



SITES *of* PLURALISM

Community Politics
in the Middle East

kurdlib.online

FIRAT ORUC (ED.)

FIRAT ORUC

(*Editor*)

Sites of Pluralism

Community Politics in the Middle East



جامعة جورجتاون قطر

GEORGETOWN UNIVERSITY QATAR

Center for International and Regional Studies

kurdlibonline



HURST & COMPANY, LONDON

Published in collaboration with Center for International and Regional Studies,
Georgetown University in Qatar.

First published in the United Kingdom in 2019 by

C. Hurst & Co. (Publishers) Ltd.,

41 Great Russell Street, London, WC1B 3PL

© Firat Oruc and the Contributors, 2019

All rights reserved.

Printed in India

The right of Firat Oruc and the Contributors to be identified as the authors of
this publication is asserted by them in accordance with the Copyright, Designs
and Patents Act, 1988.

A Cataloguing-in-Publication data record for this book
is available from the British Library.

This book is printed using paper from registered sustainable
and managed sources.

ISBN: 9781787380226

www.hurstpublishers.com

kurdlib.online

CONTENTS

<i>Acknowledgments</i>	00
<i>About the Authors</i>	vii

Introduction: Communities in the Playing Field of Pluralism	
<i>Firat Oruc</i>	1

PART 1

STATE–COMMUNITY RELATIONS

1. Between Faith and State: Contemporary Conflicts over Diversity	
<i>Kathleen A. Cavanaugh</i>	23
2. Formal Education Systems as Arenas of Inclusion and Exclusion: Comparative Case Studies from Lebanon and Syria	
<i>Annika Rabo</i>	43
3. The Ruling Family's Hegemony: Inclusion and Exclusion in Qatari Society	
<i>Islam Hassan</i>	63
4. The Shi'a State and the Socioeconomic Challenges of the Sunni Communities in Iran: Historical and Contemporary Perspectives	
<i>Afshin Shabi and Ehsan Abdoh-Tabrizi</i>	87

PART 2

FRONTIERS OF IDENTITY

5. Inclusion and Exclusion in the Arab City: Discourses on Identity and Urbanism in the Middle East	
<i>Nezar AlSayyad</i>	117
6. Millet Ethnicity: Islamized Armenians and Armenian Identity	
<i>James Barry</i>	133

CONTENTS

7. Colorblind or Blinded by Color? Race, Ethnicity, and Identity in Iran	<i>Firoozeh Kashani-Sabet</i>	153
8. Cultural Cleansing and Iconoclasm Under the Islamic State: Attacks on Yazidis and Christians and their Heritage	<i>Benjamin Isakhan, José Antonio González Zarandona, and Taghreed Jamal Al-Deen</i>	181
<i>Notes</i>		195
<i>Index</i>		247

kurdlib.online

CULTURAL CLEANSING AND ICONOCLASM UNDER THE ISLAMIC STATE

ATTACKS ON YEZIDIS AND CHRISTIANS AND THEIR HERITAGE

*Benjamin Isakhan, José Antonio González Zarandona,
and Taghreed Jamal Al-Deen*

When the “Islamic State” (IS) seized large swathes of territory across Iraq and Syria, and declared a new caliphate, it unleashed a cataclysmic wave of devastating human suffering and unprecedented heritage destruction.¹ In terms of human suffering, IS executed many who questioned its nefarious ideology or those who committed petty crimes like drinking alcohol; women have been forced into marriages and raped; girls as young as nine have been used as sex slaves; boys as young as twelve have been armed and used as child soldiers; and the region’s many cultural and religious groups have faced cruel and deadly persecution, including being slaughtered and dumped into mass graves. At the same time, the rapid expansion of IS also proved fatal for many of the world’s most sensitive and important cultural heritage sites. It is difficult to state the

SITES OF PLURALISM

extent, speed, and variety of heritage destruction that has occurred under IS rule. Targeted sites range from ancient Mesopotamian city-states through to Greek, Roman, and Byzantine sites, from classical Islamic sites to those that enshrine the history and beliefs of the region's rich diversity, as well as secular state institutions such as museums, art galleries, and libraries.

