



Examining Cultural Heritages Harmed By Religious Fanaticism: Sample of the Palmyra Ancient City

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ABSTRACT

Palmyra was an important religious and trade center of inner Syria in ancient times, and included on the World Heritage List by UNESCO in 1980. Palmyra's origin dates back to the Neolithic era. The city, known as "bride of the desert" or "pearl of the desert", and frequented by caravans, lived the most splendid times during the Roman Empire. Thanks to the welfare of those times, many statues and monumental buildings were built. Nevertheless, the city has been harmed by the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL), who have been terrorizing Middle East lately, since May 2015. The reason of collapsing, dynamiting or destroying those heritages is attributed by Islamic terrorist groups to symbolizing idolization, what Islam ideologically refuses. In this paper, information gathered about The Ancient City of Palmyra, and the importance of the problem will be highlighted by evaluating the conditions before and after the destruction.

Keywords: Palmyra; religious fanaticism; ancient city; cultural heritage.

Dini Fanatizm Tarafından Zarar Görmüş Kültürel Mirasların İrdelenmesi: Palmyra Antik Kenti Örneği

ÖZ

Palmyra, antik zamanlarda Suriye'nin önemli bir dini ve ticaret merkeziydi ve 1980'de UNESCO tarafından Dünya Mirası Listesi'ne dâhil edildi. Palmyra'nın kökeni, Neolitik Çağ'a kadar uzanmaktadır. "Çölün gelini" veya "çölün incisi" olarak bilinen, karavanlarla ziyaret edilen şehir, Roma İmparatorluğu döneminde en görkemli zamanlarını yaşamıştır. O zamanların refahı sayesinde birçok heykel ve anıtsal yapılar inşa edilmiştir. Lakin Mayıs 2015'ten beri Orta Doğu'yu terörize eden Irak Şam İslam Devleti (İŞİD) isimli terör örgütü, kente büyük zararlar vermektedir. Sözde İslami terör örgütleri tarafından bu mirasların yıkılması, bozulması ya da yok edilmesinin sebebi ise, bu yapıların İslamın reddettiği ikonlaştırmayı temsil etmeleri olarak gösterilmektedir. Bu çalışmada, Palmyra Antik Kenti hakkında toplanan bilgiler ve yıkım öncesi ve sonrasındaki koşullar değerlendirilerek sorunun önemi vurgulanmıştır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Palmyra, dini fanatizm, antik kent, kültürel miras.

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1. Introduction

Culture can be defined as: “Behaviour peculiar to Homo sapiens, together with material objects used as an integral part of this behaviour. Thus, culture includes language, ideas, beliefs, customs, codes, institutions, tools, techniques, works of art, rituals, and ceremonies, among other elements” (Britannica 2005). Beside individual differences between people, culture is the main driving force that separates humans into groups. Out of the many elements that define culture only two are readily observable: language and religion. Language is not only a means of communication; it also carries ideas, customs, and values. Religion may even be more influential for the human behaviour (Helble, 2006). According to Britannica (2005) religion is: “Human beings’ relation to that which they regard as holy, sacred, spiritual, or divine. Religion is commonly regarded as consisting of a person’s relation to God or to gods or spirits. Worship is probably the most basic element of religion, but moral conduct, right belief, and participation in religious institutions are generally also constituent elements of the religious life as practiced by believers and worshipers and as commanded by religious sages and scriptures” (Britannica 2005). This definition reveals an interesting feature of religion. The believer has a personal relation to God or Gods, but at the same time he or she is not religious on his or her own, but in interaction with other adherents. Both relations may have a considerable impact on the social and economic behaviour of an individual (Hutter, 2005). Walter Burkert (1996) commented that there has never been a society without religion. What exactly constitutes religion remains a conundrum (Burkert, 1996). The distinctive marks of monotheistic scriptural religions are clear: they have a canonical text with authoritative interpretations and applications, a class of officials to preserve and propagate the faith, a defined legal structure, and ethical norms for the regulation of the daily lives of individuals and communities. Religion is, hence, an institutionalized aspect of culture, with bureaucratic institutions that are focal points for economic and political power within the society (Fenn, 1978).

