongside a new German world. Indeed there was even a plan to replace Warsaw with a "New German City of Warsaw" (Ibid. 127).

Warsaw stood in the way of establishing the Lebensraum as the utopia Nazism wanted it to be. Ideologically, this city was antithetical to the utopian ideology of Nazism and stood in the way of establishing a utopian identity within it and, more generally, the utopian land of the Lebensraum. It was not just destroying an antithetical space, but destroying an antithetical space with the intention of establishing a new significance – the utopia – paralleled by ISIS and its attempt to establish a utopian community and land in the Levant.

12. Islamic State's Ideological Similarities

Museums and cultural artifacts are anathema to the religiously pure community of ISIS because of ISIS's Manichean division of the world into two camps. ISIS divides the world into two camps – that of the pure worshipper and those who are shirk – any who are not following their interpretation of Islam.[5] In Dabiq, ISIS states that, "... Islamic State... is upon truth, for it implements the shari'ah of Allah, carried out the hudud, and enjoins good and forbids evil."[6] ISIS views any other belief system as a lie – the only truth is through ISIS's interpretation of the Qur'an – a claim of legitimacy based on the legal foundations of Islam. The effect of this claim is that even anything representing this other "camp" is antithetical to ISIS's ideological truth claim. Based on my argument, when objects and museums have meaning attached to them that ISIS believes represents the other "camp," those sites and objects will be targeted for destruction. This is especially the case if these objects are also participant in practices of "idol worship." The Manichean divide that ISIS employs is a tool that justifies iconoclasm.

Islamic State's use of iconoclasm, then, is a means of eliminating shirk in order to deconstruct the opposing identity and power structures that stand in the way of ISIS's establishment of their ideal of truth. ISIS states that, "If you are truthful in your claim that your are upon the religion of Islam and are the followers of the Messenger, then demolish all those idols and flatten them to the ground..."[7] The destruction of cultural artifacts and anathematic meaning structures is necessitated because they stand in the way of the truth that ISIS says its organization represents. When ISIS states that, "... boots will trample the idol of nationalism, destroy the idol of democracy," they seek to destroy any association with, what is in their minds, a Western democratic identity.[8] An identity and power structure that stands in the way of the goal of creating a pure community in the sacred space of the Levant are deemed shirk and must be eliminated.

Opposing meaning structures,

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[5] "A New Era Has Arrived of Might and Dignity for the Muslims," Dabiq 1, June 2014, 10.
[6] "Dozens of 'Nusrah' and 'Ahrar' Fighters Repent and join the Islamic State, Dabiq 7, 38 [My italics]

[7] "The Law of Allah Or The Laws of Men," Dabiq 10, June 2015, 59
[8] "A New Era Has Arrived of Might and Dignity for the Muslims," Dabiq 1, June 2014, 8.

identities, or belief systems will not help to establish the ideal community in the sacred space of the Levant where ISIS believes a final Judgment will take place. This is due to the fact that ISIS believes that only their interpretation of the Qur'an and their truth is the only way to establish their utopia. Therefore anything contradicting ISIS's goals necessitates their deconstruction – something further reiterated in the destruction of the Bamiyan Buddhas in Afghanistan by the Taliban.

13. Taliban and the Bamiyan Buddhas

After the Soviet Union left in 1989, the Talbian sought to construct an Islamic nation based on a notion of a highly conservative religious interpretation of Islam and a rejection of Western cultural values (Knuth, 2006, 142). Much like ISIS, the Taliban violently killed people who did not adhere to their fundamentalist interpretation of Shari'ah law. The Taliban received a purely religious- based education that eliminated familial, racial, and tribal ties – the Taliban, as an identity group, were a unified ontology (Ibid.). This lack of division among them solidified the belief in a unified identity based on the ideal Salafis. Their Takfiri Salafist belief system contributed to the destruction of the Bamiyan Buddhas because the meaning structure behind them was anathema to their belief in the necessity to unify Sunni Muslims under what they believed was the purest form of Islam.