Not surprisingly, much media attention and several significant scholarly works have addressed both the human tragedy and the heritage destruction that has unfolded under IS rule. Aside from broader accounts of the roots of IS, its ideology, and its cruel fundamentalist vision,² others have focused on documenting the plight of various ~~ethno-religious~~ minorities across the Middle East,³ the extent to which attacks on these communities meet the varying definitions of ethnic cleansing and genocide,⁴ and the problem of holding groups like IS accountable under international human rights law.⁵ At the same time, a collection of scholarly articles has documented the scale of heritage destruction wrought under IS rule: its use of social media to present the destruction as dramatic spectacles to local, regional, and global audiences;⁶ the extent to which its destruction draws on a tradition of religious and political iconoclasm,⁷ which is used to assert and legitimize its spatio-political power;⁸ the revenues IS raised from the illicit looting and trafficking of artefacts sold on the international black market for antiquities;⁹ using satellite imagery to monitor the destruction;¹⁰ and the extent to which existing international law and the responses issued by various governments and multinational bodies have been largely ineffective.¹¹

While each of the factors outlined above must be considered in any nuanced account of the human suffering and heritage destruction unleashed by IS, the above studies overlook the fact that groups like IS employ violent iconoclasm to cleanse the world of a complex and cosmopolitan past, to encourage rifts and antagonism between communities, and to end blasphemy toward the creation of a holy and serene state. As a terrorist organization with a homogenizing ideological agenda, IS seeks to destroy many forms of religious and cultural pluralism, thus fracturing the rich and colorful mosaic that has long constituted the Middle East. In other words, little attention has been paid to the intersection between the human suffering and the heritage destruction undertaken by IS. Here, human and heritage destruction are intertwined: the suffering inflicted on people is projected onto their sites of ritual and worship—just as the destruction of these sites is deliberately orchestrated to inflict symbolic suffering on specific communities and to shatter the ethnic and religious diversity of the region. This chapter, therefore, explores and

ATTACKS ON YEZIDIS AND CHRISTIANS AND THEIR HERITAGE

documents the human/heritage “cultural cleansing” undertaken by IS against two fragile minorities: the Yezidi and Christian populations of northern Iraq and Syria.¹² The chapter begins by situating this discussion within the conceptual framework of “heritage, community, violence,” and concludes by discussing the consequences of such destruction for the rich cultural mosaic of the Middle East.

Heritage, community, violence

Although there is no shortage of historical examples in which human suffering and heritage destruction have paralleled one another, most academic studies have not adequately demonstrated their complex interrelationship. Indeed, while investigations into contexts as diverse as the First World War and the Armenian genocide,¹³ the Second World War and the Holocaust,¹⁴ the “cultural cleansing” campaign in Cambodia,¹⁵ the civil war in Lebanon,¹⁶ the ethno-nationalist conflict in Northern Ireland,¹⁷ and the Iraq war of 2003 routinely place mass human suffering alongside heritage destruction,¹⁸ the relationship between the two is not adequately explored. The same can be said of studies that examine isolated incidents in which heritage sites have become a target of specific political actors, such as the destruction of the Babri Masjid mosque in India by Hindu radicals in 1992,¹⁹ or the destruction of the Bamiyan Buddhas in Afghanistan by the Taliban in 2001.²⁰ Investigations into such phenomena achieved perhaps their greatest urgency following the devastating events that tore apart the Balkans in the 1990s. The ~~ethno-religious~~ nature of the war clearly meant that the heritage of opposing factions became a direct target.²¹ The “deliberate destruction of mosques, churches, museums, civil records, monuments and artefacts in the Balkans” was said to be driven by a zealous desire to suppress “evidence of a culturally diverse and hybrid past, in favour of a mythical ‘golden age’ of ethnic uniformity.”²² In this context, while Andras Riedlmayer has asserted a “link between the systematic persecution and expulsion of ethnic and religious communities and the destruction of the cultural and religious heritage associated with the targeted community,”²³ he does not explore the nature of this “link” and the human-heritage nexus.