Religion leaves an imprint on landscape, through culture and lifestyle. Religious structures - such as places of worship, and other sacred sites - dominate many landscapes. Religious traditions - Hindu ritual bathing in the Ganges, for example - leave their mark on the physical appearance of an area. Religious observance – church attendance, and so on - affect the time management, spatial movements and behaviour of believers (Park, 2004). Given that many people of religion tend to downplay the importance of religious buildings as merely representing the outside or the superficial part of their religion, it is remarkable how much time; energy and – above all – money are put into the construction of new religious buildings all over the world (LeCavalier, 2009). There is no doubt that religions are shaping cities as they rule on. Ever since the first religious societies, it is easy to find effects of religion on the settlements in physical scape and silhouettes. One can identify the religion when he or she visits a city via these structures, because symbolism is still on the charge of the designing temples. For example, practically, minarets are no longer necessary to build around mosque, because no imams are climbing to the top and calling for prayer, instead, they use technology – microphones and speakers - but it is a kind of symbol of Muslim temples. In some religions, it is forbidden to use any other religions’ ornaments, symbols or habits in any design element of daily life not to be like the member of others. Those representations are not welcomed in such closed beliefs – for examples Muslims do not use sculptures or pictures of Mohammad in mosques. These details address societies to a kind of fanaticism.

Religious fanaticism can be more threatening and devastating than any other fanaticism types. Originally, the idea of writing this paper came into question after reading news about ISIL strike to the ancient city of Palmyra. It was the darkest face of religious fanaticism to see the attempt of wiping out other beliefs – even prehistoric ones - over the world. In this study, some of the most prominent demolitions of religious fanaticism and how they affected the cultural heritages throughout history are compiled; the statuses of Palmyra before and after ISIL strike are evaluated.

2. Religious Fanaticism

According to Hornby (1988) fanatic person is who is too enthusiastic about something. Fanaticism therefore can be referred to as over enthusiasm. Religious fanaticism, according to Balogun (1988) is a violent and unreasoning religious enthusiasm. It is a heart perturbs understanding that religion whose elementary function is to unite people together in peace and affection has catalysed so much conflicts and wars leading to untold destruction of man and property in the society. Many factors are responsible for this religious fanaticism and insecurity in the society. These include; religion itself, differences in interpretation of the doctrine within religions, aggressive evangelisms, the claim to monopoly of religious truth and poverty (Oduwole and Fadeyi, 2013). Although this disorder can be called “religious fanaticism,” those afflicted need not appear wild-eyed or deranged; quite the contrary, they can present themselves as thoughtful and responsible people inspired by the loftiest of ideals. Nevertheless, their absolute confidence in themselves and their cause, their willingness to create massive destruction for a supposed higher good, and their dehumanization of their opponents, all indicate the imbalance of a personality disorder (Anonymous, 2016a).

The dynamics that underlie religious fanaticism have been recognized by many psychological philosophers. For example, C. G. Jung (1966) wrote of “positive inflation”, Alice Miller (1981) described grandiosity used as a defense against depression, Gary Rosenthal (1987) utilized the phrase “inflated by the spirit,” and Greg Bogart (1995) warned against “the shadow of vocation.” More recently Robert Jay Lifton (2000) has described this type of personality structure in his concept of “functional megalomania” that fuels what he calls “the new global terrorism”.

Throughout history, destruction and loss of cultural heritage have constantly occurred as a consequence of fanatic iconoclasm or as ‘collateral’ effects of armed conflicts. As early as 391 AD, the Roman Emperor Theodosius ordered the demolition of the Temple of Serapis in Alexandria, to obliterate the last refuge of non-Christians. In 1992, Hindu extremists were intent on the destruction of the sixteenth-century Babri Mosque (Saikal and Thakur, 2001). In more recent times, the Balkan wars have offered the desolate spectacle of the devastation of Bosnia’s mosques. Extensive looting and forced transfers of cultural objects have accompanied almost every war (Boylan, 1993). Aerial bombardments during the Second World War and in the hundred-plus armed conflicts that have plagued humanity since 1945 have contributed to the destruction and disappearance of much cultural heritage of great importance for countries of origin and for humanity as a whole. The violent destruction of the great rock sculptures of the Buddhas of Bamiyan by military and para-military forces of Afghanistan’s Taliban government in March 2001 could be viewed as an ordinary example in this history of cultural infamy. Closer scrutiny, however, shows that the violent acts themselves, and the perverse modalities of their execution present various new features in the pathology of State behavior toward cultural heritage (Francioni and Lenzerini, 2003).

There is increasing awareness of the 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. Some damaged or totally destroyed cultural heritages are given below.

