

The construction of Heritage in Saudi-Arabia since 2012



ABSTRACT

The major goal of the project is to add a much-needed dimension to the study of heritage in Saudi Arabia through a comparative study before and after Salman ibn Abdulaziz Al Saud became the king of Saudi Arabia. During the tenure of King Salman as king, Saudi Arabia has made notable contributions to heritage conservation in this region, especially compared to the previous government. Saudi rulers were condemned for destroying Mecca's past as Wahhābī iconoclasm till recently. Recent remarks and events imply Saudi Arabia is valuing its heritage to change its past. As of today, Saudi Arabia has six heritage sites on the UNESCO World Heritage Sites List, and ten more historical sites are on the tentative list. Under Vision 2030, Saudi Arabia has attempted to imitate modern global heritage culture based on the earlier Western agendas to improve international economic and financial governance. However, these rapid changes generate a slew of concerns and challenges about Saudi Arabia's evolving identity.

Keywords: Ibn Salman, Heritage, Wahhābism, Saudi-Arabia, and Identity.

Table of content

INTRODUCTION	3
Scientific and social relevance	5
Methodology	6
Theoretical framework & concepts	8
Literature review	10
CHAPTER 1: HISTORICISM OF SAUDI ARABIA	19
The early Saudi Emirates	19
The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia	20
CHAPTER 2: CHANGING HISTORICAL NARRATIVE	22
Salman ibn Abdulaziz Al Saud	22
The forming of institutions	24
UNESCO	25
World Heritage List	26
Tentative list	33
CHAPTER 3: HERITAGE AS THE NEW PROPAGANDA	38
Mohammad Ibn Salman	38
Vision 2030	39
Modern Changes	41
CHAPTER 4: RESPONSE TO THE CHANGING CULTURAL PRESERVATION PROGRAMS	45
Domestic response	45
International response	49
CONCLUSION	51
BIBLIOGRAPHY	53
APPENDIX I: THE CRITERIA FOR SELECTION, UNESCO	60

Introduction

In an interview with Reuters in 2018, Prince Sultan Ibn Salman, the head of the Saudi Commission for Tourism and National Heritage (SCTH), remarked that “I believe you cannot understand Islam as a great religion if you are dismissing completely what happened before Islam.” The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia also announced that it will unveil the \$15 billion Al-Ula project to create a global destination for heritage, culture, and nature.¹ More importantly, as of 2021, Saudi Arabia has six UNESCO World Heritage Sites, four of which are pre-Islamic. In addition, ten more historical sites in Saudi Arabia are on the tentative list.² Until recently, the Saudi authorities have been criticized for destroying Mecca’s material history as an act of Wahhābī iconoclasm.³⁴ But the most recent statements and developments suggest that Saudi Arabia is increasingly attaching importance to its heritage to alter its past. The motivations behind the construction of certain material history can differ depending on the ruling regime in Saudi Arabia, as each regime represents a shift and change in the country's socio-political sphere. Following the al-Qaeda attacks of September 11, 2001, the Saudi authorities felt compelled to change the historical narrative rather than religion, which had been entrenched around the Wahhābīyya ideology, as the driving force of history.⁵ The established religious thought in Saudi Arabia is still dominated by the Wahhābī school, but with growing political and economic independence, Saudi Arabia shows more willingness to deviate from concepts imposed by religious leaders. In a world where globalization is becoming more important, one way for Saudi Arabia to keep its identity and uniqueness is to take care of its history.

Saudi Arabia is undergoing a transformation under Crown Prince Mohammad ibn Salman's leadership. On April 25, 2016, Salman unveiled Vision 2030, an ambitious socio-economic transformation plan designed to diversify the kingdom's economy and open Saudi Arabia to the rest of the globe.⁶ The tourist industry, which the kingdom has identified as a top

¹ “‘A Global Destination for Heritage, Culture and Nature’: Saudi Arabia Unveils \$15bn Al-Ula Masterplan,” The Art Newspaper - International art news and events, April 30, 2021, <https://www.theartnewspaper.com/2021/04/30/a-global-destination-for-heritage-culture-and-nature-saudi-arabia-unveils-dollar15bn-alula-masterplan>.

² UNESCO World Heritage Centre, “UNESCO World Heritage Centre - World Heritage List,” UNESCO World Heritage Centre, accessed January 26, 2022, <https://whc.unesco.org/en/list/?search=Saudi+Arabia&order=country>.

³ Rosie Bsheer, *Archive Wars: The Politics of History in Saudi Arabia*, Stanford Studies in Middle Eastern and Islamic Societies and Cultures (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 2020), 14.

⁴ “Intentional destruction of cultural heritage as a violation of human rights in Bahrain and Saudi Arabia,” OHCHR, accessed Dec 4, 2020, <https://www.ohchr.org/Documents/Issues/CulturalRights/DestructionHeritage/NGOS/ADHRB.pdf>

⁵ Bsheer, *Archive Wars*, 19.

⁶ “Unveiling Saudi Vision 2030,” Arab News, April 19, 2020, <https://arab.news/89w6u>.

priority, will serve as one of the primary pillars of this plan. Today, the Saudi government is initiating multiple heritage construction programs to increase the number of UNESCO heritage projects and bolster tourism within its borders.⁷ The vast majority of the kingdom's heritage conservation efforts and resources have been directed toward archaeological excavation of sites that contain traces of pre-Islamic societies.⁸ The Saudi Heritage Commission established the National Antiquities Register in 2021 to keep track of and preserve the Kingdom's historic sites. So far, over 8,000 sites have been documented, with 624 discovered last year alone.⁹ The kingdom, on the other hand, appears indifferent to the destruction of Mecca and Medina's cultural heritage, stating that it is necessary to accommodate a growing Muslim population for the annual pilgrimage. Ibn Salman also promised to make Mecca a tourist attraction on par with Dubai and Paris.¹⁰ These developments generate a slew of concerns and challenges about Saudi Arabia's evolving identity. The fostering of patriotic and nationalistic sentiments within the kingdom marks the beginning of the shift toward a culture that is more secular.

In the current literature, there is a lack of research on how Saudi Arabia utilizes heritage to shape its national narrative and identity. To discuss this phenomenon, this paper will be guided by the following hypotheses: *To what extent are heritage preservation projects indicative of political change in Saudi Arabia, and what efforts are being made to inscribe Saudi cultural heritage sites on the World Heritage list between 2012 and 2022?*

Substitute questions will be used to evaluate this research question. First, what is the historicism behind the Wahhābī Suʿūdī alliance? This section examines the historical context of the religious-political partnership between Muḥammad Ibn ʿAbd al-Wahhāb. There will be an emphasis on both figures; the forming of the first Saudi emirate and eventually the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia.

Second, has there been any difference in Saudi Arabia's cultural preservation programs since 2012? In recent years, Saudi Arabia has modified its ties with its religious elite, relegating them to a secondary position. Discuss how the decision to inscribe heritage sites has manifested

⁷ Stephen Kalin, "Saudi Bid to Protect Pre-Islamic Sites Upends Religious Dictates," *Reuters*, July 9, 2018, <https://www.reuters.com/article/uk-saudi-tourism-idUKKBN1JZ1P4>.

⁸ George Richards says, "Managing UNESCO World Heritage Sites in Saudi Arabia: Contribution and Future Directions," *Middle East Centre* (blog), May 11, 2020, <https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/mec/2020/05/11/managing-unesco-world-heritage-sites-in-saudi-arabia-contribution-and-future-directions/>.

⁹ "Heritage Commission Placing Saudi History at Forefront of Vision 2030," *Arab News*, November 8, 2021, <https://arab.news/jbenz>.

¹⁰ "Opinion | Saudi Arabia's Crown Prince Wants to 'Crush Extremists.' But He's Punishing the Wrong People.," *Washington Post*, accessed November 29, 2021, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/global-opinions/wp/2017/10/31/saudi-arabias-crown-prince-wants-to-crush-extremists-but-hes-punishing-the-wrong-people/>.

itself in cultural policies, the number of files submitted to list heritage sites, and professional bodies such as the ministry of Tourism and the Saudi Heritage Preservation Society (SHPS).¹¹

Third, to what extent do these changes reflect a break with the Wahhābī perspective of heritage preservation and showcase newly constructed propaganda? This section will explain the rationale behind the newly initiated heritage projects, such as competing with other Gulf states, making Saudi Arabia more open to the world, diversifying its economy, and attracting non-pilgrim tourists. Describe the audience that the Saudi government prefers to reach through cultural preservation projects as a targeted demographic. Lastly, identify the types of historic sites and their locations.

Lastly, how were these changes perceived by the Saudi public, media, statesmen, and international audience? This section will look at the impacts of such changes locally, nationally, and internationally. With six heritage sites listed and ten on the tentative list, Saudi Arabia is attempting to participate in UNESCO's worldwide principles and ideals. The following section will demonstrate the impact of political change in Saudi Arabia.

Scientific and social relevance

Since the emergence of the Wahhābiyya movement in Saudi Arabia, many Islamic heritage sites have been demolished in the Kingdom, mainly Sufi and Shi'i shrines, but also numerous other cultural heritage places.¹² Today, the Saudi authorities are erecting multiple heritage preservation initiatives to preserve their history. The implications of this change on heritage are insufficiently highlighted and researched.

The political sphere in Saudi Arabia shifted in the late twentieth century from a religiously orientated to a less religiously restricted orientation. The appointment of Salman ibn Abdulaziz Al Saud as the king of Saudi Arabia has led to major changes in the kingdom. In particular, after 2017, when he appointed his son Mohammad ibn Salman as Crown Prince. His accession to the throne saw many positive changes, among them his liberal policies that made it possible for women to drive and allowed them entry into sports stadiums. In 2016, he unveiled Vision 2030, an ambitious socioeconomic transformation plan that envisions the kingdom as a tourism hub, a global power in entertainment and sports, and a diversifier of its economy. A main tenet of Vision 2030 was to invest in tourism and fund cultural heritage

¹¹ UNESCO World Heritage Centre, "UNESCO World Heritage Centre - World Heritage List Nominations," UNESCO World Heritage Centre, accessed January 28, 2022, <https://whc.unesco.org/en/nominations/>.

UNESCO World Heritage Centre, "UNESCO World Heritage Centre - Tentative Lists," UNESCO World Heritage Centre, accessed January 28, 2022, <https://whc.unesco.org/en/tentativelists/>.

¹² Bsheer, *Archive Wars*, 3.

initiatives such as museums and the restoration of historical sites.¹³ Since 2008, the number of UNESCO World Heritage Sites in Saudi Arabia has climbed from one to six, and since 2015, an additional 10 sites have been added to the tentative list. A sign that Saudi Arabia is seeking to adhere to the international norms and values of UNESCO. Amidst concerns that Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman is running the kingdom in a more authoritarian direction, we are seeing more reports from international human rights groups accusing Saudi Arabia of various human rights violations. The Kingdom invested a lot of money to change their image in the West and show that they support international values.

There is a lack of research and care about the motivations behind the current wave of heritage projects. It is imperative to understand why these sites are important, what the role of tourism and heritage preservation plays in Saudi Arabia, who the stakeholders are, how domestic actors are responding to these projects, and if they have any benefits or adverse effects. By focusing on this subject, I hope to contribute and assist in this field of studies by highlighting the execution of heritage construction in Saudi Arabia and its impact on the national narrative and identity. By doing so, this research will add a much-needed dimension to the study of heritage in Saudi Arabia through a comparative study before and after Salman ibn Abdulaziz Al Saud became the king of Saudi Arabia.

Methodology

This paragraph will outline the methodological framework and concepts that will be utilized to address the research question. This research consists of comparative and qualitative analyses of the complex dynamics of heritage construction and identity politics in Saudi Arabia prior to 2012, as well as case studies of different historic preservation initiatives. A qualitative analysis will help to gain a deeper understanding of the trends, directions, and developments driving Saudi Arabia's heritage construction policies.