Attacks on heritage sites in conjunction with genocidal pogroms or ~~ethno-religious~~ conflict occur precisely because heritage plays such a critical role as the tangible manifestation of community.²⁴ Sites of religious or historical significance, of public ritual, and of commemoration or celebration enable

SITES OF PLURALISM

groups to build an “imagined community” in which individuals inculcate a sense of collective identity.²⁵ Heritage sites therefore “act as markers that signify the identity of the place,”²⁶ a physical structure that can be used (and, in many cases, abused) by various actors—from oppressive states to liberation movements, and from divisive ~~ethno-religious~~ separatists to unifying civil society organizations—to rally people behind a common cause.²⁷ However, when differences between and within communities occur, specific groups become targets, and their heritage sites can be transformed into sites of contestation and conflict.²⁸ In such a situation, actors who target enemy heritage are aiming to destroy not just the site itself but the site as symbol of the given community—its history, customs, and identity.²⁹ However, the targeting of a community and its heritage can have divergent consequences and responses,³⁰ from the complete erasure of a way of life through to the re-appropriation of suffering by future generations in which communities come to commemorate their “places of pain and shame.”³¹ In some instances, such sites are turned into monuments where trauma is memorialized and conflict mediated.³²

Despite such transformative potential, the targeting of heritage sites as a proxy for, or in conjunction with, attacks on human beings remains deeply problematic, and the intersection between the two phenomena remains widely understudied. For his part, Robert Bevan has argued that attacks on heritage sites and human communities during conflict ought to be thought of as indistinguishable moments of cultural cleansing “with architecture as its medium.”³³ More recently, W. J. T. Mitchell has argued that “the destruction of images [iconoclasm] is directly linked to ... ‘ethnic cleansing.’ The removal of images, sacred sites, and persons is all one process ... to cleanse the world of these images and of the ‘inhabitants’ for whom they are important signs of identity and belonging to a place.”³⁴ Further, in response to the heinous actions of IS, UNESCO’s Director General, Irina Bokova, referred to the atrocities as “cultural cleansing,” arguing that the destruction of heritage cannot be understood without the persecution and killing of cultural minorities. It is “intended to destroy identities, tear apart social fabrics, and fuel hatred,” because “violent extremists attack anything that can sustain diversity, critical thinking and freedom of opinion—schools, teachers, journalists, cultural minorities, and monuments.”³⁵ Drawing on this work, the remainder of this chapter seeks to document this human–heritage nexus by examining the plight of the Yezidis and Christians under IS rule, and the deliberate targeting of them as human communities and their specific heritage sites. What distinguishes the human–heritage attacks on the Yezidis and Christians from other

ATTACKS ON YEZIDIS AND CHRISTIANS AND THEIR HERITAGE

historical iconoclastic episodes is the speed and ferocity of this deliberate symbolic campaign.³⁶ Another point of distinction is that while much attention has been paid to IS destruction of certain sites—particularly ancient archaeological sites with a distinct connection to biblical narratives or the origins of “Western civilization” such as Palmyra or Nimrud—little mention has been made in the Western media of the destruction of those sites that hold contemporary significance to the many ethnic and religious minorities that constitute the modern Middle East.

“Devil worshippers” and judgment day: Islamic State attacks on Yezidis

Yezidis are a minority community spread across different regions of Iraq, Syria, Iran, Turkey, and Transcaucasia (Armenia, Georgia, and Azerbaijan), and there are also significant Yezidi communities in Germany, Switzerland, Sweden, and Russia.³⁷ Today, the biggest communities are in northern Iraq, particularly in the Laleş Valley in the Sheikhan district west of Mosul where their holiest sites are located. It is thought that they number around 450,000 people in total.³⁸ Throughout their history, Yezidis have experienced repression and extermination and today face significant challenges in keeping their traditions alive in their homeland. Although their origins are somewhat opaque, scholars recognize the influence of and elements from Christianity, Islam (including Sufism), Gnosticism, and Zoroastrianism in their unique religion and system of beliefs.³⁹ Ethnically and linguistically, most are considered to be Kurds, although other variations exist. Thus, Yezidis are regarded as “one of the most remarkable illustrations of ethno-religious identity,”⁴⁰ because their sense of identity combines unique religious, cultural, and ethnic elements.