2.1. Alexandria Library

In 332 BCE Alexander the Great invaded Egypt, which at that time was part of the Persian Empire. However, Egypt’s Persian rulers were so unpopular, that the Egyptians welcomed Alexander to be their new king instead. He was crowned king in Egypt’s capital, Memphis. Next, Alexander travelled northwards with his army and set up camp on the north coast near the village of Rhakotis, where he founded the city of Alexandria in 331 BC. And in 301 BC, the Great Library of Alexandria was built with the support of invited Greek poet and philosopher, Demetrius of Phalerum (Escoffey, 2012). In 48 BC, The Great Library of Alexandria was set on fire along with Caesar’s ships on the bay. It is said that, because loss of those precious books, human race’s development came to a standstill.

2.2. Buddhas of Bamiyan

The devastation of the great rock sculptures of the Buddhas of Bamiyan by military and para-military forces of the Taliban Government of Afghanistan in March 2001 presents some unprecedented features. The discriminatory intent, reflected in the sheer will to eradicate any cultural manifestation foreign to the Taliban ideology, and the deliberate defiance of the United Nations and international public opinion make this destruction a very dangerous precedent. Unlike traditional war damage to cultural heritage, which affects the enemy’s property, the demolition of the Buddhas of Bamiyan concerns the Afghan Nation’s heritage. They were located on its territory and belonged to its ancient pre-Islamic past. The purpose of the destruction was not linked in any way to a military objective, but inspired by the sheer will to eradicate any cultural manifestation of religious or spiritual creativity that did not correspond to the Taliban view of religion and culture (Figure 1). The modalities of the execution differ considerably from other similar instances of destruction in the course of recent armed conflicts. For instance, during the Balkan war of the 1990s and during the Iraq–Iran war in the 1980s, extensive destruction of cultural property occurred as a result of wanton bombardment, as in the case of Dubrovnik, or under the impulse of ethnic hatred. In the case of the Afghan Buddhas, demolition was carefully planned, painstakingly announced to the media all over the world, and cynically documented in all its phases of preparation, bombing and ultimate destruction (Francioni and Lenzerini, 2003).

2.3. Bosnia - Herzegovina’s Post-War Period

During the 1992-1996 conflict in Bosnia-Herzegovina, there were reports by various parties concerning the widespread destruction of cultural and religious heritage. Minarets, which with their tall spires are the most visible symbol of the Muslim community's presence in a locality, appear to have been favorite targets. Virtually no minarets survived the 1992-1996 war intact in the parts of Bosnia controlled by Bosnian Serb forces. In Bosnia,

255 mosques - %92 of all - were found to have been heavily damaged or destroyed. Of these, 119 mosques were heavily damaged while 136 mosques were almost or entirely destroyed. 11 turbes (Islamic shrines), 3 tekkes (dervish lodges), were either heavily damaged or destroyed. The destruction of mosques and of other Islamic religious monuments appears to have been widespread and systematic and in many cases is reported to have taken place just before, or in some cases just after, a mass exodus of the local Muslim population. Besides; more than 75 percent of the 57 Roman Catholic churches were either heavily damaged (30) or destroyed (13) (Riedlmayer, 2002). Undoubtedly, samples can be increased, but we will focus on The Ancient City of Palmyra in the following part.