First, using discourse analysis, the historical and ideological assumptions underlying Saudi Arabia's shifting historical narrative will be identified. The implications of these shifts in historical narrative on conceptions of national identity will be further analyzed by deploying the concept of heritage construction as a key driver for framing a nation and its identity. According to Stephanie Taylor, discourse is a method for determining power structures and interpersonal relationships in a social setting.¹⁴ She implies that meanings are fluid and

¹³ "Saudi Tourism Authority to Fund 33 Projects Worth \$293m," accessed December 29, 2021, http://tradedearabia.com/news/TTN_353596.html.

¹⁴ Stephanie Taylor, *What Is Discourse Analysis?* (London: Bloomsbury, 2013), 15.

dependent on circumstances. These shifting meanings are heavily dependent on the political and religious ideologies that serve as a tool for a group of people to be in power, giving them authority over another group of people. This reflects the changing context in Saudi Arabia, where Ibn Salman's authority is growing while the ulamas' authority is declining. This will be shown by using discourse analysis on Saudi Arabia's UNESCO World Heritage nomination documents. Sara Mills argues that discourse cannot be boiled down to a singular meaning. She emphasized that discourse is also characterized by what it is not and highlighted the importance of communication.¹⁵ This will offer a contrast to the promoted heritage preservation initiatives of the Saudi kingdom. It will also assist in determining whether these cultural heritage preservation initiatives and nominations for historic sites are intended for a Saudi or international audience. Both primary and secondary sources will be used to collect the data. This will be discussed in the section on literature reviews. After the data is collected, the main sources will be systematically looked at to find examples of how heritage and identity discourses are repeated.

Second, by conducting a case study analysis, specific UNESCO heritage preservation initiatives will be examined to understand the motivations and ideologies behind them and to reveal how heritage and identity discourses are reproduced in them. It also involves research on the UNESCO database, where Saudi Arabia has filed official documents of preservation and memorialization initiatives, including the heritage zones of Al-Ula, Diriyah, and Jeddah. The documentation alongside the discursive context of the sites will be examined to understand how they fit into the larger schema of identity construction. The case study sites are especially important because the Saudi government chose them to represent "national heritage" and as symbols of Saudi identity.

The third method is comparative analysis, which adds a much-needed dimension to the study of heritage in Saudi Arabia by highlighting the interplay between religious and secular nationalist ideas of heritage before and after King Salman was appointed Crown Prince in 2012. It will be essential to assess changes in preservation policies and initiatives that showcase new areas of interest, such as concerts, cultural festivals like the Souk Okaz Festival, and other displays. For instance, the poetry of the great Arab poet Al-A'sha, who lived and wrote before the advent of Islam.¹⁶ Conclusions will be formed utilizing the results of this study to identify trends in the reproduction of heritage and identity discourses.

¹⁵ Sara Mills, *Discourse*, New Critical Idiom (London ; New York: Routledge, 2004), 2-3.

¹⁶ UNESCO World Heritage Centre, "Hejaz Railway," UNESCO World Heritage Centre, accessed January 28, 2022, <https://whc.unesco.org/en/tentativelists/6026/>. "The Legend of Al-A'sha," accessed January 11, 2022,

Theoretical framework & concepts

The United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) states that World Heritage is the name for places on Earth that are of outstanding universal value to all people and have been put on the World Heritage List to be protected so that future generations can enjoy and appreciate them.¹⁷ UNESCO states that cultural heritage encompasses two important categories, namely tangible and intangible cultural heritage. The term "tangible cultural heritage" refers to cultural heritage that is movable, immovable, or submerged. An intangible cultural heritage includes oral traditions, performing arts, and rituals.¹⁸

The Antiquities, Museums, and Architectural Heritage Law of Saudi Arabia, as well as UNESCO, refer to tangible heritage in terms of moving and immovable antiquities, maritime, museums, handicrafts, or urban.¹⁹ There are also references to intangible heritage, but its significance is understated in this act. This legislation considers a location to be historically significant if it has been mentioned in an oral story or in classical literature, regardless of whether concrete traces exist or not. This indicates that intangible heritage exists, but it may not be readily apparent. In addition, in 2003, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia signed the UNESCO convention on protecting intangible heritage. Since then, the Saudi state has attempted to implement the convention's requirements through its own national institutions. The most important example is the ministry of culture, which is responsible for the national heritage sector.²⁰

Heritage is a mnemonic tradition passed down through generations that shapes a community's collective memory and identity. According to Joris Kila, heritage is linked to notions of identity, status, and social values and thus is subject to change.²¹ In this sense, heritage creates, negotiates, and socially constructs identity. It is also important to emphasize that identity is about more than just inclusion; it is also about exclusion, by stating what it is

<https://www.wafyapp.com/article/the-legend-of-al-asha>. "Souk Okaz Festival Blends Arab Heritage with Modern Culture | Habib Lassoued," AW, accessed January 28, 2022, <https://thearabweekly.com/souk-okaz-festival-blends-arab-heritage-modern-culture>.

¹⁷ UNESCO World Heritage Centre, "What Is World Heritage? - Frequently Asked Questions (FAQ)," UNESCO World Heritage Centre, accessed February 17, 2021, <https://whc.unesco.org/en/faq/19>.

¹⁸ "Definition of the Cultural Heritage | United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization," accessed February 18, 2021, <http://www.unesco.org/new/en/culture/themes/illicit-trafficking-of-cultural-property/unesco-database-of-national-cultural-heritage-laws/frequently-asked-questions/definition-of-the-cultural-heritage/>.

¹⁹ SCTA, "Law of Antiquities, Museums and Urban Heritage," 2014.

²⁰ "SCTH Transfers National Heritage Sector to Ministry of Culture After Completing Its Organization, Development and Launching Its Projects," accessed December 29, 2021, <https://mt.gov.sa/en/mediaCenter/News/MainNews/Pages/a-m-1-30-19.aspx>.

²¹ Joris Kila, *Heritage under Siege: Military Implementation of Cultural Property Protection Following the 1954 Hague Convention*, Heritage and Identity : Issues in Cultural Heritage Protection (Leiden ; Boston: Brill, 2012).

not. As a result, heritage can also refer to the rejection of another history, representing various historical narratives. In his book "Time Maps," Eviatar Zerubavel, professor of sociology at Rutgers University, discusses the concept of social construction of discontinuity, which he defines as a type of "social construction" in which old mental bridges are removed to mark new beginnings, such as by destroying historical monuments. This is especially interesting in the case of Saudi Arabia, where certain Islamic sites are being destroyed while other pre-Islamic sites are being preserved. Within the scope of this research, this reconstruction symbolizes the rise of nationalism and the decline of religion in Saudi Arabia. This fundamental change can be understood through the concept of "imagined communities" by Benedict Anderson. He argues that a nation is constituted through an imagined political community and that it is imagined in the sense of being limited and sovereign.²² He is interested in how an idea and a strong attachment to cultural artifacts can help build a nation.²³ These sites can represent lieux de memoire, meaning sites of memory. This is a theory by Pierre Nora, who says that memory depends on physical or symbolic sites of memory and on traces of the past that can be found in the present.²⁴ These memorial sites evoke memories of specific historical events. According to Bsheer, these symbolic sites encompass power struggles in which the destruction of these sites can be used as political spectacles and power projections.²⁵ These heritage sites are very important for a community's sociomnemonic experiences because they underpin identities. This is consistent with Lowenthal's concept of heritage, which asserts that we present our identity through heritage. Through reconstruction, the Saudi state can legitimize a new social fabric that asserts a new ideology and identity. Analysing this reconstruction can provide new insights into existing communities' mnemonic experiences and their relationships with the Saudi government. After all, heritage sites are part of nationalistic identity as well as a channel to create culture and history in the public imagination.

²² Benedict R. O'G Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 1983), 6.

²³ Anderson, 4.

²⁴ Pierre Nora, "Between Memory and History: Les Lieux de Mémoire," 2020, 19.

²⁵ Rosie Bsheer, "Heritage as War," *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 49, no. 4 (November 2017): 729–34, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S002074381700068X>.

Literature review

Wahhābiyya

The article “Wahhābiyya.” by Esther Peskes and W. Ende discusses the rapid emergence of the Wahhābiyya movement in Arabia, with an emphasis on the persona of Muḥammad b. ‘Abd al-Wahhāb. He came from a long line of accomplished scholars at this Ḥanbalī school. He advocated returning to the fundamentals of Islam as written in the Quran and practiced by the Prophet Muhammad during his lifetime. A new Islamic state with ‘pure’ sharia law was essential to ‘Abd al-Wahhāb. His views gained traction, and eventually the emir, Muhammad Ibn Saud, accepted some of the principles of ‘Abd al-Wahhāb. Throughout the Middle East and beyond, the growth of Wahhābism has had a tremendous impact.

Muḥammad Ibn ‘Abd al-Wahhāb

Ibn ‘Abd al-Wahhāb was born in 1703 in the centre of the Naḍjd at al-‘Uyayna (an oasis in Arabia, which is now part of Saudi Arabia). He was a theologian and founded the Wahhābiya movement, which aimed to revert to the teachings of Islam as practiced by its *salaf* (predecessors). Around 1740, ‘Abd al-Wahhāb wrote his first treatise called the Kitāb al-tawḥīd, on the unity of God (*tawḥīd*), in which he propagated his Wahhābī doctrine.²⁶

Doctrine

In general, the Wahhābi doctrine is heavily influenced by Ibn Taymiyya (d. 1328), one of the great thinkers of the Hanbali school, and to an extent by his student, Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyya (d. 1350). They asserted the literal interpretation of the Qur'an and Sunnah and rejected *taḳlīd* (blind imitation) of the *madhāhib* (classical schools of law) authorities.²⁷ They also rejected religious innovation (*bid'a*) and any reliance on reason in the interpretation of religious texts. Both criticized erroneous behaviors like the veneration of saints and the visitation of tombs. They contended that such practices violate the fundamental Islamic tenet of *tawḥīd* and contradict the *sharī'a* (Islamic law). ‘Abd al-Wahhāb drew upon similar ideas, especially those elaborated upon by Ibn Taymiyya.²⁸ The core of his teachings was based on the concept of

²⁶ H. Laoust, “Ibn ‘Abd Al-Wahhāb,” *Encyclopaedia of Islam, Second Edition*, April 24, 2012, http://referenceworks.brillonline.com/entries/encyclopaedia-of-islam-2/Ibn-abd-al-Wahhāb-SIM_3033.

²⁷ Al-Atawneh, *Wahhābī Islam Facing the Challenges of Modernity*, 15.

²⁸ Esther Peskes and W. Ende, “Wahhābiyya,” *Encyclopaedia of Islam, Second Edition*, April 24, 2012, https://referenceworks-brillonline-com.ezproxy.leidenuniv.nl/entries/encyclopaedia-of-islam-2/Wahhābiyya-COM_1329?s.num=0&s.f.s2_parent=s.f.book.encyclopaedia-of-islam-2&s.q=Wahhābi.

tawhīd (unity of God) and its antonym, *shirk* (idolatry). He condemned any act that implied *shirk*, such as visiting tombs and venerating saints.²⁹ He rejected the idea of *wilāya*, the spiritual hierarchy and intercession of saints. He identified these practices as *bid‘a* (innovations) that had infiltrated the religion and desired to purify Islam. He attributed it to a misunderstanding of the true meaning of *tawhid*, as prescribed by God and demonstrated by the prophet Muhammad. ‘Abd al-Wahhāb asserted that it is only Allah who can be worshiped and mortals aren’t asked for intercession in this world or the hereafter.