Yezidis have long suffered a history of persecution, which has also formed a core part of their identity.⁴¹ In the 1970s, for example, Saddam Hussein initiated a campaign of Arabization that entailed the destruction of Yezidi villages and/or their repopulation by Sunni Arabs, as well as the relocation of hundreds of thousands of Kurds and Yezidis to the so-called “collective villages,” so their independence could be suppressed by the Ba’thist regime. In the 1980s, the Ba’ath regime undertook several attacks against the Kurds and Yezidis, including the brutal Anfal Campaign.⁴² Needless to say, such actions forced the Yezidis to settle in urban centers, disrupting their rural way of life. Most recently, in August 2007, a series of bombs in the Sinjar region left 250 dead and 350 wounded Yezidis when four trucks exploded in three villages in

northern Iraq.⁴³ Al-Qa‘ida-linked Sunni insurgents were widely viewed as being responsible for the attacks, which a US army general described as “an act of ethnic cleansing ... almost genocide.”⁴⁴

As with many other groups, the tangible heritage sites of the Yezidis play a central role in their community and religious identity. Their main type of heritage site is the mausoleums of saints as well as temples and shrines where a mixture of Christian, Muslim, and Zoroastrian traditions converge in the rituals. Situated mainly in rural areas and on top of hills “to separate them from public spaces,” these shrines, temples, and mausoleums play an important role in underscoring Yezidi identity: they are places for community and religious ritual, sacred and public gatherings, and for collective worship of the divine.⁴⁵ Yezidi temples can be easily identified by the depiction of the two revered animals of their faith on the façade: the peacock and the serpent. The first symbolizes the Peacock Angel or Melek Taus, the representative of their god, Xwade, on earth. Melek Taus is thought to have been an angel that fell to earth and transformed into the colorful bird.⁴⁶ The serpent is also revered by the Yezidis because they believe that it helped humanity to survive the Flood when the animal used its body to seal a leak in Noah’s ark after it crashed into rocks.⁴⁷ The worship of a fallen angel and a serpent are controversial in the three Abrahamic faiths of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam where the fallen angel and the serpent are associated with the story of the devil. This has often led to the Yezidis being mistakenly described as “devil worshippers.”

The most recent example is that of IS, which has frequently referred to the Yezidis as “devil worshippers” in its propaganda materials, as well as calling them *kafir* (non-believers) who are given the option of conversion or death. On 3 August 2014, IS staged a horrifying campaign to not only take the northwestern Iraqi city of Sinjar but to cleanse the region of its Yezidi population. In the IS propaganda magazine *Dabiq*, the jihadists explained their desire to erase the Yezidi community for fear of judgment day:

Upon conquering the region of Sinjar in Wilayat Ninawa, the Islamic State faced a population of Yazidis, a pagan minority existent for ages in regions of Iraq and Sham. Their continual existence to this day is a matter that Muslims should question as they will be asked about it on Judgment Day, considering that Allah had revealed Ayat as-Sayf (the verse of the sword) over 1400 years ago.⁴⁸

The consequences of its claim to be committing genocide on behalf of the divine were devastating. Up to 500 Yezidis were slaughtered in a matter of days, with tens of thousands, including up to 25,000 children,⁴⁹ fleeing their homes in fear, many ending up trapped on Mount Sinjar without food, water, or weap-

ATTACKS ON YEZIDIS AND CHRISTIANS AND THEIR HERITAGE

ons.⁵⁰ According to a report commissioned by the United Nations in 2016, many Yezidi women, including girls as young as nine, were taken into slavery and raped.⁵¹ After Sinjar was retaken in November 2015 by Iraqi and Kurdish forces, six mass graves were unearthed containing the bodies of at least 200 women aged between forty and eighty years old who were apparently deemed too old or unattractive to be used as sex slaves.⁵² The physical violence committed by IS on the Yezidis and other minorities was the subject of a UN report in March 2015, which argued that IS “may have committed genocide,” based on its deliberate intentions to “destroy the Yezidis as a group.”⁵³ A similar report by the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum concluded that IS was “targeting particular groups on the basis of their identity,”⁵⁴ and that it was undoubtedly “perpetrating genocide against the Yezidi people.”⁵⁵