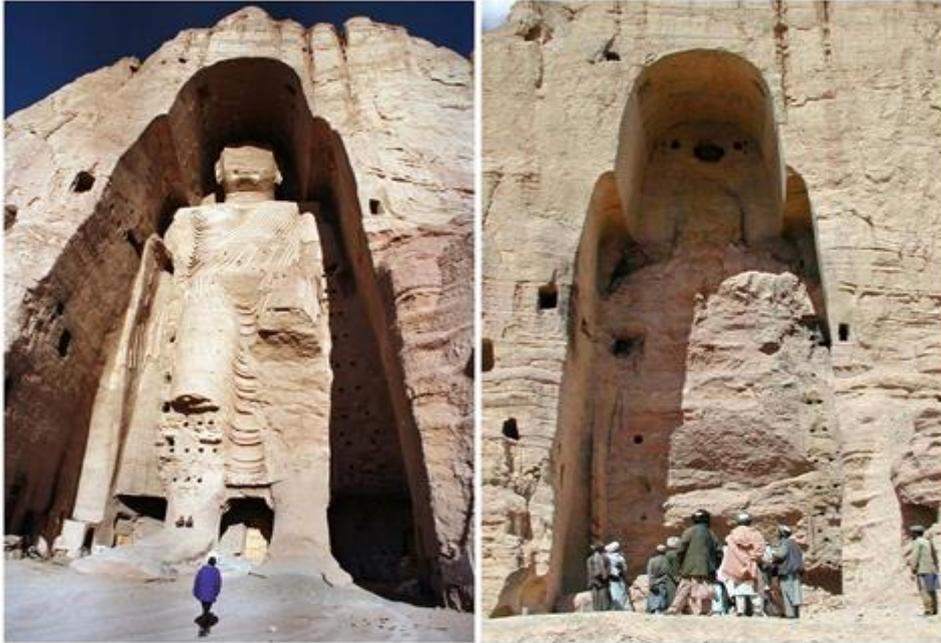


Figure 1. Buddhas of Bamiyan before and after the destruction (Anonymous, 2017b).

3. The Ancient City of Palmyra

In 1980, the historic site including the necropolis outside the walls was declared a World Heritage Site by the UNESCO, and added to the List of World Heritage in Danger in 2013 (Anonymous, 2016s).

3.1. A brief history of Syrian geography

Syria is located in the continent of Asia, Syrian Arab Republic covers 183,630 square kilometers of land and 1,550 square kilometers of water, making it the 89th largest nation in the world with a total area of 185,180 square kilometers. The population of Syria is 22,530,746 (2012) and the nation has a density of 123 people per square kilometer (Anonymous, 2016b).

Syria came into being in 1916 under the Sykes-Picot agreement, following the collapse of the Ottoman Empire in the First World War. Formerly, it was one of the Ottoman provinces of 'Greater Syria' that today would consist of Lebanon, Syria, Jordan, Palestinian Territories, parts of Turkey and Iraq. Administered by France under a League of Nations mandate from 1921, Syria declared its official independence in 1946 (Taki, 2012). Before Ottoman Empire, towards back in time chronologically, Syria region had survived through Saladin, the Ayyubids, and the Mamluks. Fatimid Rule, The Umayyad Era, The Spread of Islam, The Roman and Byzantine Era, Ancient Greek Conquest (Alexander The Great), Aramaeans, Assyrians, and Persians, and The Ancient City of Ebla times, dates back 2400 B.C (Anonymous, 2016c).

3.2. A brief history of Palmyra

An oasis in the Syrian Desert, north-east of Damascus, Palmyra contains the monumental ruins of a great city that was one of the most important cultural centers of the ancient world (Figure 2). From the 1st to the 2nd century, the art and architecture of Palmyra, standing at the crossroads of several civilizations, married Greco-Roman techniques with local traditions and Persian influences (Anonymous, 2016d).



Figure 2. The Ancient City of Palmyra (Anonymous, 2017c).

First mentioned in the archives of Mari in the 2nd millennium BC, Palmyra was an established caravan oasis when it came under Roman control in the mid-first century AD as part of the Roman province of Syria. It grew steadily in importance as a city on the trade route linking Persia, India and China with the Roman Empire, marking the crossroads of several civilizations in the ancient world. A grand, colonnaded street of 1100 meters' length forms the monumental axis of the city, which together with secondary colonnaded cross streets links the major public monuments including the Temple of Ba'al, Diocletian's Camp, the Agora, Theatre, other temples and urban quarters. Architectural ornament including unique examples of funerary sculpture unites the forms of Greco-Roman art with indigenous elements and Persian influences in a strongly original style. Outside the city's walls are remains of a Roman aqueduct and immense necropolises (Anonymous, 2016d).

3.3. Culture and society of Palmyra

At its height during the reign of Zenobia, the queen of her time, Palmyra had more than 200,000 residents (Cotterman, 2013). Its earliest known inhabitants were the Amorites in the early second millennium BC (Ben-Yehoshua et al, 2012), and by the end of the millennium Arameans were mentioned as inhabiting the area (Benzel et al, 2010). Arabs arrived in the city in the late first millennium BC (Bryce, 2014). Until the late third century AD, Palmyrenes spoke a dialect of Aramaic and used the Palmyrene alphabet. The use of Latin was minimal, but Greek was used by wealthier members of society for commercial and diplomatic purposes, and it became the dominant language during the Byzantine era. After the Arab conquest, Greek was replaced by Arabic, from which a Palmyrene dialect evolved (Belnap and Haeri, 1997).

