

The Archaeology of Power:

Saudi Arabia and Heritage Destruction in the Middle East

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In 1925, Saudi forces captured the two holy cities of Mecca and Medina, and immediately destroyed the tomb of Khadija, the wife of the Prophet Muhammad, as well as the mausoleums of several Shi'a Imams' tombs that had stood for centuries on end.¹ These demolitions were motivated by the iconoclastic Wahhabist movement, a school of Islamic fundamentalism that is officially endorsed by the Saudi government.² Wahhabist clerics, from whom the Saudi state derives much of its legitimacy, advocate for the destruction of historic sites, such as the shrines of Sunni and Shi'a saints, and sites associated with the Prophet Muhammad and his family, including their homes in Mecca and Medina.³ Wahhabists view veneration and visitation of holy sites as idolatry, and as non-Islamic, and consequently support the destruction of sites to prevent further veneration.⁴ This policy of destruction has been thoroughly adopted by the Saudi state, which draws support from its "radical religious demographic," and continues to this day, in the two holy cities as well as across Saudi Arabia.⁵ Saudi Arabia's destruction of historic Islamic holy sites and heritage sites represents an ideologically-driven mission of erasure of non-Wahhabi and Shi'i presence in the Middle East and a threat to regional stability.

Domestic challenges

The extent of cultural destruction in Saudi Arabia is staggering. Government-sponsored demolitions have erased enormous amounts of history in the region. The government has destroyed 98% of the nation's historic sites, including 95% of historic buildings in Mecca alone.^{6,7} The rampant demolition of heritage sites in Saudi Arabia can be linked directly to the Wahhabist distaste for venerating or visiting holy sites related to the Prophet Muhammad, Imams, or saints, Sunni or Shi'a. As mentioned above, Wahhabists view both practices as idolatry; they claim that these practices constitute worshipping something other than God.⁸ Wahhabism has thus historically declared various "practices, groups, and areas" generally considered Islamic as takfir al-mu'ayyan, or "non-Muslim."⁹ These groups' historic sites are, for Wahhabists, monuments to idolatry and nonbelief. Wahhabist intolerance has been wholly folded into the ideology of the Saudi state, after being first adopted by the al-Saud family in 1744.¹⁰ The replacement of Islamic sites with commercial development is an intentional denigration.¹¹ In Mecca, luxury hotels for wealthy pilgrims on the umrah or hajj, like the newly built Abraj-al-bait, loom over the Great Mosque (which contains the Kaaba), dwarfing the most sacred site in

Islam.¹² Abbasid-era pillars in the Great Mosque have also been removed. Other examples include the site of the tomb of Khadija, mentioned earlier, which has been covered with bathrooms for pilgrims, and the house of Abu Bakr, the first caliph, which has been replaced with a hotel and a Burger King.¹³ The Saudi government has also proposed moving the Prophet Muhammad's body from its traditional sacred place in al-Masjid al-Nabawi mosque in Medina to an "anonymous grave."¹⁴ There has been a vast increase in the number of Muslim pilgrims to Mecca, who require housing, but this blatant devastation of regional heritage is not undertaken for purely practical purposes. Indeed, commercial necessity and commercialization caused much of the destruction in Mecca and Medina, but the rampant demolition of heritage is a "deliberate cost" of the new construction, a useful excuse for the effacement of culture and the past in Saudi Arabia.¹⁵

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Internally, this intolerance and cultural destruction is part and parcel with Saudi Arabia's larger program of persecution towards non-Wahhabist Muslims, which includes intentional discrimination against Shi'is in employment and education.¹⁶ The Saudi state identifies itself as a spreader of "the true message of Islam" across the world through the Muslim World League and other tools of influence and propaganda.¹⁷ By the early 2000s, the Saudi government had spent at least \$90 billion on this project, which in reality spreads Wahhabist ideology "beyond [Saudi Arabia's] borders."¹⁸ Discrimination

and cultural destruction are an internal counterpart to the Kingdom's "historic export" of extremism.¹⁹ Saudi Arabia's cultural destruction has had consequences far beyond Saudi's borders and control. It is worth mentioning that the Islamic State, also notorious for its destruction of heritage sites, utilized Saudi textbooks in its educational system "throughout 2015."^{20 21}

Foreign challenges

The destruction of non-Wahhabi and Shi'a Islamic sites is not simply a domestic problem in Saudi Arabia. Combined with discrimination and other extremist policies, as well as underlying tensions in the region, these demolitions can also lead to significant instability and endanger regional peace.