In addition to the violence against the Yezidi people, IS undertook an aggressive campaign to cleanse the region of the physical manifestations of their identity, including many heritage sites. Once IS had cleared the Sinjar region of Yezidis, it began to mark Yezidi houses to distinguish them from houses that belonged to Muslims. Needless to say, the Yezidi houses were “looted, and some were destroyed or severely damaged.”⁵⁶ Likewise, in August 2014, IS appeared to destroy four significant Yezidi cultural sites, including the Shrine of Sheikh Mand in Jiddala, the Shrine of Sheikh Hassan in Gabara, the Shrine of Malak Fakhraddin in Sikeeniya, and the Shrine of Mahma Rasha in Solagh.⁵⁷ In 2015, IS destroyed the early thirteenth-century minaret of Qutb Al-Din Muhammad in Sinjar, filling the building with explosives before detonating it and demolishing it.⁵⁸ In Tal Afar on 25 June 2015, IS also destroyed the shrine of Khidr al-Elias (Ilyas, the Green Man), a saint revered by Christians, Muslims, and Yezidis alike.⁵⁹ Also in 2015, the second most important shrine in the Yezidi faith, the Sharaf Al-Deen shrine near Sinjar, came under several waves of attack by IS. It was successfully defended by a small group of just eighteen armed Yezidi men who stayed behind to defend the thirteenth-century shrine.⁶⁰

Being prepared to risk their lives to defend their religious sites speaks volumes about the high value that the Yezidi community places on their heritage. The Yezidi collective identity and culture are fundamentally tied to their heritage. As one Yezidi man put it when reflecting on the IS attack on Sinjar, “It’s more than our heritage ... It’s our heart and soul.”⁶¹ Haider Elias, the president of Yazda, a global Yezidi organization based in Houston, also underlined the erasure of Yezidi identity via the destruction of their holy sites: “The new generation, they don’t know, they don’t have places of worship ... they don’t know

who they are. And that is terrifying for the Yezidi culture.”⁶² Therefore, attacks on the Yezidis, including the displacement of their population and the destruction of their shrines, are comparable to the ontological death of the community.⁶³ As human rights activist Nadia Murad, a Yezidi who was kidnapped and sold into sex slavery by IS, said: “[it is a] genocide against our identity.” She added that IS “came with the sole aim of destroying the Yezidi identity through force, rape, recruitment of children and destruction of all our temples.”⁶⁴ This highlights the interconnection between the violent genocide perpetrated by IS against the Yezidi and the parallel destruction of their heritage sites and points to the terrifying relationship between human/heritage suffering.

“N” for “Nasarene:” Islamic State attacks on Christians

Christians have long played a significant role in the Middle East’s rich socio-cultural life, contributing to the region’s diversity, an influence that has been dramatically reduced in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. The geopolitics of the Middle East has deeply shaped the history of Christianity as well as its survival in the region of its birth.⁶⁵ As one anthropologist asserts, Christianity in the Middle East needs to be “understood as a cultural and political system in addition to being a religion.”⁶⁶ Christians in the Middle East belong to a broad spectrum of different sects, including Chalcedonians or Eastern Orthodox (Greek Orthodox, Russian Orthodox); Chalcedonian Monothelites (Maronites); non-Chalcedonians or Oriental Orthodox (Syrian or Syriac Orthodox, Coptic, Armenian, and Ethiopian Orthodox); non-Ephesians (Nestorians or Assyrians); and Eastern Catholics (Uniate). Like the Yezidis, Christians in the Middle East are scattered across different regions: Copts mostly live in Egypt; Armenians mainly live in Syria, Lebanon, Armenia, Turkey, and Iran; Maronites and Catholics are predominantly in Lebanon; Greek and Syriac Orthodox branches live in Syria; and Nestorians, Syrian Orthodox, and Chalcedonians live in Iraq.⁶⁷ Beyond their doctrinal differences, the Christians of the Middle East are not monolithic, differing along divergent cultural, political, and ethnic identities. No matter where they are, the communal identity of Middle Eastern Christians—as with Christians elsewhere—embodied in various forms of material culture, particularly churches that are identified by the prominence of a sacred cross. Worship occurs in these sacred spaces, where people also gather for ritual ceremonies like christenings, weddings, and funerals, and to mark important religious events, like Easter and Christmas.