The plea of Western nations to buy the Bamiyan Buddhas from the Taliban further attached a meaning structure behind them that made the objects idols. Western nations attempted to pay the Taliban to save the Buddhas, but implemented sanctions that the Taliban claimed made their people starve, which in the eyes of the Taliban meant that these nations valued these inanimate objects more than people (Flood, 2002, 651). Mullah Omar, the leader of the Afghani Taliban, responded to this over the radio addressing the umma, rhetorically asking, "do you prefer to be a breaker of idols or a seller of idols" (Ibid.)[9]. Attaching the value of a Western aesthetic to these objects now made them idols in the eyes of the Taliban. Destruction of the Buddhas affirmed their commitment to a pure praxis of Islam by destroying idols and the antithetical meaning structure behind them. The Buddhas contained an antithetical identity structure that contradicted the Taliban's ideological necessity of establishing a unified ontology based on a Takfiri Salafist interpretation of Islam.

The Islamic State, the Taliban, and Nazis share the idea of a world divided into good and evil. Similarly, ISIS claims repeatedly that the Western world is plotting to destroy them, much like Hitler claimed Jews were trying to destroy the German volk. The key components involved in both claims is a ubiquitous power structure – Jews, the community of nations, or the West – that seeks to eliminate both societies, wherein the good must eliminate evil. In both National Socialism and ISIS's ideology, what is consistently reiterated is the need to destroy the opponents and their objects that oppose the establishment of an ideal community.

The Manichean divide here simplifies an individual's outlook into good and bad. There is no room for an individual to question cultural destruction because they must adhere to the binary thought process that binds them to the group identity. If they do not, they are

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[9] This harkened back to Sultan Mahmud of Ghazni who broke into a temple in Somnath in 1025 AD to steal a sacred lingam and was asked for it back in exchange for ransom. Mahmud replied he would rather be known as the Idol breaker, not the idol broker (Ibid. 651).

in the other camp of kufr. In both cases iconoclasm is one means used to establish each group's utopia and utopian community in order to purge the area of antithetical identities and meaning structures.

When looking at these ideological similarities, iconoclasm is an outcome of several criteria within these groups, sharing a utopian ideology. The first criterion is the belief in the need to reestablish a pure identity. The second criterion, which is related to the first, is the belief that the pure identity group is incompatible with other identity groups, which necessitates their extermination. They are a taboo – a moral threat to establishment of the pure identity group.

Iconoclasm is a means of destroying the power structure of another identity in order to establish a new power structure, necessitated by a belief in establishing a utopia. The cases of the Bamiyan Buddhas, the destruction of Warsaw, the destruction of the Baalshami Temple in Palmyra, and the destruction of artifacts in the Mosul Museum all share the same motive: to eliminate antithetical meaning structures, or idolatrous objects, in order to establish their utopian vision. The destruction of these sites were attempts to establish these groups' new utopian meaning structures over the old antithetical ones.

14. Conclusion

My argument is an attempt to understand why ISIS is engaging in iconoclasm. I believe that their utopianism is the primary causal mechanism. I do not believe the structural-materialist arguments

explaining why ISIS is engaging in iconoclasm are the most salient casual mechanisms. One popular argument focuses on diminishing the supply of artifacts to increase the net worth of remaining artifacts in order to sell them at a higher price – procuring more income for ISIS in order to support their state affairs. Without a source of income to provide benefits to the population they govern, they would face a legitimation crisis.

Another argument is that groups engage in iconoclasm for the purposes of recruitment and attention. That they publicize their acts signifies they want attention to garner more recruits rather than representing a desire to erase shirk rooted in a purely religious or ideological belief. The attention seeking they engage in via publication of their iconoclastic acts is an act of provoking a response from their enemies as supported in their statement that, "... [these] actions served to enrage the kufr, a deed that in itself is beloved by Allah."[10] While this may be one component, it is not sufficient in explaining why ISIS engages in iconoclasm because it ignores the religious and ideological motivations of ISIS.