Palmyra had a distinctive culture, based on a local Semitic tradition, and influenced by Greece and Rome. To appear better integrated into the Roman Empire, some Palmyrenes adopted Greco-Roman names, either alone or in addition to a second native name (Yon, 2002). Palmyra had no large libraries or publishing facilities, and it lacked an intellectual movement characteristic of other Eastern cities. Palmyra had a large agora. However, unlike the Greek Agoras (public gathering places shared with public buildings), Palmyra's agora resembled an Eastern caravanserai more than a hub of public life (Ball, 2002).

4. Today the Ancient City of Palmyra

Deliberate destruction and theft of cultural heritage has been conducted by the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant since 2014 in Iraq, Syria, and to a lesser extent in Libya. The destruction targets various places of worship under ISIL control and ancient historical artifacts. In Iraq, between the fall of Mosul in June 2014 and February 2015, ISIL has plundered and destroyed at least 28 historical religious buildings. The valuable items from some buildings were looted in order to smuggle and sell them to finance ISIL activities (Anonymous, 2016f). The site containing the ruins of the ancient Palmyra was captured by ISIL in May 2015.

The Ancient Site of Palmyra and its surrounding archaeological area have all sustained significant damage, as it has been caught in the middle of intense firefights accompanied by extensive military occupation. Reports of looting and thefts in the Palmyra archaeological zone and thefts began in spring 2012 and continue. By March 2013, the first reports of shelling damage to the site emerged and around that same time were the first reports of snipers positioned in the Roman theatre and in other standing ruins. Throughout 2013, the Syrian military forces ramped up its efforts to control the area and used the site to house its equipment. Reports indicated the presence of rocket launchers and tanks inside the archaeological site. As the Syrian Arab Republic Government (SARG)'s

military forces gained ground, extensive defensive berm and road construction were reported throughout Palmyra (Anonymous, 2016d).

4.1. Destructions around the cityscape

The Directorate-General for Antiquities and Museums (DGAM) is a Syrian government owned agency that is responsible for the protection, promotion and excavation activities in all sites of national heritage in the country. The directorate was established shortly after Syria's independence in 1946 under the central supervision of the Ministry of Culture (Anonymous, 2017d). DGAM has conducted many research and created reports about conflicted archaeological sites of Syria. Their research about Palmyra Ancient Site has been created as a map shown in Figure 3, which includes destructions along with their spatial information.