ATTACKS ON YEZIDIS AND CHRISTIANS AND THEIR HERITAGE

As with many religious and ethnic minorities, Christian communities have also endured centuries of persecution and oppression in the Middle East at the hands of different forces. To some extent, this has been shaped by actual and perceived political connections between the Christians of the Middle East and the West, a legacy that dates back to the Crusades, but it also influenced attitudes towards Christians during the colonial period and more recent military interventions.⁶⁸ Historically, many governments of the region have undertaken degrees of discrimination and persecution against the Christians. These range from restricting religious education or banning their ancient languages (Aramaic, for example) through to direct persecution, such as the Armenian genocide at the end of the First World War, or the Simele massacre undertaken by the Iraqi state in 1933.⁶⁹ In fact, the persecution and oppression have played an important part in the construction of identity discourses related to the genocide narrative, particularly in the case of the Christian Armenian community.⁷⁰ Under strict interpretations of Islamic law, while the Yezidis are considered *kafir* and devil worshippers, the Christians are considered *Ahl Al-Kitab* (people of the book) and are granted protection as long as they pay the *jizya* tax. With the rise of various fundamentalist groups such as IS, Christians have once again faced persecution, with many choosing to flee the region. Experts have demonstrated that the Christian population of the Middle East has plummeted dramatically over the last century: in 1910, Christians represented 13.6 percent of the Middle East's population, but in 2010 they comprised just 4.2 percent, with that number likely to decline further given the post-Arab-uprisings environment, and the rise of groups like IS.⁷¹

Indeed, when IS swept across Syria and Iraq, the region's many Christians were given a stark ultimatum: either convert to Islam, pay the *jizya* tax, leave their ancient homelands, or be executed.⁷² In Syria alone, 600,000 Christians have fled the country since the start of the civil war in 2011, driven out by extremist groups like Nusra Front and IS.⁷³ The abuse of human rights that they are subjected to is devastating. As an example, many Christians have been crucified by IS and left to die in public spaces over the course of several days.⁷⁴ Similarly, since the Iraq war of 2003, nearly a million Christians have fled Iraq and only about 300,000 remain in the country.⁷⁵ In Mosul, IS marked all Christian properties across the city with a red Arabic letter "N" for "Nasarene," a derogatory name for Christians taken from the city of Nazareth where Jesus is said to have spent his youth. Many of the marked buildings were later looted by IS and demolished. In terms of Christian heritage sites, IS has destroyed

SITES OF PLURALISM

Fig. 8. 1



hundreds of statues, defaced murals, desecrated Christian cemeteries, taken sledgehammers to church façades, blown up ancient monasteries, and removed crosses from churches and replaced them with the black flag of IS before converting them to mosques or for other purposes. Nuri Kino, founder and president of a group called “A Demand for Action” campaigning for the rights of ethno-religious minorities such as Christians and Yazidis in the Middle East, notes: “If they changed a church to a mosque it is further proof of their cleansing, something that many call a genocide. They destroy our artefacts, our churches and try to erase us in any way they can.”⁷⁶ This has been confirmed by priests in Mosul, with one explaining: “Some of these churches date back to ancient historical periods.” By destroying the churches, “IS and the extremists in Mosul want to fully erase the history of the Christians.”⁷⁷

For example, in Mosul, IS destroyed the Tomb of the Prophet Jonah (Nebi Yunus) in July 2014, with reports of a statue of the Virgin Mary also being destroyed.⁷⁸ Furthermore, the 1,400-year-old monastery of St. Elijah (Deir