The religious political legacy in Arabia

The political legitimacy of the Saudi emirate was based on the religious foundations of the Wahhābiyya call (al-da‘wa al-Wahhābiyya), indicating that the state had a divine mandate to protect the so-called Wahhābiyya religious awakening. These beliefs were at the heart of the Taliban's destruction of the Kabul Museum and the Bamiyan Buddhas in Afghanistan in 2001, as well as many other acts of violence.³⁰

Currently, Islamic legal theory in Saudi Arabia is directly linked to Wahhābī jurisprudence, but Peskes and Ende do not discuss the implementation of the governmental religious institution. Muhammad Al-Atawneh fills this void with his research on the religious legitimacy of the Wahhābiyya creed through the Dār al-Iftā’, the official Saudi religious establishment for issuing fatwās. He refers in his research to a Wahhābī fatwā issued by Ibn ‘Abd al-Wahhāb’s grandson, Shaykh ‘Abd al-Raḥmān Ibn Ḥasan on the practice of *ziyāra*. Al-Atawneh states that the classical Wahhābīs forbid visiting graves, even the grave of the Prophet himself.³¹ Similarly, Ibn Bāz was fiercely against shrine veneration. In his fatwa, he gives a warning against building masjids on graves and supplicating the dead.³²

Mark Caudill provides in his research “*Twilight in the Kingdom: Understanding the Saudis*” a similar historical context of the emerging emirate in Arabia. He affirms that the Wahhābī doctrine was followed by most Saudis. The followers strived to uproot and destroy all vestiges of polytheism's past. For example, all non-Saudi Islamic court justices were

²⁹ Al-Rasheed, “A History of Saudi Arabia,” 16.

³⁰ “Why Is Saudi Arabia Destroying the Cultural Heritage of Mecca and Medina?,” The Art Newspaper - International art news and events, November 19, 2015, <https://www.theartnewspaper.com/2015/11/19/why-is-saudi-arabia-destroying-the-cultural-heritage-of-mecca-and-medina>.

³¹ Al-Atawneh, 51.

³² Abd al-‘Azīz Ibn Bāz, “Warning against Building Masjids on Graves and Supplicating the Dead,” Alifita, accessed January 20, 2021, <https://www.alifita.gov.sa/En/IftaContents/IbnBaz/Pages/FatawaDetails.aspx?cultStr=en&IndexItemID=3&SecItemHitID=3&ind=1&Type=Index&View=Page&PageID=373&PageNo=1&BookID=14&Title=DisplayIndexAlpha.aspx#Abdul-AzizIbnAbdullahIbnBaz>.

replaced with Najdis in the mid-twentieth century. This suggests that being a Najdi was an important part of their national identity. They see themselves as the purest of Bedouin Arabs and the most faithful inheritors of the strict orthodox Wahhābi legacy.³³ Caudill focuses on the demolition of religious historical sites that represent narratives other than the stringent orthodox Wahhābī ideology. During the 1970s mosque expansion in Mecca and urban modernization projects, numerous sites, including the Prophet's home in Mecca and the "tomb of Eve" in Jeddah, were bulldozed or paved over.³⁴ A significant absence in his research is the lack of information on Muhammad Ibn ‘Abd al-Wahhāb.

According to Rosie Bsheer, the legacy of al-Wahhāb shattered after the Gulf War. Its significance in the state would be lessened, beginning with the built environment in ad-Dir’iyah but also in Riyadh.³⁵ The Wahhābiyya were replaced by a focus on secular national notions built around the history of the al-Su‘ūd dynasty.³⁶ In the 1980s, an Islamic Awakening (al-Sahwa al-Islamiyya) movement emerged from within the Wahhābiyya milieu. By 2011, the most serious challenge to Ibn Su‘ūd’s authority was the Sahwa and other Islamic groups.³⁷ During Crown Prince ibn Salman's rule, both groups, as well as the religious elite, were crushed and silenced by a large majority.³⁸ This shows the tendency between the religious and political spheres in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. Ibn Salman, as well as his predecessors, neglected the remaining material heritage and prioritized profit and global construction trends.³⁹ He is currently attempting to rehabilitate the cultural and urban environment through material culture.⁴⁰

Heritage

What exactly is heritage? In defining this term, UNESCO divides it into two categories: tangible and intangible heritage.⁴¹ The Palgrave handbook of contemporary heritage research delves deeper into the concept of heritage. In this study, heritage is defined as a contemporary

³³ Mark A. Caudill, *Twilight in the Kingdom: Understanding the Saudis* (Greenwood Publishing Group, 2006), 99.

³⁴ Caudill, 100.

³⁵ Bsheer, *Archive Wars*, 18.

³⁶ Rosie Bsheer, *Archive Wars: The Politics of History in Saudi Arabia*, Stanford Studies in Middle Eastern and Islamic Societies and Cultures (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 2020), 20.

³⁷ Bsheer, 211.

³⁸ Bsheer, 225.

³⁹ Bsheer, 228.

⁴⁰ Bsheer, 229.

⁴¹ “Definition of the Cultural Heritage | United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization.”

process that is used in the construction of identities in a variety of ways.⁴² Dr. Jessica Moody argues that heritage is not a physical thing left over from the past. Instead, she says, it is a way of thinking about the past that is constantly changing.⁴³ Therefore, heritage might be defined as the way we remember our past and use it to create a vision of how we want to be in the future. This explanation demonstrates how difficult it is to provide a static definition of heritage. This research makes numerous references to Dr. David Lowenthal's works on heritage, which explain that heritage is passed down from one generation to the next, and also add that heritage is essential to individual and collective identity as well as self-respect.⁴⁴ He does not directly refer to heritage as history, but rather to memory, which is highly subjective. However, the past, and thus history, remains an essential component of heritage studies. In *The Heritage Crusade and the Spoils of History*, he claims that heritage is constructed.⁴⁵ He believes that our contemporary identity is primarily based on our heritage, which can change over time as everyone's relationship with heritage changes. Rosie Bsheer, who studied the construction of a historical narrative through material production in Saudi Arabia, emphasizes this as well. The focus on Salman ibn Abdulaziz Al Saud is an important sidenote to her research. During his reign, the Saudi state gradually replaced its political religion as the driving force of its history with secular nationalistic notions.⁴⁶ The historical component of this research focuses on the destruction and redevelopment of Mecca's landscape. There has been a push for a secular historical narrative since the Gulf War. However, Al Saud continued to demolish historical sites that could easily be added to the historical narrative. To illustrate, she does not provide extensive case studies of religious historical sites destroyed in Mecca and Medina. She also doesn't go into detail about what religious heritage entails. For example, Mecca and Medina are always described as religious or Islamic heritage sites. However, they are not covered by the legal framework of heritage, either nationally or internationally. Today, under the tutelage of Ibn Salman, the Saudi state works to preserve sites associated with the life of the Prophet Muhammad.⁴⁷ This is a significant shift in the approach of the Saudi state.

⁴² Emma Waterton and Steve Watson, eds., *The Palgrave Handbook of Contemporary Heritage Research* (London: Palgrave Macmillan UK, 2015), <https://doi.org/10.1057/9781137293565>.

⁴³ Waterton and Watson.

⁴⁴ David Lowenthal, "Natural and Cultural Heritage," *International Journal of Heritage Studies* 11, no. 1 (January 2005): 81–92, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13527250500037088>.

⁴⁵ David Lowenthal, *Possessed by the Past: The Heritage Crusade and the Spoils of History* (New York: Free Press, 1996).

⁴⁶ Bsheer, *Archive Wars*, 19.

⁴⁷ "SCTH Transfers National Heritage Sector to Ministry of Culture After Completing Its Organization, Development and Launching Its Projects."

Another point to mention is that these studies are primarily written from a Western perspective, leaving the East out of the discussion.

It is important to note that the concept of heritage is a Western mechanism that is still unknown to the Saudi state. This forms a challenge due to the lack of information and experience on heritage. The SCTA and the SCSH are frequently mentioned by Bsheer. However, there is no clear explanation for their understanding of heritage and how Saudi national heritage is formed. This research should have added more information on how Saudi institutions define the concept of heritage. In this regard, the study "The Making of Islamic Heritage" could be a useful addition to my thesis. Through case-studies of the Saudi Arabian museums and the Hejaz Railway, Ömer Can Aksoy examines the historiography and the heritage management of Saudi Arabia. Like Bsheer, Aksoy contends that Muḥammad b. ‘Abd al-Wahhāb’s movement influenced the Kingdom's historiography.⁴⁸ Aksoy claims that heritage in Saudi Arabia is made to conform to a specific Islamic timeline. On the other hand, he argues that the relationship between Muslims and the time before Islam is shown as one of indifference.⁴⁹ On the contrary, Abdullah Hamidaddin argues that the Saudi state does not have a problem with its pre-Islamic past through the case of Madain Saleh.⁵⁰ He argues that the fundamental issue was not pre-Islamic places per se, but sites of God's wrath. However, over the years, the Wahhābī ideology has resulted in the destruction of several heritage sites in the Middle East. Most of these sites trace back to pre-Islamic periods. He further argues that the process of heritage formation should not be examined through the lens of religious perspectives or a binary of acceptance and rejection. However, it shouldn't be ruled out either. On the other hand, he ignores the destruction of practically all Islamic sites in this debate. As aforementioned, the Saudi government explicitly announced its intention to protect pre-Islamic sites.⁵¹ Even though both case studies are quite extensive and well analyzed, neither Aksoy nor Hamidaddin make any effort to understand how heritage is perceived by the Saudi government. This gives a distorted picture of the conception of heritage in Saudi Arabia.

⁴⁸ Trinidad Rico, ed., *The Making of Islamic Heritage: Muslim Pasts and Heritage Presents* (Singapore: Springer Singapore, 2017), 68, <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-10-4071-9>.

⁴⁹ Rico, *The Making of Islamic Heritage*, 83.

⁵⁰ ispiiso, "Misconceptions and Saudi Pre-Islamic Heritage: The Case of Madain Saleh," Text, ISPI, September 9, 2020, <https://www.ispionline.it/en/pubblicazione/misconceptions-and-saudi-pre-islamic-heritage-case-madain-saleh-27355>.

⁵¹ Kalin, "Saudi Bid to Protect Pre-Islamic Sites Depends Religious Dictates."

Collective Memory

Saudi Arabia's heritage construction has an impact not only on the memories of Saudi citizens but also on the millions of Muslims who visit Mecca and Medina for the hajj. The concept of Pierre Nora's "Les Lieux de Memoire," or sites of memory, is central to this discussion. Memory, according to Nora, is based on symbolic memory sites as well as material traces of the past.⁵² They no longer have the "materiality of the trace" after the destruction. When a community no longer carries historical memory, the process of "re-collection" of the memory is disrupted. It denies them access to their memory or history in the past.

A similar understanding of the destruction of memory can be found in the research by Robert Bevan on "the destruction of memory." The destruction of the cultural artefacts of a nation or enemy people is a means of dominating, terrorizing, dividing, or eradicating its history altogether.⁵³ These artefacts carry historical memory and provide evidence for the presence of a community. This designates these sites as targets, with the primary goal of erasing them to enforce forgetting. These sites and shared spaces can be used to reconstruct the past, bringing different groups together through shared experience. These sites and shared spaces can be a location to reconstruct the past in which different groups come together through shared experience. Collective identities are formed, and traditions are created as a result of this gathering.⁵⁴ According to Zerubavel, a memory is made up of only the experiences that all of its members have had together.⁵⁵ Veysel Apaydin points out that memory has even become a selling point and history something to be consumed, which contributes to vanishing heritage and memory.⁵⁶ This shows the economic side of destructing but also constructing heritage. Academics agree that the destruction of cultural or historic sites has a direct effect on collective memory.

However, with the present advent of new technologies, such as 3D printing and other methods of documenting and re-creating heritage, the physical presence of heritage and its historical memory may be more open to question. For example, the Saudi Arabian National Museum exhibits both replicas and originals.⁵⁷ Virginia Cassola believes that both can convey

⁵² Nora, "Between Memory and History: Les Lieux de Mémoire."

⁵³ Robert Bevan, "The Destruction of Memory," n.d., 8.

⁵⁴ Robert Bevan, *The Destruction of Memory: Architecture at War*, Reaktion Books, 2006. 12.

⁵⁵ Eviatar Zerubavel, *Time Maps: Collective Memory and the Social Shape of the Past* (Chicago, Ill: University of Chicago Press, 2003), 4.

⁵⁶ Veysel Apaydin, *Critical Perspectives on Cultural Memory and Heritage* (UCL Press, 2020), 1, <https://doi.org/10.14324/111.9781787354845>.