For example, the geopolitical rivalry between Saudi Arabia and Iran has been deeply influenced by Saudi Arabia's destruction of Islamic heritage.²² Iran, a Shi'a theocracy, is especially irate regarding religious site destruction, as many of these sites are holy to Shi'is.²³ Iran's foreign policy is predicated upon supporting foreign Shi'i movements and Shi'ism abroad more generally, as in the Houthis in Yemen and Hezbollah in Lebanon; Iran therefore expresses outrage at the destruction of Shi'a sites.²⁴ The destruction of Islamic sites (and subsequent stirring of sectarian violence) is particularly delicate given Iran's direct support of the Houthi movement, a group currently engaged in a civil war with Saudi Arabia in Yemen.²⁵ The Houthis have, as a result, attacked several civilian sites in Saudi Arabia.²⁶ Additionally, a demolition of "historic" Shi'i homes in 2017 led to armed violence between Saudi forces and Shi'i residents. Saudi Arabia subsequently accused Iran of bankrolling the militants.²⁷ Given the regional rivalry between Iran and Saudi Arabia, part of Iran's criticism is also pragmatic in nature, a desire by Iranian leadership to take advantage of an opportunity for confrontation with Saudi Arabia, to which sectarian grievances lend themselves well.²⁸

Turkey has also experienced tensions with the Kingdom over its destruction of historic sites. For example, in 2002, Saudi Arabia destroyed an Ottoman-era fort built in 1781 overlooking the Great Mosque, a site of considerable historic importance in its own right and a vestige of Ottoman control of the holiest city in Islam.²⁹ Turkey voiced significant protest after the fort's destruction, with its minister of culture, M. Istemihan Talay, calling the demolition "no different from the pulling down of the Buddha monuments [by the Taliban] in Afghanistan."³⁰ Turkey-Saudi Arabia relations have always been tense—from 2017 until 2022, Saudi Arabia boycotted Turkish goods—but destruction of heritage, especially in a region previously controlled by the Ottomans, strikes at the heart of Turkish identity and history.³¹ Saudi Arabia, similarly, has a program of destroying old Ottoman mosques and monuments in

the Balkans, in what is not only an attempt to erase history but a move with additional cultural and geopolitical implications.³²

Heritage destruction as warfare

The Saudi government's erasure of history and heritage destruction is not only occurring within its borders, but also outside of Saudi territory, especially in Yemen. The Yemeni civil war, a complex conflict in its own right, is an expression of the long-term Iran-Saudi proxy war, with Iran supporting the Shi'i Houthi rebels in the north and Saudi Arabia (and its international coalition of partners, including the United States) siding with the mostly Sunni government forces, based in the south and east of the country.³³ During the war, countless Yemeni historic sites have been destroyed. According to the official Yemeni count, "damaged or destroyed [historical sites] exceed seventy-eight."³⁴ Fifty-nine of these sites, three of which were UNESCO World Heritage Sites, were destroyed by Saudi bombs.³⁵ This damage is "intentional," undertaken with the express purpose of the "erasure of [the] cultural identity of the Yemeni people."³⁶ The destruction of Yemeni heritage is part of Saudi Arabia's "archaeology of power": destroying history and culture that is non-Saudi and non-Wahhabi purposely.³⁷ In Yemen, heritage destruction and underlying geopolitical and religious tensions have become part of a dangerous proxy war.

Conclusion

Saudi Arabia's erasure of non-Wahhabist Muslim cultural and historic sites both within and without Saudi Arabia represents a distinct threat to regional stability and to the region's traditional heritage. There is hope, however, that these developments are slowing. Saudi Arabia, on the surface, appears to be reconsidering its previous *modus operandi*. The Kingdom recently contributed \$25 million to UNESCO for the protection of heritage sites.³⁸ Whether this charitable impulse will translate into protection of heritage sites in fact remains to be seen.

Cultural destruction across the world—whether it be ISIS's destruction of Buddhist statues, China's demolition of traditional historic districts in its cities, or Saudi Arabia's wholesale erasure of its distinct Islamic heritage—is not an isolated problem. These demolitions have consequences far beyond geopolitics: cultural sites have inherent value in themselves, and the brazen pursuit of commercial development, of radical religious ideology, or both, can lead to the destruction of beautiful, important, and sacred places that are essential to our understanding of the present and, more to the point, of the past. The leveling of historic sites in Saudi Arabia, and in the broader Middle East, is putting at risk our ability to make sense of the past and engage with history.