ATTACKS ON YEZIDIS AND CHRISTIANS AND THEIR HERITAGE

Mar Elian) was completely leveled during August or September 2014.⁷⁹ This monastery was the oldest in Iraq, having been established by one of the first Christians communities in the world. Other religious sites attacked in Iraq include the September 2014 destruction of the seventh-century Assyrian St. Ahoadamah Church (or Green church) in Tikrit;⁸⁰ the February 2015 destruction of the seventh-century Al-Tahera church in Mosul;⁸¹ the March 2015 destruction of the tenth-century Chalcedonian Catholic church of St. Markourkas in Mosul;⁸² the early March destruction of the Christian cemetery of Tel Kaif in Mosul; and the 19 March 2015 demolition of the tombs associated with the Syriac Catholic monastery dedicated to the martyrs Mar Behnam and Mart Sarah, originally erected in the fourth century in Qaraqosh, southeast of Mosul, Iraq.⁸³

Additionally, in July 2015, IS destroyed a Chalcedonian church, known as the Mother of Aid Church in Mosul, which is thought to be more than 1,000 years old.⁸⁴ Although not destroyed, the church of Saint Ephraim—the seat of the Syriac Orthodox archdiocese in Mosul—was occupied over the course of a year, while IS emptied the church of anything it could sell and then converted the premises into the location of its state council. In June 2015, IS had devised plans to convert the church into what would be called “the mosque of the mujahideen.”⁸⁵ The attack on Mosul’s Christian heritage is particularly strategic because, as a historian has pointed out, “Mosul was a key center of spirituality for the Church of the East.”⁸⁶ The second largest city in Iraq was not only an important city in terms of the Islamic State’s desire to dominate significant cities, but it was also important because of the cosmopolitan heritage of the city with its many cultural and ethnic peoples.

Similar attacks on Christian heritage sites occurred in Syria. In August 2015, the Christian monastery of Deir Mar Elian in Al-Qaryatayn, thought to date from the sixth century, was bulldozed by members of IS, leaving the site in ruins.⁸⁷ Osama Edward, director of the Assyrian Human Rights Network, described the destruction: “The monastery has been completely removed ... these actions send a message to Christians in the area that we don’t have a place anymore.”⁸⁸ Likewise, after conquering the northern city of Raqqa in late 2013—the de facto capital city of IS—the group shuttered all three of the major churches in the city and removed the crosses and hung black flags over the buildings. The largest church, the Armenian Catholic Martyrs Church, was turned into a recruitment center where gruesome videos are shown of IS operations and conquests.⁸⁹ A similar case occurred with the Church of St. Simeon—famous for having spent his life atop a column. A sublime exam-

SITES OF PLURALISM

ple of a Byzantine-era church (AD 490), located 35 kilometers east of Aleppo, was used by Islamist forces as a military base in 2013.⁹⁰ Perhaps the most well-known example is the complete destruction of the Armenian Holy Martyrs Church in the al-Roshdeyah neighborhood in Deir ez-Zour, Syria, by IS—or its once affiliate, Jabhat al-Nusra, in September 2014.⁹¹ This church, built from the mid-1980s and consecrated in 1991,⁹² is known as the Armenian Genocide Memorial Church or Holy Martyrs Armenian Church and housed one of the world's largest and most significant archives on the 1915 Armenian genocide, as well as a crypt with the remains of hundreds of victims.⁹³ Each year, thousands of Armenians gather at the church on 25 April, the date they commemorate the start of the genocide dedicated to the one and a half million Armenians slaughtered in 1915. Most of the church archives, dating back to 1841 and containing thousands of documents on the Armenian genocide, were burned to ashes, while the bones of hundreds of victims, packed into the church's crypt in memory of the mass killings a century ago, were thrown into the street beside the ruins.⁹⁴