⁵⁷ Pamela Erskine-Loftus, Mariam Al-Mulla, and Victoria Hightower, eds., *Representing the Nation*, 0 ed. (Routledge, 2016), 175-176, <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315691350>.

a message and that the Saudi Arabian National Museum's objective is to educate visitors and teach national narratives rather than evoke emotional responses.⁵⁸ As a result, both replicas and originals have a place in a culture and can convey a certain significance. In this sense, the destruction of heritage does not have to imply the loss of collective memory. This is achievable with some objects, but it is debatable whether it is possible with places in a specific area, such as Mecca and Medina. Although it is wonderful that Saudi Arabia has a replica of the Quran on display in their museum, this is not the same as displaying the tomb of Abu Bakr. It's great that Saudi Arabia has a replica of a fourteenth-century Holy Qur'an on display in their museum, but it's not the same as presenting actual items' that evoke feelings.⁵⁹ A miniaturized version of the Kaaba is still a replica, and not the actual monument.

The targeting of buildings and sites is mentioned as a form of iconoclasm by Bevan.⁶⁰ However, he does not elaborate on the concept itself. Clapperton defines iconoclasm in short as "a strategy of employing violence to achieve political ends."⁶¹ Clapperton asserts that iconoclasm weakens and replaces the memories of modern societies with something else.⁶² The latter is interesting within the scope of this research, as Saudi Arabia has started to construct heritage. It is up for debate whether Saudi Arabia eradicated the "collective memory" that certain historical sites signified, to replace it with newly constructed heritage sites that convey a different narrative. According to Apaydin, cultural memory and heritage produce values and meanings for individuals and groups. He believes that heritage can become an important symbol of collective identity, thereby keeping groups and communities together.⁶³ Clapperton refers to the concept of an "imagined community" through heritage, as it signifies the *idea* of a shared identity.⁶⁴

Tourism

Duncan Light opens his essay by defining heritage as the present process through which human civilizations engage with and make use of their past. He goes on to say that tourism is a well-established element of this process and is exploited and commodified for economic advantage

⁵⁸ Erskine-Loftus, Al-Mulla, and Hightower, 176.

⁵⁹ Erskine-Loftus, Al-Mulla, and Hightower.

⁶⁰ Bevan, 14.

⁶¹ Matthew Clapperton, David Martin Jones, and M. L. R. Smith, "Iconoclasm and Strategic Thought: Islamic State and Cultural Heritage in Iraq and Syria," *International Affairs* 93, no. 5 (September 1, 2017): 1, <https://doi.org/10.1093/ia/iix168>.

⁶² Clapperton, Jones, and Smith, 1-2.

⁶³ Veyssel Apaydin, *Critical Perspectives on Cultural Memory and Heritage*, 3.

⁶⁴ Clapperton, Jones, and Smith, 14.

in modern civilizations.⁶⁵ He also stressed how important heritage tourism is for building nations and creating national identities.⁶⁶ This statement is interesting within the historical context of Saudi Arabia. In 2019, Saudi Arabia announced that it would begin issuing visas to non-religious tourists for the first time.⁶⁷

According to Nimrod Luz, pilgrimage practices in the modern Muslim world are quite diverse. This religious diversity implies the existence of various pilgrimage narratives, such as those shared by the Sufi and Shiite communities around the world. In this regard, these historical sites may be crucial for Saudi Arabia's plan to diversify its economy through pilgrimages. According to Duncan Light, exploitation of the past for tourism can lead to significant economic activity in many countries.⁶⁸ This is hard to understand because almost all of the holy Islamic sites, like mausoleums and the graves of the prophet and his friends, have been destroyed.⁶⁹

In their study on the destruction of visiting graves (ziyārāt), Ondrej Beranek and Pavel Tupek argue that the hostile attitude toward the practice of ziyārāt is due to the Saudi government's adoption of the Wahhābiyya doctrine.⁷⁰ This practice indicates a different mnemonic experience of historical narrative than the Wahhābiyya narrative. Kholoud Al-Ajarma depicts in her research the destruction and construction of important Islamic sites. An important example in her research is the blue signs of behavior guidelines near mount Uḥud, a place where a battle took place in the year 625 CE.⁷¹ This location also has a cemetery and is frequently visited by pilgrims. The trip to visit graves is prohibited by the guidelines. The authorities want to prevent pilgrims from supplicating the dead and seeking assistance or intercession from them. It is interesting to see how the Saudi authorities enforce certain behaviors by placing signs. This enforcement is closely related to the Wahhābiyya doctrine. This has been discussed in previous sections and dates back to the teachings of Muhammad Ibn 'Abd al-Wahhāb.

⁶⁵ Waterton and Watson, *The Palgrave Handbook of Contemporary Heritage Research*, 144.

⁶⁶ Waterton and Watson, *The Palgrave Handbook of Contemporary Heritage Research*, 144.

⁶⁷ "Saudi Arabia to Open Itself up to Foreign Tourists for First Time | Saudi Arabia | The Guardian," accessed January 28, 2022, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2019/sep/27/saudi-arabia-offer-tourist-visas-for-first-time>.

⁶⁸ Waterton and Watson, 149.

⁶⁹ "The Destruction of Mecca & Medina's Historic Landscapes," *Cities From Salt*, accessed January 26, 2022, <https://www.citiesfromsalt.com/blog/the-destruction-of-mecca-and-medinas-historic-landscapes>.

⁷⁰ "Medina: Saudis take a bulldozer to Islam's history," *Web*. 02 Jun 2017 <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/middle-east/medina-saudis-take-a-bulldozer-to-islams-history-8228795.html>

⁷¹ Kholoud Al-Ajarma, "Mecca in Morocco: Articulations of the Muslim Pilgrimage (Hajj) in Moroccan Everyday Life" (University of Groningen, 2020), <https://doi.org/10.33612/diss.132290623>, 242.

To give contrast to this rejection, Luz quotes the Prophet Muhammad: “You shall only set out for three mosques: The Sacred Mosque (in Mecca), my mosque (in Medina), and al-Aqsa Mosque (in Jerusalem)”.⁷² This hadith explains why the two Holy Mosques, Mecca and Medina, are regarded as holy sites. It also explains why the Wahhābiyya movement opposes pilgrimages to places other than these locations. They claim that it is *bid’a*, an act of worship outside the unity of God, and thus contradicts their understanding of Islam.

⁷² Luz, “Pilgrimage and religious tourism in Islam,” 1.

Chapter 1: Historicism of Saudi Arabia

Before delving into the complex dynamics of heritage construction and identity politics in Saudi Arabia, it is essential to grasp the historical context of the narrative's formation. In recent years, the international media has criticized Saudi Arabia for its historical destruction of mosques, graves, and other sacred sites.⁷³ This conservative form of Islam arose in Saudi Arabia in the eighteenth century. Muḥammad Ibn ‘Abd al-Wahhāb, founded the Wahhābi school of thought, and his ideas helped shape the Saudi government of today. The influence of the Wahhābi movement on Saudi Arabia's politics spread and eventually came to exert an influence in politics, particularly on the rulers of the country. The forming of the Saudi-Wahhābi ideology has played an important role in the destruction of Islamic heritage sites, which will be highlighted in this chapter. Today, the reclusive Saudi Arabia strives to open up by preserving its pre-Islamic historical sites, like the date palm oasis from the Stone Age. To highlight this shift, this chapter will begin with an intellectual account of the fabrication of the Wahhābī Su‘ūdī alliance.

The early Saudi Emirates

The first so-called Saudi–Wahhābi kingdom was established between 1744 and 1818 as a coalition of tribal confederations.⁷⁴ ‘Abd al-Wahhāb arrived in 1744 at al-Dir’iyyah, where the emir, Muhammad Ibn Saud, supported his quest.⁷⁵ The encounter between ‘Abd al- Wahhāb and Saud was a watershed moment in the history of Islam and Saudi Arabia. This historical alliance between the Wahhābi religious reformer and the ruler of Dir'iyyah laid the groundwork for the establishment of a religious kingdom in central Arabia.⁷⁶ ‘Abd al-Wahhāb had the political backing he needed to disseminate his views, and Ibn Saud helped him expand his political dominance. Ad-Dir’iyah functioned as the capital and is Al-Saud's historical home.

‘Abd al-Wahhāb died in 1792 in ad-Dir’iyah, in the heart of Arabia.⁷⁷ Until his death, he continued his religious and political activities as well as his teaching at his mosque in the neighbourhoods of al-Bujeiri in ad-Dir’iyah.⁷⁸ The mosque is called al-Bujeiri and it was

⁷³ Mustafa Hameed, “The Destruction of Mecca,” *Foreign Policy* (blog), accessed June 27, 2022, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2015/09/22/the-destruction-of-mecca-saudi-arabia-construction/>.

⁷⁴ Al-Rasheed, “A History of Saudi Arabia.” 7.

⁷⁵ “Wahhābi | Beliefs, Movement, & History.”

⁷⁶ Al-Rasheed, “A History of Saudi Arabia.” 17.

⁷⁷ Laoust, “Ibn ‘Abd Al-Wahhāb.”

⁷⁸ Laoust.

listed in the UNESCO nomination document of ad-Dir'iyah.⁷⁹ 'Abd al-Wahhāb's reforming mission was centered in Bujeyri, where he resided with his large family. This adds to the significance of this place in the Saudi national narrative. Their alliance ultimately resulted in the successful imposition of 'Abd al-Wahhāb doctrine across the Arabian Peninsula. In the late 18th and early 19th centuries, the Saudi emirate challenged the Ottoman Empire's authority in Hijaz. As a response, the Ottoman sultan dispatched Egypt's ruler, Muhammad 'Ali, into Arabia in 1811. Within a few years, his army conquered all the remaining territory and put an end to the first Saudi emirate in 1818 by taking down ad-Dir'iyah as their capital. Historically, ad-Dir'iyah is very important for the forming of a secular national identity when it comes to Saudi identity. With al-Dir'iyyah, Saudi Arabia is attempting to control the narrative of its history for the sake of its own people as well as for the benefit of interested foreigners. This also becomes evident through the use of ad-Dir'iyah by King Salman as well as his son when it comes to public announcements.

The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia

Following the establishment of Saudi Arabia in 1932, the Wahhābi establishment of clerics provided King 'Abd al-Aziz Ibn Saud (1932–1953) with the ideological platform for territorial expansion and the absorption of Wahhābism as the common denominator for the people.⁸⁰ This fostered Wahhābi nationalism, even though all Saudi civilians have Saudi citizenship, only Wahhābis loyal to the royal family and the religious establishment were considered as real national Saudis.⁸¹ Throughout this time, Wahhābi political theology was allied with the state in subordinating the public sphere to Al-Saud rule, women as well as men. As aforementioned, its influence also impacted the heritage of historical sites.

For more than two centuries, Islamic heritage sites related with early Islam have been destructed around the country, particularly around Mecca and Medina. Since the emergence of the Wahhābiyya in the region several raids have been launched on local shrines dedicated to the prophet Muhammads companions, blaming the practice of *ziyāra* for inviting the wrath of Allah.⁸² Over the last two centuries the tombs of prominent members of the Prophet's family, which had attracted devotees for generations, were basically turned to ruins.⁸³ Among the most

⁷⁹ "At-Turaif District in Ad-Dir'iyah" (Saudi Commission for Tourism and Antiquities (SCTA), January 2009).

⁸⁰ Gadi Hitman, "Saudi Arabia's Wahhābism and Nationalism: The Evolution of Wataniyya into Qawmiyya: Middle East," *Digest of Middle East Studies* 27, no. 1 (March 2018): 79, <https://doi.org/10.1111/dome.12131>.

⁸¹ Hitman.

⁸² Peskes and Ende, "Wahhābiyya."

⁸³ Thorsten Botz-Bornstein, *Transcultural Architecture: The Limits and Opportunities of Critical Regionalism* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2015).

notable examples of these raids is the demolition of Medina's Jannat al-Baqi cemeteries in 1925.⁸⁴ Another instance is the destruction of the so-called "Eve's Tomb" in 1928, located outside of Jeddah. Regardless of whether this is where Eve was buried, many pilgrims attempted to visit the Tomb of Eve. The Saudi government poured concrete over the site in 1975, preventing pilgrims from visiting and performing religious rites there.⁸⁵

The destruction was an act of iconoclasm, with a specific target on early Islamic heritage sites deemed un-Islamic. To instill Wahhābi doctrine, the Saudi government degraded and delegitimized the existing social structure by eliminating references to past Islamic communities. As a result, certain narratives, particularly Sunni-Sufi and Shia, are effectively denied access to their identity. This paved the way for the reconstruction of Saudi society in accordance with Saudi and Wahhābi identity.