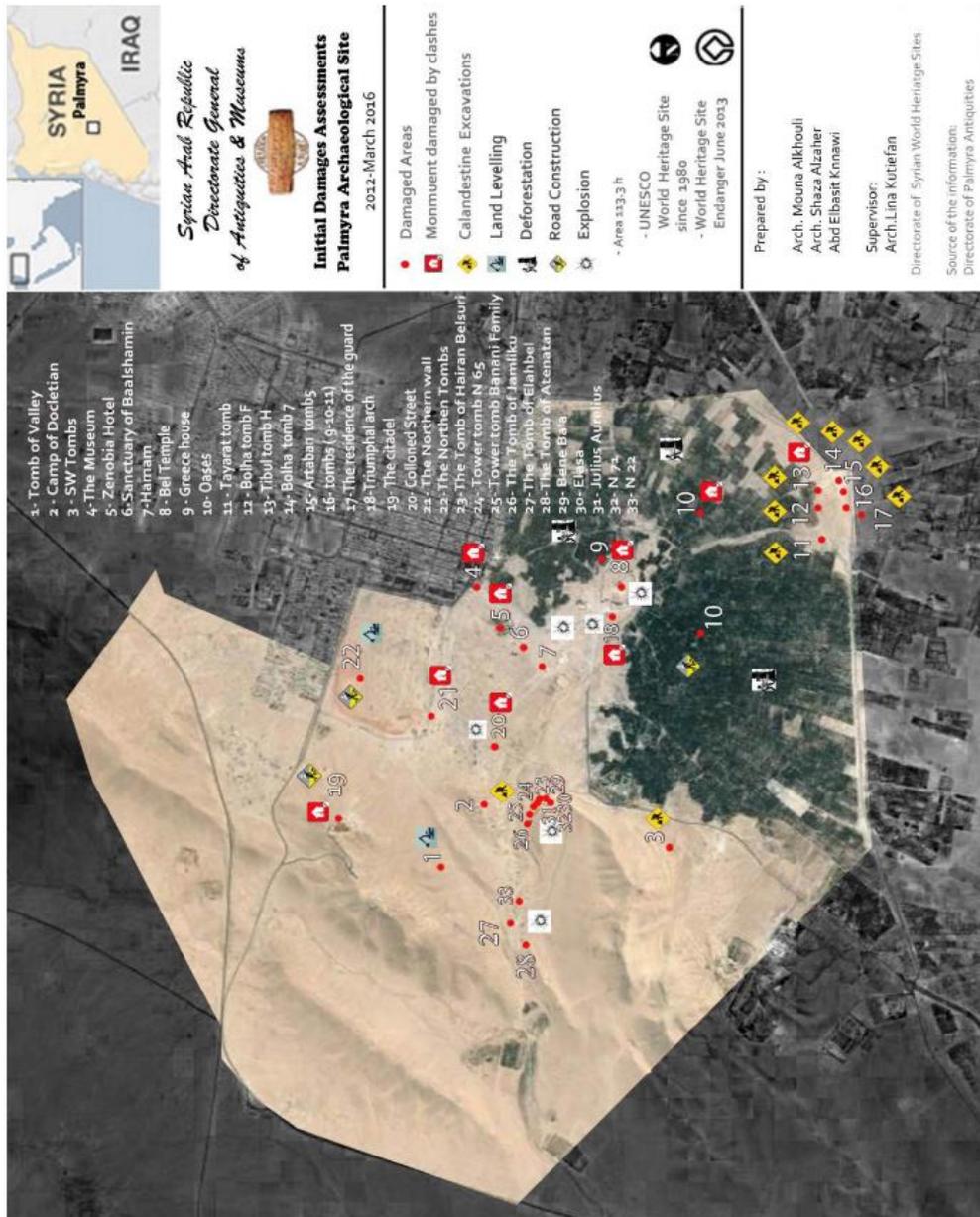


Figure 3. Initial damages assessments of Palmyra archaeological site (DGAM, 2016).

Destructions around the cityscape, which were conducted by ISIL, are grouped and listed below as cemeteries, public buildings, and temples:

1. Cemeteries: West of the ancient walls, the Palmyrenes built a number of large-scale funerary monuments which now form the Valley of Tombs, a 1-kilometre-long necropolis. Towers were replaced by funerary temples in the first half of the second century AD. The city had other cemeteries in the north, southwest

and southeast, where the tombs are primarily underground, which are being used nowadays as a shelter for ISIL militants (Burns, 2007). There are some towers built in that valley and The Tower of Elahbel, was a four-storey sandstone tower tomb is the best known one. The tower was demolished using explosives by the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) on 4 September 2015 (Anonymous, 2016g). The ancient tombs of Iamluku and Atenaten were also destroyed (Anonymous, 2016k). The Monumental Arch was also blown up in October (Anonymous, 2016l).

2. Public buildings: The senate building is largely ruined. It is a small building that consists of a peristyle courtyard and a chamber that has an apse at one end and rows of seats around it (Bryce, 2014). Much of the Baths of Diocletian are ruined and do not survive above the level of the foundations. The complex's entrance is marked by four massive Egyptian granite columns each 1.3 meters in diameter, 12.5 meters high and 20 tonnes weigh. Inside, the outline of a bathing pool surrounded by a colonnade of Corinthian columns is still visible in addition to an octagonal room that served as a dressing room containing a drain in its center (Beattie and Pepper, 2001). On 5 October 2015, news media reported ISIL is destroying buildings with no religious meaning, including the Arch of Triumph (Anonymous, 2016j). When Palmyra was recaptured by Syrian government forces on 27 March 2016, retreating ISIL fighters blew up parts of the 13th-century Palmyra Castle, causing extensive damage (Anonymous, 2016m). On 27 June 2015, ISIL demolished the ancient Lion of Al-lāt statue in Palmyra. Several other statues from Palmyra reportedly confiscated from a smuggler were also destroyed by ISIL (Anonymous, 2016n).
3. Temples: The Temple of Baalshamin was uncovered by Swiss archaeologists in 1954–56. It was one of the most complete ancient structures in Palmyra. In 1980, UNESCO designated the temple as a World Heritage Site and collapsed down on 23 August 2015 by ISIL (Anonymous, 2016h). The Temple of Bel, sometimes also referred to as the "Temple of Baal", consecrated to the Mesopotamian god Bel, worshipped at Palmyra in triad with the lunar god Aglibol and the sun god Yarhibol, formed the center of religious life in Palmyra and was dedicated in 32 AD. Its ruins were considered among the best preserved at Palmyra, until they were further destroyed by the ISIL on 30 August 2015 (Anonymous, 2016i).

