

Washington University in St. Louis

## Washington University Open Scholarship

---

Spring 2018

Washington University  
Senior Honors Thesis Abstracts

---

Spring 2018

### The Art of Terror: Iconoclasm in Radical Islamic Terrorism

Chrisopher Hall

*Washington University in St. Louis*

Follow this and additional works at: [https://openscholarship.wustl.edu/wushta\\_spr2018](https://openscholarship.wustl.edu/wushta_spr2018)

---

#### Recommended Citation

Hall, Chrisopher, "The Art of Terror: Iconoclasm in Radical Islamic Terrorism" (2018). *Spring 2018*. 51.  
[https://openscholarship.wustl.edu/wushta\\_spr2018/51](https://openscholarship.wustl.edu/wushta_spr2018/51)

This Abstract for College of Arts & Sciences is brought to you for free and open access by the Washington University Senior Honors Thesis Abstracts at Washington University Open Scholarship. It has been accepted for inclusion in Spring 2018 by an authorized administrator of Washington University Open Scholarship. For more information, please contact [digital@wumail.wustl.edu](mailto:digital@wumail.wustl.edu).

# THE ART OF TERROR: ICONOCLASM IN RADICAL ISLAMIC TERRORISM

*Christopher Hall*

*Mentor: Lee Epstein*

Contemporary terrorism has received a great deal of attention in the news media and academia. These analyses tend to focus on the political and economic motivations of terrorists, which, while important, are missing a significant aspect of modern terrorism. Looking at major terrorist actions from 2000 to 2017, I find an observable pattern of iconoclasm in modern radical Islamic terrorism; iconoclasm being defined as the purposeful destruction of objects of perceived value, symbolism, or cultural unity for political ends. I find this strategy of iconoclasm to arise from economic and political grievances among Arab populations combined with the powerful draw and ideological bent of Western cultural exports such as Hollywood movies, television shows, and social media platforms. Those looking to position themselves in opposition to the West realize that these cultural exports enhance Western cultural or “soft” power and present a rallying point for mainstream Arabs. Radical Islamic terrorists thus seek to destroy objects that symbolize this soft power. In so doing, they aim to deny Arab populations alternative visions for the future of the Middle East, strengthening the radical Islamists’ claims to legitimacy. These findings further our understanding of the motivations and strategies of modern radical Islamic terrorism, highlighting the importance with which they view Western cultural goods and the degree to which combating modern terrorism is every bit as much a battle of ideas as a military and political conflict.