Important on this topic is 'Abd al-'Azīz b. Bāz, (d. 1999), who issued Fatwās supporting the destruction of domes built on tombs, referring to the false beliefs in the dead or their veneration.⁸⁶ He also stated that Islamic heritage consisted solely of the Quran and Sunnah, which is not how the Saudi government currently views heritage. If Ibn Bāz was alive today, it is highly improbable that he would approve of the initiatives to preserve cultural heritage. He was, after all, a renowned Wahhabi cleric with influence in the kingdom. The most recent developments under Vision 2030 demonstrate that the strict Wahhābi religious discourse has been marginalized. In recent years, several Wahhabi religious scholars who attempted to oppose the crown prince have been imprisoned.⁸⁷ These instances indicate how the Saudi national discourse dominates the subordinate Wahhābi religious discourse. The following chapter will provide additional information about the shift in Saudi Arabian discourse.

⁸⁴ "Jannat Ul-Baqi Before Demolitions - Madain Project (En)," accessed June 27, 2022, https://madainproject.com/jannat_ul_baqi_before_demolitions.

⁸⁵ "Mother Eve Cemetery," Google Arts & Culture, accessed June 27, 2022, <https://artsandculture.google.com/entity/mother-eve-cemetery/m02pt0rp>.

⁸⁶ Abd al-'Azīz Bin Bāz, "Warning against the Bid'ahs Observed in Funerals," Alifita, accessed January 20, 2021,

<https://www.alifita.gov.sa/En/IftaContents/IbnBaz/Pages/FatawaDetails.aspx?cultStr=en&IndexItemID=3&SecItemHitID=3&ind=1&Type=Index&View=Page&PageID=2326&PageNo=1&BookID=14&Title=DisplayIndexAlpha.aspx#Abdul-AzizibnAbdullahibnBaz>. Bin Bāz, "Warning against Building Masjids on Graves and Supplicating the Dead."

⁸⁷ "Saudi Crown Prince Lambasts His Kingdom's Wahhabi Establishment | Wilson Center," accessed June 27, 2022, <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/article/saudi-crown-prince-lambasts-his-kingdoms-wahhabi-establishment>. "Saudi Arabia 'Detains' More Preachers," accessed June 27, 2022, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2017/9/13/saudi-arabia-detains-more-preachers>.

Chapter 2: Changing historical narrative

Until the 1991 Gulf War, the historical narrative was consolidated around the Wahhābiyya ideology; afterward, it entailed revising the official historical narrative, with secular nationalism replacing political religion as the driving force of history.⁸⁸ Since the September 11, 2001, al-Qaeda attacks, the Saudi state has adopted a different identity in which the Al Saud's secular history is at the very center. On September 11, the Saudi state was accused of conspiring against the United States. The Saudi government has always said that any connections between Saudi citizens and the hijackers were just a coincidence. As proof, they point to years of fighting al-Qaida together with the US.⁸⁹ In response, the Saudi leadership during the reign of King Fahd felt compelled to modify the country's religious teaching and historical narrative in response to the attacks. In reality, the top decision makers have started to see religion as the biggest threat. This led to a long-term policy to limit the influence and decision-making power of the official religious establishment, especially in the areas of culture and social control.⁹⁰ King Fahd started these changes, but as governor of Riyadh, Salman was in charge of the plan to rewrite history and replace political religion with secular nationalism.⁹¹ One way King Salman fostered this change was through awareness of heritage in Saudi Arabia.

Salman ibn Abdulaziz Al Saud

With the passing of Saudi King Abdullah in 2015, Salman ibn Abdulaziz Al Saud was pronounced as the new monarch at the age of 79. His reform efforts began already in the early 1990s, when he gained political legitimacy in Riyadh and began to reduce the religious establishment's influence over society and economics. He served as governor of Saudi Arabia's Riyadh Province from 1963 until 2015. He used the Kingdom's heritage to further his political goal and move the kingdom away from its traditional religious origins and diversify the kingdom's economy while simultaneously reshaping society.⁹² He utilized culture to mobilize and materialize the secular history of Al Saud.

⁸⁸ Bsheer, *Archive Wars*, 19-20.

⁸⁹ Laura Sullivan, "Biden Declassifies Secret FBI Report Detailing Saudi Nationals' Connections To 9/11," *NPR*, September 12, 2021, sec. National Security, <https://www.npr.org/2021/09/12/1036389448/biden-declassifies-secret-fbi-report-detailing-saudi-nationals-connections-to-9->.

⁹⁰ Bsheer, *Archive Wars*, 18.

⁹¹ Bsheer, 19.

⁹² Rosie Bsheer, "How Mohammed Bin Salman Has Transformed Saudi Arabia," *Jadaliyya* - جدلية, accessed April 29, 2022, <https://www.jadaliyya.com/Details/37696>.

As Riyadh governor (1963–2011), he was quite busy holding chair positions in institutions dealing with heritage related to Saudi Arabia's historical past. He was appointed as the chairman of the Board of Directors of the King Abdulaziz Foundation for Research and Archives (KAFRA) (Arabic title: Darat al-Malik Abdulaziz). The Darah was founded in 1972 with the intention of preserving the history of the Saudi Arabian Kingdom.⁹³ Some have accused the Darah of withholding records showing Wahhāb's role in the 18th century emirate of Al Saud and of rewriting history for the royal dynasty's benefit.⁹⁴ He also served as the Higher Commissioner for the Development of Arriyadh (HCDA) and the Arriyadh Development Authority (ADA), where he oversaw the reconstruction of the built environment. The Metropolitan Development Strategy for the Arriyadh Region (MEDSTAR) project is a major ADA initiative. The MEDSTAR would strengthen the authority of Al Saud and erode the credibility of the Wahhābi movement by investing in certain historical sites and use deteriorated historical sites for recreational purposes.⁹⁵ This led to the growth of historical tourism, the development of real estate, and the accumulation of financial wealth.

The institutions are simply examples, but they demonstrate that in Riyadh he was active in forging the Kingdom's secular historical past and was successful in creating a heritage sector in that represented Al Saud's past. It was for this reason that the Saudi administration began constructing, including preservation projects, the collection of historical documents and manuscripts related to Saudi Arabia.⁹⁶ These resemble Pierre Nora's "realms of memory," which depict Saudi Arabia's heritage. This acts as a mechanism for bringing people together, educating them, and most importantly, building a collective identity. The reconstruction of historical sites served to bolster Al-Saud's past and develop a sense of collective identity. This period of time also resembles the first movements towards a new discourse, one that puts the religious forces in the shadows of state formation. As a result, the state's political legitimacy was replaced: instead of the previous religious underpinnings, it concentrated on a secular national mythology based on Al Saud's past. The kingdom, on the other hand, was indifferent with the loss of heritage at Mecca and Medina, claiming that it was vital to accommodate an ever-growing Muslim population. After all the Hajj and Umrah is very important for the Saudi economy and expanding both Mecca and Medina would produce economic outcomes. The mid-2000s oil price surge sparked economic and cultural aspirations to take shape under the

⁹³ Fahd Al-Semmari, "The King Abdulaziz Foundation for Research and Archives," *Review of Middle East Studies* 35, no. 1 (ed 2001): 45–46, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0026318400041432>.

⁹⁴ Bsheer, *Archive Wars*, 2.

⁹⁵ Bsheer, 128.

⁹⁶ Bsheer, 21.

MEDSTAR.⁹⁷ Following that, Saudi Arabia added its first two historical sites to the UNESCO World Heritage List in 2008 and 2010. These historical sites were new sources of revenue and led to a national tourist strategy that facilitated capital investment in and around memorial places eventually.⁹⁸

The forming of institutions

On April 16, 2000, the Saudi Council of Ministers enacted Resolution No. (9) establishing the Supreme Commission for Tourism (SCT). The SCT was founded in 2000 to support the regime's endeavor to revise, centralize, and materialize Saudi Arabia's official history. Subsequently, on March 24, 2008, resolution number 78 was adopted to incorporate the Antiquities and Museums sector within the Supreme Commission of Tourism. In addition to being responsible for tourism, the SCT is now also accountable for the implementation of its relevant duties. In the resolution, the name "Supreme Commission for Tourism" (SCT) was changed to "Saudi Commission for Tourism and Antiquities" (SCTA), and it was confirmed that domestic and international tourism is a reality that needs a national authority to plan and develop it because there are so many different forms of tourism in the Kingdom.⁹⁹ In 2015, the SCTA became the Saudi Commission for Tourism and National Heritage (SCTH). The main goal of SCTH's establishment has been to take care of the Kingdom's tourism sector by preserving, developing, and promoting the Kingdom's national heritage and its value to the cultural and economic prosperity of its people.¹⁰⁰ In the past two decades, efforts to preserve and memorialize the state-sanctioned secular past have expanded beyond Riyadh's historical landmarks to encompass the entire kingdom.¹⁰¹ By 2020, the SCTH had been transformed into a ministry, a unified government agency with direct ties to the royal family.

After the year 2015, King Salman was successful in putting an end to the power-sharing system by centralizing the governing institutions of the kingdom. Today, members of King Salman's family hold a variety of influential roles, including Prince Abdulaziz as the deputy oil minister, Prince Faisal as the governor of Madina Province, and Prince Sultan as the head

⁹⁷ Rosie Bsheer, "How Mohammed Bin Salman Has Transformed Saudi Arabia."

⁹⁸ "Saudi Arabia Unveils National Strategy to Promote Nation's Heritage," Arab News, September 30, 2021, <https://arab.news/47xwn>.

⁹⁹ "Rock Art in the Hail Region of Saudi Arabia" (Saudi Commission for Tourism and Antiquities, 2013).

¹⁰⁰ "Saudi Commission for Tourism and National Heritage (SCTH)," accessed June 28, 2022, <https://www.scega.gov.sa/en/pages/aboutscta.aspx>.

¹⁰¹ Bsheer, *Archive Wars*, 145.

of the tourism authority.¹⁰² Moreover, his son Ibn Salman currently holds the most influential position in the kingdom as Crown Prince. Once he had absolute control of these entities, he made efforts to alter national policy, most notably through promoting Saudi Arabia's Vision 2030.¹⁰³ In summary, the recent rulers of Saudi Arabia reconstructed society through a different discourse on heritage by forging new institutions that deal with heritage on a national scale.¹⁰⁴ After all, the development of heritage would enhance Al Saud's legitimacy, and investing in historical sites would ultimately result in an economic gain. Currently, the tourism sector represents about three percent of Saudi Arabia's GDP, and the ministry has its work cut out for it with a goal of increasing that figure to fifteen percent by 2030.¹⁰⁵

UNESCO

In the past, Saudi Arabia has been criticized by the international community for its destruction of historical sites in the country, mainly Islamic heritage sites. The demolition was deemed necessary by Wahhābī doctrine to prevent these sites from becoming pilgrimage shrines, which they deem heretical. In Saudi Arabia, the demolition and erasure of the Islamic past is carried out not only for religious reasons but also for modernization. Over time, Saudi Arabia expanded Mecca and Medina to accommodate more pilgrims. This resulted in the demolition of the remaining structures that gave Mecca its unique architectural character and made way for modern architecture.¹⁰⁶ The Abraj Al-Bait Towers, a complex of seven tower hotels in Mecca that is controlled by the government, is a notable example. The government claims that these changes are necessary to accommodate more pilgrims.

In contrast to these demolitions, the Saudi government has launched several preservation programs, as evidenced by listing historic sites on the World Heritage List and Tentative List. The Saudi government is committed to close collaboration with international organizations like UNESCO. During UNESCO's 44th session in Fuzhou, China, member states elected Saudi Arabia to serve as the organization's vice chair as a representative of the Arab

¹⁰² "Salman Ascends Throne to Become Saudi King - The New York Times," accessed March 24, 2022, <https://www.nytimes.com/2015/01/23/world/middleeast/salman-ascends-throne-to-become-saudi-king.html>.