4.1. Current Status of Palmyra

According to latest news, the approximate chronology of the events that ultimately led to seizure of Palmyra by ISIL listed below.

20.05.2015 – ISIL nearly seized full control of Tadmur (the modern city next to Palmyra), after government forces withdrew (Anonymous, 2016o).

21.05.2015 - ISIL fighters entered the ruins of the ancient city (Anonymous, 2016o).

03.07.2015 – ISIL released a graphic video showing 25 teenage members of that group executing by shooting in the head a similar number of adult male captives dressed in dark fatigues and kneeling in front of them on the Palmyra theatre's stage area (Anonymous, 2016p).

18.08.2015 – ISIL beheaded a respected antiquarian, Khaled al-Asaad (aged 83), who had worked for over 50 years as head of antiquities in Palmyra and hung his body on a column in a main square of the historic site (Anonymous, 2016q).

---.06.2015 – The Lion Statue of Athena was destroyed by ISIL.

23.08.2015 – The Temple of Baal-Shamin was destroyed by ISIL.

30.08.2015 – The Temple of Bel was destroyed by ISIL.

04.10.2015 – The Triumphal Arch was destroyed by ISIL.

26.10.2015 – Three columns in the main street/colonnade were blown-up to execute three persons.

---.09.2015 – Satellite images gave evidence of the destruction of six funerary towers. The date of destruction is unknown. Besides, voluminous sculptures in the Palmyra Museum that could not be evacuated from the museum have been destroyed or beheaded like the ones of the Mosul Museum.

In addition, The Citadel has been severely damaged. What is not known yet is the extent of the possible destructions and looting of other funerary structures, scattered around the ancient city; these include many decorated tombs. Indeed, propaganda photos have shown public destructions with hammers of sculptures (funerary busts) looted from Palmyra.

5. Results and Discussion

Following the demining of large parts of the archaeological site of Palmyra, UNESCO conducted a rapid

assessment mission on 25 April 2016 and examined the substantial and irreversible damage and destruction at the property, which confirmed the damage that was reported in satellite images and propaganda videos, in particular at the Ba'al and Ba'al Shamin temples, and at the triumphal arch. However, the mission could not access the Valley of the Tombs, the southwest Necropolis, and the southeast Necropolis to assess the destruction and looting of the funeral towers and underground tombs within the buffer zone, visible in satellite images of September 2015 and March 2016. Similarly, the damages at the Fakhr-al-Din alMa'ani Citadel could only be assessed from afar and through photos owing to its current inaccessibility. The visit of the Palmyra museum showed severe damage to the building. The mission noted that the building was in great need of emergency consolidation, restoration, securing and refurbishment. The artefacts at the museum that could not be evacuated before the occupation of the city have been intentionally damaged, and the objects in the museum's storage gathered like rubble in one room (Anonymous, 2016r).

First thing to do is political, to end the war at the concerning geography. Nothing ever can be carried out about protecting or restoring damaged sites before the conflict solved. Then, the modern town next to Palmyra, Tadmur has to be renewed and social life set up again. An overall planning approach for Palmyra city has to include the boundaries of the property, its proposed buffer zone and desert landscape views and connectivity. It must be assessed that clearly established boundaries of the property and buffer zone will allow the protection of the site including for temporary and future urban plans, constructions, as well as infrastructure and tourism plans. Future plans for the rehabilitation and re-population of the modern city will require extensive infrastructure works and probably new constructions such as temporary housing. Coordination with the international humanitarian entities and the national authorities in charge will be crucial to make the necessary rehabilitation interventions at the city, compatible with the World Heritage status of the archaeological site, especially in terms of the boundaries of the World Heritage property, the building regulations in the buffer zone, and the presence of historical remains in the town, that would necessitate salvage excavations. Any encroachment on the archaeological zone has to be avoided during the rebuilding processes. UNESCO actions in relation with the Palmyra World Heritage site should be seen as part and parcel of the United Nations humanitarian, security and peace building response. Palmyra, which bears very strong symbolic values for Syrians, can be harnessed upon, to foster dialogue, reconciliation, technical and academic cooperation.

Additional Note: Unfortunately, after we carried out this research, ISIL completely destroyed Palmyra on 20th January, 2017 (Anonymous, 2017).

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