Also very symbolic is the attack against Christians in the Khabur River in the Jazirah region of Syria, where an Assyrian community settled in 1933—in thirty-five villages stretching between Al-Hasaka and Ras al-Ain—after having left Iraq because of the Simele massacre at the hands of the Iraqi state. In February 2015, at around the same time that IS seized global media attention with its destruction of the Mosul Museum, the group had also captured the villages along the Khabur River, displacing thousands of Christians,⁹⁵ and kidnapping between 220 and 250 Assyrian civilians.⁹⁶ The group burned down a church in the village of Tal Hurmoz—one of the oldest churches in the region—and destroyed three more churches in the town of Tal Tamer.⁹⁷ Other reports claim that IS had also set fire to churches in the villages of Tel Shamiran, Qabr Shamly, and Tel Baloua.⁹⁸ On Easter Sunday 2015, in the village of Tal Nasri, IS blew up the Assyrian Church of the Virgin Mary, an eighty-year-old structure, and turned it to rubble. As they went on to do at many churches along the Khabur River, IS then set booby traps at the church, including landmines, in the hope of killing more Christians as they returned to their villages and holy sites.⁹⁹ In total, nineteen churches, all built after 1933, were destroyed, damaged, or vandalized along the Khabur River.¹⁰⁰

Needless to say, this is an unprecedented act of heritage destruction that not only emphasizes the sectarian violence against Assyrians in Syria but that also seeks to erase the community's history and collective identity. Demonstrating the significance of the human–heritage nexus in the actions of

ATTACKS ON YEZIDIS AND CHRISTIANS AND THEIR HERITAGE

IS against Christian communities, these attacks highlight the emphasis that groups such as IS place on both the targeting of humans and their sacred sites. As one Syrian Christian refugee put it, when asked whether he would return to his village in Hasaka, “Go back to what? I watched ISIS blow up our church.”¹⁰¹ This speaks volumes about the intent and effectiveness of the IS campaign to not only erase the Christian people but to also remove the sites most sacred to them.

Conclusion

Despite the fact that the days of IS controlling significant territory across Iraq and Syria appear to be drawing to a close,¹⁰² the organization has left behind a horrific legacy. Key to interpreting and analyzing this legacy will be an appreciation of the devastating brutality and heritage destruction carried out by IS, which has included deliberate attacks against two of the most vulnerable minorities in Iraq and Syria: Yazidis and Christians. This has been a two-pronged campaign: it included violent genocidal pogroms that ended in enslavement, gang rape, torture, and mass graves on the one hand, and a very deliberate parallel effort to destroy the key heritage sites and symbols that enshrine the respective collective identity of these communities, on the other. Such attacks on the human/heritage dimension of a given community ultimately rupture their identity, dismembering their connections to each other and to their collective past.

Beyond this, however, lies an even darker dimension to the human/heritage destruction wrought by the IS. Many of the organization’s attacks on the Yazidis and Christians are deliberately orchestrated to connect with earlier waves of genocide endured by these groups. For example, many of the IS attacks against the Yazidis have included the destruction of their villages and their forced migration to urban centers, reminiscent of the Arabization programs undertaken by the Ba’ath in the 1970s and 1980s. More to the point, attacks by IS on Christian sites such as the Armenian church in Deir ez-Zour and the villages along the Khabur River appear to have been deliberately designed to conjure sharp memories of the Armenian genocide and the Simele massacre. Reenacting earlier waves of genocide allows IS to connect its contemporary brutality—ideologically, temporally, and physically—to those moments in Yazidi and Christian history that are most sensitive and painful. This deliberate layering of genocide means that moments of direct persecution extend beyond the human/heritage suffering of the present to invoke the

SITES OF PLURALISM

traumas of the past. The message could not be clearer: where the Armenian genocide or the Anfal campaign failed, the holy mandate of IS will succeed. It intends to erase any vestige of a cosmopolitan and diverse Middle East toward the creation of a monolithic and oppressive caliphate governed by the most perverse interpretations of Islamic law.

However, it is in the IS rejection and suppression of difference that we find the seeds of the group's undoing. The rich and colorful mosaic of the Middle East has always been central to its unique history and way of life. Beyond political and military efforts to defeat IS lies the even more urgent need to defeat the organization ideologically. What the Middle East—and Iraq and Syria more specifically—needs is a robust and sensitive process in which the traumas of the past are openly and honestly engaged with. This would serve as but one antidote to the ongoing chaos and as a critical first step toward mending inter-ethnic and religious relations, creating a cohesive region and a modern, peaceful, and multicultural Middle East where all citizens are free to live in peace regardless of their ethnicity, religion, or political leanings.

kurdlib.online