¹⁰³ "Homepage: The Progress & Achievements of Saudi Arabia - Vision 2030," accessed June 28, 2022, <https://www.vision2030.gov.sa/>.

¹⁰⁴ "SCTH Transfers National Heritage Sector to Ministry of Culture After Completing Its Organization, Development and Launching Its Projects."

¹⁰⁵ "Tourism to Contribute 15% to Saudi \$1.86tn Economy by 2030," Arab News, March 13, 2022, <https://arab.news/48k5t>.

¹⁰⁶ Michael Kerr, "Mecca Has Been Turned into Disneyland," *The Telegraph*, February 4, 2016, <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/travel/destinations/middle-east/saudi-arabia/articles/Mecca-has-been-turned-into-Disneyland/>.

group from 2021 to 2023.¹⁰⁷ On April 8, 2022, Saudi Arabia acceded to the Hague Apostille Convention of 5 October 1961, abolishing the requirement of legalization for foreign public documents.¹⁰⁸ This one-step procedure simplifies the process by eliminating the need for extra certification or authorization. These actions show that the Saudi government is trying to change the image of the kingdom and attract sufficient regional and international investment. This will make it less reliant on oil, give its economy more options, and help grow its tourism industry.

World Heritage List

There are several conventional standards and requirements for heritage sites to be included on the World Heritage List. A state must have ratified the World Heritage Convention to submit nominations for its cultural heritage. Another criterion is the existence of physical evidence that can be preserved for an extended period. However, what constitutes physical evidence of a heritage site is open to multiple interpretations. Furthermore, the nominating state must submit documentation explaining why the site should be included based on the selection criteria. A site must be of outstanding global significance and meet at least one of UNESCO's ten selection criteria.¹⁰⁹

Today, Saudi Arabia has six UNESCO World Heritage Sites, four of which date back to pre-Islamic times. Since 2015, ten new historical sites have been added to the UNESCO tentative list. There are even religious overtones to some of these sites. On April 25, 2016, Ibn Salman, then-Deputy Crown Prince, unveiled Vision 2030, an ambitious strategic plan aimed at reducing the kingdom's reliance on oil and diversifying the kingdom's economy, in which the youthful Saudi population will play a crucial part.¹¹⁰ Investment in the tourism sector is one of the kingdom's pillars and evidence of its desire to achieve its goals. Saudi Arabia's Vision 2030 initiative aims to boost the number of UNESCO heritage projects.¹¹¹ The Kingdom has also started several tourism-related projects, such as the \$15 billion Al-Ula plan to create a

¹⁰⁷ *ere*“Saudi Arabia Elected as Vice Chair of UNESCO World Heritage Committee,” *Saudigazette*, August 6, 2021, <http://www.saudigazette.com.sa/article/609544>.

¹⁰⁸ *e-Vision nl* Netherlands The, “HCCH | Saudi Arabia Accedes to the Apostille Convention,” accessed June 28, 2022, <https://www.hcch.net/en/news-archive/details/?varevent=857>.

¹⁰⁹ UNESCO World Heritage Centre, “The Criteria for Selection,” UNESCO World Heritage Centre, accessed February 16, 2022, <https://whc.unesco.org/en/criteria/>.

¹¹⁰ “Unveiling Saudi Vision 2030.”

¹¹¹ “Tourism Investment,” accessed April 15, 2022, <https://mt.gov.sa/en/TourismInvestment/Pages/TourismInvestment.aspx>.

place where people can go to learn about history, culture, and nature.¹¹² The Saudi government has listed six sites on the World Heritage List since 2008:

- Al-Hijr/ Madā' in Ṣāliḥ (2008)
- The At-Turaif District in ad-Dir'iyah (2010)
- Historic Jeddah, the Gate to Makkah (2014)
- Rock Art in the Hail Region of Saudi Arabia (2015)
- Al-Ahsa Oasis, an Evolving Cultural Landscape (2018)
- Ḥimā Cultural Area (2021)

The Royal Commission for Al-Ula (RCU) and UNESCO signed a long-term strategic partnership in 2021 to improve Al-Ula's cultural landscape and raise awareness of the importance of heritage around the world.¹¹³ Al Ula is home to several historic sites, the most notable of which is the Hegra Archaeological Site (al-Hijr / Madā' in Ṣāliḥ). This is also the first World Heritage Site inscribed in Saudi Arabia. It was discovered in 2008 and has pre-Islamic overtones. The Hegra Archaeological Site, as well as the other five World Heritage Sites, will be discussed in greater depth below. The section that follows will provide a discourse analysis on the documentation of the aforementioned heritage sites.

Al-Hijr/ Madā' in Ṣāliḥ

The Saudi government values sites related to its national past, as seen by the preservation of this site. After all, the Nabataeans are descended from ancient Arabia and are basically Arabian nomads. The site itself is also quite like the preserved Nabataean city of Petra in Jordan, which is a UNESCO World Heritage Site. It's important to remember that the Wahhābi religious establishment thinks of the time before Islam as a time of ignorance. However, it's interesting that the Saudi government gives priority to religious sites from before Islam, like tombs and religious monuments. Even more so, because Saudi Arabia has been criticised for destroying holy sites associated with the life of the prophet Mohammad. Abdel Wahhāb, the religious forefather of Saudi Arabia, was against the veneration of saints and the practice of ziyara. 'Abd al-ʿAzīz b. Bāz, formerly the kingdom's highest religious authority, said in 1994 in a highly

¹¹² “‘A Global Destination for Heritage, Culture and Nature’: Saudi Arabia Unveils \$15bn AlUla Masterplan,” The Art Newspaper - International art news and events, April 30, 2021, <https://www.theartnewspaper.com/2021/04/30/a-global-destination-for-heritage-culture-and-nature-saudi-arabia-unveils-dollar15bn-alula-masterplan>.

¹¹³ “AIUla, UNESCO Sign Deal to Promote Saudi Heritage, Culture,” Arab News, November 10, 2021, <https://arab.news/gcvkp>.

publicized fatwa, "It is forbidden to celebrate architecture and historical landmarks." He asserted that such conduct would lead to polytheism.¹¹⁴ Currently, the Saudi government is promoting the preservation of pre-Islamic tombs. This symbolizes, on the one hand, the loss of control by the Wahhabi movement and, on the other hand, a trend toward secular inclinations as the Kingdom attempts to align itself with Western institutions. Preserving these types of historical sites has been described as a bid to increase tourism, help revive the kingdom's tourist industry, and allow for alternative narratives. The Saudi government has also been criticized for the destruction of historical sites, such as the *Al-Baqi* cemetery in Medina, which was destroyed in the 1980s. Another point is that certain narratives claim that Al-Hijr is mentioned in the Holy Qur'ân and by the prophet Mohammad himself in a negative manner. According to this narrative, the Quran refers to the pre-Islamic Prophet Saleh, who asked his people to worship God, though they rejected his message. However, this claim is not unanimously supported by everyone.

The At-Turaif District in ad-Dir'iyah

The district of Turaif in ad-Dir'iyah was nominated to the World Heritage List in 2010. The Saudi Kingdom existed in three different manifestations before it became the Saudi Arabia we know today. In 1744, an agreement between Muhammad ibn Saud and Ibn 'Abd al-Wahhâb led to the establishment of the first so-called Saudi emirate (1703–1792). Ad-Dir'iyah functioned as the capital and was Al-Saud's ancestral residence. This emphasizes the significance of this place within the Saudi national secular narrative. According to Richard Jenkins, it is this altering social environment that simultaneously generates new and modified identities.¹¹⁵ This is evidenced by the inclusion of this site on the World Heritage List.

In this regard, the heritage site itself already conveys a particular discourse by the Saudi government. It is being utilized to achieve a certain national political objective, namely gaining Western legitimacy by engaging more with its institutions. The primary underlying discourse of this source is essentially political. Saudi Arabia aims to join the international political system through UNESCO in order to have some of its heritage sites designated as world heritage.

Secondly, it expresses a nationalistic discourse, as the location of ad-Dir'iyah reflects the origins of the Saudi state in the person of Ibn Saud and his family. The inscription for ad-

¹¹⁴ Zvika Krieger, "McMecca: The Strange Alliance of Clerics and Businessmen in Saudi Arabia," *The Atlantic*, March 19, 2013, <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2013/03/mcmecca-the-strange-alliance-of-clerics-and-businessmen-in-saudi-arabia/274146/>.

¹¹⁵ Richard Jenkins, *Social Identity* (London; New York: Routledge, 2004), <http://www.myilibrary.com?id=7762>.

Dir'iyah underlines its significance to Saudi culture. This demonstrates how the Saudi government perceives its history and will in the future. These aspirations reflect the Saudi national identity. By emphasizing that this location is more important than others, the Saudi government promotes its national identity. This is also shown by the specific criteria (iv), (v), and (vi) that are used to prove its world-wide importance. To illustrate, criterion (vi) by UNESCO emphasizes a living tradition, and its significance for the Saudi national identity is demonstrated by the Wahhābi Su'ūdī coalition. In addition, it illustrates the identification process, which is a crucial aspect of the discourse of cultural identity.¹¹⁶ Despite the allusion to 'Abdul Wahhāb, the At-Turaif District has a national rather than an Islamic connotation. In addition, the Saudi government refers to itself as Sunni Islam rather than Wahhābi Islam. In an April 2018 interview with the Atlantic's editor-in-chief, Jeffrey Goldberg, Ibn Salman stated that Wahhābism did not exist.¹¹⁷ He even asserted that Sunni and Shiite interpretations of Islam coexist within the kingdom's borders in Saudi Arabia.¹¹⁸ In the history of Saudi Arabia, the relationship between the political authorities and Islam has been of central importance and constitutes an essential source of legitimacy and political power. In the context of this social change, the architecture of Ad-Diriyah can be seen as a sign that a Saudi national identity is being promoted.

The language used in the UNESCO nomination document represents the Saudi government's perspective on how heritage should be perceived. Through this inscription, the Saudi government gives its audience, international as well as national, access to its subjectivity. By doing so, the government is indirectly expressing to its people and the world its own view of a Saudi national identity. Therefore, its audience is subject to the Saudi government's national political discourse. In this line, the government also addresses the establishment of subject-position stereotypes. The establishment of stereotypes is a key concern in discourse production, as discussed by Foucault. According to Foucault's notion of discourse production, stereotypes are produced and maintained in order to create a subject-position for the purpose of social control and identity formation. This national discourse creates Saudi citizens that are very proud and enthusiastic when it comes to their nation. The regime gains power and a means of disciplining people through the establishment of stereotypes, which allow the government

¹¹⁶ Stuart Hall, "Introduction: Who Needs 'Identity'?", in *Questions of Cultural Identity* (1 Oliver's Yard, 55 City Road, London EC1Y 1SP United Kingdom: SAGE Publications Ltd, 2011), 1–17, <https://doi.org/10.4135/9781446221907.n1>.

¹¹⁷ Jeffrey Goldberg, "Saudi Crown Prince: Iran's Supreme Leader 'Makes Hitler Look Good,'" *The Atlantic*, April 2, 2018, <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2018/04/mohammed-bin-salman-iran-israel/557036/>.

¹¹⁸ Goldberg.

to create a positive view of itself as a protector, leader, etc. This is depicted throughout the nomination document, in which the House of Saud is presented as the protectors of at-Turaif and as having contributed to its political stability and its prosperity.¹¹⁹ Also, most people thought that the Imams of the First Saudi Emirate were very wise, religious, and honest.¹²⁰

Through this source, the Saudi government presents its audience with its own perspective on identity and subjectivity. This is an attempt to identify with the past and influence its future obligations as the protector and leader of its nation. This nomination provides a historical narrative that strengthens the devotion of Saudi nationalist citizens and specific details on how the Saudi government fosters cultural heritage preservation. In short, through at-Turaif, the government is attempting to shape the Saudi national identity of its people.