These arguments are valid and do have credence, but they are neither necessary nor sufficient explanations, and focus only on pragmatic causal explanations that exclude the aspect of their utopian ideology. There is no way to separate the realm of religious interpretation of idolatry, or their ideology, from ISIS's iconoclasm. While these pragmatic explanations could explain one motivation, I believe they have various overlapping motives, but the primary being an ideological incompatibility of those objects and sites with their utopian and religious interpretation of purity.

One of the main shortcomings of this paper is

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[10] "Erasing the Legacy of a Ruined Nation," Dabiq 8, March 2015, p.22.

the small universe of cases I use to support my argument. I believe these cases do support my argument, but there may be other cases where the variables of a utopian ideology coupled with violently seeking to establish a unified ideal community are present, but no iconoclasm occurs. I have not found such cases, but that does not preclude their existence. Further, I may have omitted a variable concerning the casual mechanism of violence among utopian groups. What makes a utopian group violently seek to establish a unified ontology? Is it really a belief in the sacredness of a space that only true believers should have access to, or something that I have not considered? Moving forward, I would like to find cases where these variables crop up in utopian groups that violently engage in actions that assert their ideological supremacy and iconoclasm is not present. Do such cases exist?

If we are to understand ISIS's iconoclastic acts we must look to the ideological and religious underpinnings of these actions. There are pragmatic reasons to engage in these acts, but discounting the ideology and, specifically, religious motivations of these groups leaves out the crucial role ideas play in motivating these actions, hampering pragmatic solutions. Only by studying the deeper implication that ideas play in Takfiri Salafist terrorist organizations will we be able to better combat these groups and the legacy of a new generation of members. Many authors, writers, and scholars agree that solutions need to be found through this lens of understanding the role ideas play – the maxim that bullets do not kill

ideas holds true in this case. Countries, specifically Western and non-Muslim countries, cannot stop ISIS with bombing and combat solely.[11] Combating ideas is a missing component of policies that engage with this conflict as a battle of opposing groups. Without a strategy that engages with ISIS's ideas proliferating among a significant population, Takfiri Salafist ideology will continue to be a pervasive ideological justification for more terrorism and greater atrocities.

Deradicalization programs should be further explored as potential mechanisms to combat ISIS. The process of deradicalization is an ongoing phenomenon, especially involving Takfiri Salafists, and needs to be further researched, implemented, and funded alongside counter- radicalization programs.[12] Deradicalization, within the context of Takfiri Salafist groups should focus on religious engagement with Imams, and not simply ideological change (Porges and Stern, 2010). It is the role religious interpretation plays in ISIS's utopian ideology that needs be targeted. The logic here is that religion is being used to legitimate violence, and by understanding that, religion can also be used for combating violence via deradicalization programs.

Iconoclasm is an outcome of this utopian ideology rooted in an extremist interpretation of the Qur'an, carried out by rational actors. Religion and ideological justifications matter in the study of international security. While religion is simply a tool, it is manipulated to justify

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[11] For a discussion on interdiction and decapitation see CRONIN and DREZNER.

[12] The literature on the process of radicalization and the pragmatic solution of programs of de-radicalization is a topic for another paper, but if the reader is interested, see: Mitchell D. Silber and Arvin Bhatt, "Radicalization in the West: The Homegrown Threat," New York Police Department, 2007 http://www.nyc.gov/html/nypd/downloads/pdf/public

_information/NYPD_Report-Radicalization_in_the_West.pdf; Marisa L. Porges and Jessica Stern, "Getting Deradicalization Right," Foreign Affairs, May/June 2010 https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/persian-gulf/2010-05-01/getting-deradicalization-right

actions that threaten regional and international stability. Only through the act of understanding it this can a pragmatic solution be found to combat the ideas that motivate iconoclasm and the atrocities carried out upon individuals. The international community needs to tackle the root causes of motivational factors for joining ISIS and their ability to recruit new members. Without a coherent strategy that is future-oriented and sustainable, any measures to eliminate this extremist ideological strain, rooted in religious interpretation, from the world will fail.

Conflict of Interest Statement

The author declares no conflict of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

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