Historic Jeddah, the Gate to Makkah

In 2014, Historic Jeddah, the Gate to Makkah, was inscribed on the World Heritage List. The SCTA included this site, using the following criteria to justify its inclusion: (ii), (iv), (v), and (vi). The second criterion identifies the interchange of human values that occurred in Jeddah because of international sea trade as well as a shared geographical, cultural, and religious context. It was created as a significant port for Indian Ocean commerce lines, as well as a gateway for pilgrims to Makkah. The fourth criterion reflects architecture and is illustrated by the *roshan* (wooden bay window) tower houses in Jeddah. In terms of style, design, and materials, this is a classic example of Red Sea architecture.¹²¹ The sixth criterion requires a connection to living traditions, ideas, or beliefs of exceptional universal significance. In this case, it is the hajj, in which Jeddah functions as the harbour for pilgrims. This site basically includes both tangible and intangible components. The architecture represents the tangible elements, while the international sea trade and shared geographical, cultural, and religious context explain the intangible elements.

Furthermore, this text expresses specific discourses and, as previously stated, in dealing with UNESCO, it has a political message. In addition to this, it places an emphasis on secular concepts by emphasizing the history of the Al-Saud family. For instance, the Ottoman empire is described as an important opponent in the historical account of this site, which sheds positive light on the Saudis. In this context, phrases like "the Ottoman Sultan decided to deploy his

¹¹⁹ "At-Turaif District in Ad-Dir'iyah."

¹²⁰ "At-Turaif District in Ad-Dir'iyah."

¹²¹ "Historic Jeddah, the Gate to Makkah" (Saudi Commission for Tourism and Antiquities, January 2013), 49.

viceroy in Egypt, Mohammad Ali, to destroy the growing influence and strength of the Saudis" and "its independence from the Ottomans" are used to illustrate the point.¹²² It's also interesting to observe how the Ottoman empire is portrayed negatively. The historical depiction describes Ottoman authority over Arabia as a provocation, causing tremendous discontent in the Hijaz.¹²³ On the contrary, Saudi leaders such as Sharif Hussein Ibn 'Ali are portrayed as liberation warriors and heroes. Another example is the exaggeration of Abdulaziz Ibn Saud's career, as well as the statement that he founded the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia.¹²⁴ This shows the significance of the figure of Al-Saud in subjecting Saudi nationals and an international audience to its national political discourse. The narration of the document presents Al-Saud as the embodiment of national unity.

Rock Art in the Hail Region of Saudi Arabia

Rock Art is the fourth listing and was nominated in 2015. It includes two locations in Jabel Umm Sinman at Jubbah, Jabal Al-Manjor and Raat at Shuwaymis. These sites offer the most comprehensive remaining examples of early Neolithic petroglyphs (rock carvings) in Arabia.¹²⁵

Thousands of rock carvings, ranging from Thamudic to Islamic writing, are matched with hundreds of camel designs.¹²⁶ The inscription further mentions that the hills surrounding Jubbah are home to stone structures such as cairns and circular tombs. More intriguingly, the inscription states that there is a ruin in Shuwaymis that appears to be some kind of ritual site. This violates the Wahhabi doctrine that considers the veneration of pre-Islamic ruins and objects to be idolatrous. In addition, this credo prohibits the depiction of animals.¹²⁷ In this situation, the kingdom is even promoting a site with a ritual center, which clearly violates the Wahhābi teaching. Finally, in the inscription document, it is mentioned that King Abdullah ibn Abdulaziz al-Saud and the Governor of the Hail area, Prince Saud ibn Abdulmoshin ibn

¹²² "Historic Jeddah, the Gate to Makkah," 72.

¹²³ "Historic Jeddah, the Gate to Makkah," 73, 75.

¹²⁴ "Historic Jeddah, the Gate to Makkah," 75.

¹²⁵ The Neolithic Era refers to the latter half of the Stone Age and is a pivotal point in the cultural evolution of humanity, during which nomadic people adopted a settled way of life. "Neolithic - Oxford Reference," accessed June 29, 2022, <https://www-oxfordreference-com>.

¹²⁶ The Thamudic script designates a group of inscriptions found in northern and central Arabia between the fifth and first century BCE. "Thamudic, Adj. and n. : Oxford English Dictionary," accessed June 29, 2022, <https://www-oed-com>.

¹²⁷ Abd al-‘Azīz Bin Bāz, "Pictures of Animals Are Quite Forbidden.," Alifita, accessed February 19, 2021, <https://www.alifita.gov.sa/En/IftaContents/IbnBaz/Pages/FatawaDetails.aspx?cultStr=en&IndexItemID=3&SecItemHitID=3&ind=1&Type=Index&View=Page&PageID=2326&PageNo=1&BookID=14&Title=DisplayIndexAlpha.aspx#Abdul-AzizibnAbdullahibnBaz>.

Abdulaziz al-Saud, are highly interested in maintaining and highlighting the country's cultural heritage. There is a claim that the locals recognise the significance and worth of the sites. This shows that the Al-Saud family has a personal interest in the preservation of cultural heritage and the formation of national identity.

Al-Ahsa Oasis, an Evolving Cultural Landscape

This site was inscribed in 2018 and is claimed to have 2.5 million date palms, making it the largest in the world. There are also historic buildings in the area, such as Najidi palaces, souks, and mountain caves. Mosques have also been conserved and depicted as significant historical sites in this oasis.

To illustrate, the *Jawatha Abd al-Qais* Mosque is an important historical site in Al-Ahsa. This mosque was built on top of the second mosque in Islam, which was built in 1436. The SCTH claims that the site has religious and symbolic significance to Muslims and Al-Ahsa people due to the memory of this location. Another notable example is the Al-Mulla House, also known as the House of Allegiance, which is a historic site in Al Mubarraz. King Abdul Aziz of Saudi Arabia visited the Al-Ahsa region and made a stay here in 1331 AH, and the people of Al-Ahsa swore loyalty to King Abdul Aziz, giving it historical significance. This preservation of Al-Ahsa shows that the kingdom cares about historical sites related to Al-Saud's historicism. It also brings attention to historical sites in Saudi Arabia that have religious meanings.

Ḥimā Cultural Area

One of the largest groups of rock art in the world is at Ḥimā Najrān, which is in the southwest of Saudi Arabia. In the text, this region is described as a living cultural zone where some traditions from the distant past have remained. Today, rock art has cultural significance and is still being made in some circumstances. The rock art is a source of pride for the local Bedouins, connecting them with their ancestors and identifying their cultural identity. However, the rock art that they create is composed of tribal symbols known as *wusūm*, as well as the veneration of the fertility goddess Alia. This idea directly contradicts Wahhābi ideology. Essentially, by preserving and promoting these sites as being of great importance, the kingdom demonstrates its shift toward secular tendencies. While Saudi Arabia has always been distinguished by its Saudi Wahhābi alliance, this shift and emphasis on the country's pre-Islamic past implies a secular trend. Also, the text makes it clear that the state's main goal for this site is not to get a

lot of tourists but to make more people aware of its cultural property by making it a World Heritage site and getting worldwide recognition for it.

The primary discourse driving these historic preservation initiatives is political. By enhancing its interaction with the institutions of the West, the Kingdom attempts to establish a specific national political interest and win respect from the Western world. The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia is attempting to join the global political system through UNESCO in order to have specific historical sites designated as having global heritage significance. UNESCO is an international organization, so involvement in its activities is an indication of appreciation.

Tentative list

As previously stated, Saudi Arabia's Vision 2030 is a significant socioeconomic transformation strategy aimed at opening the country to the rest of the world. Investment in the tourist industry is one of the pillars of the kingdom and evidence of its determination to achieve its objectives. It intends to increase the number of UNESCO heritage projects. Since 2015, ten new historical sites have been added to the tentative list of Saudi Arabia to meet the criteria necessary to be included on the UNESCO World Heritage List. Some of these sites even have religious connotations. The section that follows will explain the documentation presented to UNESCO and the rationale behind the tentative list's site selections. As with nomination sites, the state also presents justification criteria for these areas. Since 2015, the Saudi government has suggested the following 10 sites for the tentative list:

- Hejaz Railway (2015)
- Rijal Almaa Heritage Village in Assir Region (2015)
- Syrian Hajj Road (2015)
- Zee Ain Heritage Village in Al-Baha Region (2015)
- Egyptian Hajj Road (2015)
- ‘Uruq Bani Mu’arid Protected Area (2019)
- Farasan Islands Protected Area (2019)
- The Ancient Walled Oases of Northern Arabia (2022)
- The Hajj Pilgrimage Routes: The Darb Zubaydah (2022)
- The Cultural Landscape of Al-Faw Archaeological Area (2022)

The heritage sites registered on the Tentative List are classified as cultural and natural sites. Moreover, the cultural category can be subdivided into places with nationalist, Islamic, and pre-Islamic overtones. The following section will present a discourse analysis of only three sites, as these sites are important to understanding the construction of Saudi national identity.

Hejaz Railway

It was constructed by the Ottoman empire at the beginning of the 20th century to connect Damascus with the Islamic holy cities of Madinah and Makkah. As a result of World War I, T.E. Lawrence and his Arab allies attacked the railway, and it was never completed. Since 1920, the railway has been in ruins and abandoned. Today, the Al-Madinah Hijaz Railway Station has been rebuilt and is now a museum featuring records, artifacts, photographs, and other materials relating to the Hijaz Railway. A second major station was Madain Saleh, which included a train maintenance workshop and a small museum within the main historical site of Madain Saleh. Even though the inscription claims that the site consists of 34 stations, many of them are in bad condition. However, the Mada'in Saleh and central Madinah City stations have been rebuilt and are now museums. Recently, several of Tabuk's railroad structures have been rehabilitated as a railroad park. This one is interesting because it is close to Al-Ula and shows that the government is putting money into this area to bring in tourists.

The Hejaz Railway inscription is remarkable since it provides numerous narratives. This site is highlighted because it facilitates the hajj by replacing camel caravans. Even so, the railroad brought other benefits that fit with the Ottoman empire's story, like economic gains through trade and political gains through unifying the area and making the Ottoman military stronger. The discourse given in this inscription disregards the history of the Ottoman empire by ignoring the economic and political benefits of the Hejaz railway and emphasizing only its role in aiding the hajj, which continues to be of critical importance to the Saudi kingdom. Considering that the Ottoman Empire constructed the site, it is surprising that the Ottoman Empire is not mentioned in the section titled "Justification of Outstanding Universal Value". The Ottoman Empire is also not included in the site's description on the official page of Saudisaudi.com. Furthermore, the inscription emphasizes that the site was destroyed by Sharif Hussein ibn Ali and T.E. Laurence, and it praises Ibn al-Saud as the savior for regaining control of the Hejaz. It also highlights Ibn Saud's efforts to reconstruct this site.

In short, this inscription highlights Ibn-Saud's secular historical significance for Arabia and the significance of the Hejaz Railway to the kingdom by emphasizing the hajj and the

kingdom's connection to it. Thus, the Hijaz Railway shows Ibn Saud's persistence in gaining control of the kingdom.¹²⁸

Rijal Almaa Heritage Village in Asir Region

In 2015, this site was also added to the tentative list. The village is in the region of Asir, near the city of Abha. The village served as a gateway from Yemen and the Levant to the holy cities of Makkah and Madinah, and it was the commercial hub of the region.¹²⁹ In 2007, the Prince Sultan ibn Salman Prize for Urban Heritage was awarded to the village, and it became a domestic tourist destination.¹³⁰ This indicates that the site in question has always been significant to the history of the Saudi kingdom.

The village was also a key juncture in forging a stance against the Ottoman Empire. This is the village where the Asiri tribes defeated the Ottoman troops. Over 50,000 Turkish soldiers were defeated, which compelled them to sign an agreement guaranteeing the independence of the region. This inscription seeks to increase national pride by depicting the conflicts between the Ottoman Empire and Saudi Arabia as a type of independence struggle. The village represents the spirit of a historical struggle to recover Rijal Almaa's independence from Ottoman control. This is reflected in the wording of the phrase, "showed courage, pride in their independence, victory against, to discipline them (the Asiri men by the Ottoman rule) and the military dominance of the Rijal Alma." In this light, the village serves as a heritage site not only to educate Saudis and other people but also to evoke specific feelings stemming from the fight between the Ottomans and Saudis. In short, this inscription attempts to boost national pride in the Rijal Almaa village by portraying the clashes between the Ottoman Empire and Saudi Arabia as a form of freedom struggle. Discourse abounds throughout the village, glorifying and even sanctifying the Saudi national identity through war and heroism of religious and national pride. There are several fortifications and a museum in the village that tell the story of the Saudis' fight for independence from the Ottoman Empire.

In 2017, the village received the Arab Cities "*Mudon*" (cities) Award to celebrate its "architectural heritage" and the repair of the village's 16 fortifications.¹³¹ In 2017, a UNESCO delegation visited the village, and the SCTH has been advocating for this location to be voted

¹²⁸ Permanent Delegation of Saudi Arabia to UNESCO, "Hejaz Railway," 2015.

¹²⁹ UNESCO World Heritage Centre, "Rijal Almaa Heritage Village in Assir Region," UNESCO World Heritage Centre, accessed May 21, 2022, <https://whc.unesco.org/en/tentativelists/6030/>.

¹³⁰ "Saudi Village of Rijal Alma Prepares to Join UNESCO World Heritage List," Arab News, August 5, 2018, <https://www.arabnews.com/node/1351251/saudi-arabia>.

¹³¹ "Saudi's Rijal Alma Is a Historical Heritage Surrounded by Fortresses," Al Arabiya English, June 2, 2018, <https://english.alarabiya.net/features/2018/06/02/Rijal-Alma-is-a-historical-heritage-surrounded-by-fortresses>.

as a World Heritage Site.¹³² The UN World Tourism Organization (UNWTO) recently recognized it as one of the world's top tourist destinations in 2021.¹³³ This drew international attention to the site and increased local community pride. Additionally, being part of the international spotlight allows for social and cultural exchanges, as well as accommodating a potential influx of tourists from other countries in the region and around the world. In addition, the Saudi government is actively campaigning to nominate this site for nomination as a UNESCO World Heritage Site, which demonstrates the political and economic agenda of the Saudi government to preserve its cultural heritage to market itself and attract tourism.

Zee Ain Heritage Village in Al-Baha Region

The next village is called Zee Ain Heritage Village, and it is in the Al-Baha Region. This inscription gives an ample history of how the culture of this village has influenced Saudi Arabia. Its historical and cultural past is intertwined with the Bedouin tribes, and its national identity is bolstered by its struggle against the Turks and the Ottoman empire.

Notably, the inscription of Zee Ain Heritage Village highlights its defensive aspect, as demonstrated by tribal wars and battles with the Ottoman Empire. This demonstrates the historical significance of the national identity of the Saudi Kingdom in relation to the Ottoman empire. It is an obvious effort to instil a sense of pride and patriotism in those who live there and those who come to visit. For instance, when discussing the battle against the Turks, phrases such as "the Turkish graves" are used to signify defeat. In addition, the Saudi Commission for Tourism and National Heritage (SCTH) has devised a plan to restore and develop this heritage village so that it becomes an economic, tourism, and cultural resource that provides employment opportunities for locals and tour guides. Since the inscription is meant to improve the local economy and the prosperity of the nation, it is evident that economic discourse and the site are directly related. Also briefly mentioned are conflicts between the Zahran and Ghamd tribes before King Abdulaziz united the kingdom. According to the text, the most significant of these battles occurred between the tribes of Zahran and Ghamd and the Turkish army led by Muhammad Ali Pasha, which resulted in the death of the Turks; their burial site is referred to as "the Turks' graves."

¹³² Staff Writer, "Saudi's Rijal Alma Heritage Village Could Become UNESCO Site in 2018 - Gulf Business," accessed May 22, 2022, <https://gulfbusiness.com/saudis-rijal-alma-heritage-village-become-unesco-site-2018/>.

¹³³ "Rijal Alma'a," *Best Tourism Villages* (blog), December 2, 2021, <https://www.unwto.org/tourism-villages/en/villages/rijal-almaa/>.

In summary, this inscription promotes national political and economic discourses and imagery relating to the significance of the historical past, the present, and their close connection to national identity. These discursive devices are used to instill a sense of national pride and success in the subjects, namely the Saudi nationals.

The Ancient Walled Oases of Northern Arabia and The Cultural Landscape of Al-Faw Archaeological Area

In 2022, the government registered two cultural landscapes. The Ancient Walled Oases of Northern Arabia consist of four distinctive sites: two walled Bronze Age oasis settlements (Tayma and Qurayyah) and two later walled Iron Age oasis settlements (Dumat Al-Jandal and Al-Ha'it). They jointly reflect long-lasting sedentary settlements from the Bronze and Iron Ages to the Classical and Islamic periods.

The inscription uses the Western Gregorian calendar as opposed to the Islamic calendar, which makes the depiction of the latter date somewhat distinctive. Remarkably, the inscription mentions the term "frankincense," which is also mentioned in the Bible. In the Bible, "frankincense" is described as one of the three gifts sent by the Three Wise Men to the infant Jesus. Also interesting is the absence of the Arabic term for frankincense, *al-luban*, in the inscription. It is, after all, a distinctive characteristic of the region and a part of its history. There are also numerous references to old Arabic tribes that are present. For example, the reference to *Qurayyah*, the reported capital of the Midian tribe during the Late Bronze Age (1700–1200 BCE). This tribe is mentioned in the Bible and the Quran. In the latter, it has been deemed heretical. Midian is recognized in the Quran as one of the deceased nations. As a punishment for their immoral practices and unbelief, God annihilated them. Attempting to protect and promote sites associated with this narrative is therefore in direct opposition to Wahhābi ideology. Even as recently as 2010, some scholars issued fatwas arguing that pre-Islamic sites should not be preserved.

According to the inscription of The Cultural Landscape of Al-Faw Archaeological Area, around 320 tapering structures were discovered at the archaeological site. The site comprises more than 1,500 circular stone structures (tombs), while the plateau atop the site contains more than 150 circular stone constructions (cairns, tombs, etc.). This is especially intriguing given that the Saudi state has always opposed tombs. This is primarily due to the Wahhābi conception of tawhid. For example, back in 2010, there were clerics who criticized the preservation of pre-Islamic historical sites for similar reasons. This demonstrates a substantial change in Saudi Arabia's attitude towards its heritage.

Chapter 3: Heritage as the new propaganda

This section describes the rationale and context for these new heritage projects by introducing Ibn Salman's story and discussing Vision 2030. The heritage projects currently underway are meant to draw the world's attention to Saudi Arabia, which will in turn spark both religious and cultural tourism. While Saudi Arabia continues to open up to the rest of the globe, it appears to be competing with other Gulf countries such as Dubai. In this regard, the Saudi government changed certain legislation that previously restricted the ability of tourists to enter Saudi Arabia. By issuing tourist visas for the first time ever in 2019, the kingdom shows its desire to attract non-pilgrim tourists to boost its economy. In addition to ads, they asked bloggers and vloggers with a lot of followers to talk about these heritage sites on Instagram, Facebook, and other social networking sites.

Mohammad Ibn Salman

After King Abdullah died in 2015, Ibn Salman ascended to the throne. According to King Abdullah's succession plan, his younger brother, Deputy Crown Prince Muqrin (b. 1945), was appointed as the new crown prince.¹³⁴ The new king, however, changed the succession plan by dismissing Crown Prince Muqrin and placing his nephew, Deputy Crown Prince Muhammad Ibn Nayif, as the Crown Prince.¹³⁵ This allowed his son to become the deputy crown prince. However, the crown prince, Muhammad Ibn Nayif, was excluded from key roles in the kingdom, while the Deputy Crown Prince Ibn Salman, gained authority over the kingdom's most important ministries, including deputy prime minister, minister of defence, chief of the royal court, and chair of the Council of Economic Development Affairs.¹³⁶ Ibn Nayif was basically left with the title of crown prince, which he also lost in 2017 when Ibn Salman became the crown prince.¹³⁷

Ibn Salman is known for his efforts to modernize Saudi Arabia. In 2016, he declared that women in Saudi Arabia would be allowed to drive. This was a major step forward for women's rights in Saudi Arabia. He has also announced that Saudi Arabia will allow women to attend sports events and concerts. On top of this, the religious power in the kingdom was centralised under the authority of Ibn Salman. Wahhābi ulama (religious scholars) in Saudi

¹³⁴ F. Gregory Gause et al., *Salman's Legacy: The Dilemmas of a New Era in Saudi Arabia*, ed. Madawi Al-Rasheed, Paperback edition (International Conference, London: Hurst & Company, 2020), 45.

¹³⁵ Gause et al., 14.

¹³⁶ Rosie Bsheer, "How Mohammed Bin Salman Has Transformed Saudi Arabia."

¹³⁷ Gause et al., *Salman's Legacy*, 46.

Arabia have lost considerable control over religious activities, and it is apparent that religion no longer wields power in the government. Despite its impact in some areas of society, Wahhābism has failed to maintain political supremacy. This became clear when Imam Sudais spoke in 2018 from the platform of the Grand Mosque and suggested that the crown prince was the *mujaddid* sent by God to bring the Islamic faith back to life in our time.¹³⁸ These events show that Ibn Salman is attempting to consolidate control and neutralize opposing centers to his reign.

In short, Ibn Salman tries to move the country toward a more secular atmosphere by encouraging patriotic and tendencies and positioning himself at the very center. Ibn Salman has subsequently altered his father's national political discourse. Despite the fact that his father remained in power, it is clear that today, Ibn Salman is the ruler of the kingdom.¹³⁹

Vision 2030

Ibn Salman has been the driving force behind Vision 2030, a plan to reduce the Kingdom's dependency on oil. In a 2017 interview with the Atlantic, he said that the Saudi economy can not survive if it continues to rely on oil.¹⁴⁰ In 2020, Saudi Arabia announced that it would invest \$810 billion in the tourism sector over the next ten years.¹⁴¹ The kingdom's tourism sector is firmly positioned in the 2030 agenda and forms a key component in diversifying and increasing its revenues in the kingdom. They want to achieve this by attracting more international tourists, retaining more Saudis on holiday at home and accompanying more pilgrims for the Umrah and the Hajj. Regarding international tourist, the Saudi government is heavily investing in pre-Islamic heritage sites. One way to do this is through inscription on the UNESCO World Heritage List. In addition, since 2015, the Saudi government has submitted ten other historic sites to UNESCO. This is currently on the tentative list but shows that the government is trying to attract more attention at the global level to attract tourists. Another way of attracting these sites is through the ad campaigns that they launched with famous bloggers and vloggers to market these world heritage sites. Regarding its own citizens, the government is using its

¹³⁸ Khaled M. Abou El Fadl, "Opinion | Saudi Arabia Is Misusing Mecca," *The New York Times*, November 12, 2018, sec. Opinion, <http://www.nytimes.com/2018/11/12/opinion/saudi-arabia-mbs-grandmosque-mecca-politics.html>.

¹³⁹ Ben Hubbard, "MBS: The Rise of a Saudi Prince," *The New York Times*, March 21, 2020, sec. World, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/03/21/world/middleeast/mohammed-bin-salman-saudi-arabia.html>.

¹⁴⁰ "Saudi Prince Unveils Sweeping Plans to End 'addiction' to Oil," *Reuters*, April 25, 2016, sec. Business News, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-saudi-economy-idUSKCN0XM1CD>.

¹⁴¹ Abigail Ng, "This Is 'absolutely the Right Time' to Invest in Tourism Projects, Saudi Minister Says," CNBC, October 8, 2020, <https://www.cnbc.com/2020/10/08/absolutely-the-right-time-to-invest-in-tourism-saudi-minister.html>.

historical sites to alter its history. The historical site of Ad-Diriyyah is an important example in which the national memory of being a Saudi is triggered. Lastly, the government is expanding the two great mosques in Mecca and Medina to accommodate more pilgrims. However, over the years, the Saudi government destroyed many Islamic sites and argued for the necessity of the expansion due to the increasing number of pilgrims to the city. It is up for debate whether the destruction of these sites is linked to the Wahhābiyya motivation. Especially since the Wahhābi clergy has been overwhelmingly silenced since Ibn Salman tried to “crush extremists” and bring back “moderate Islam” to the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia.¹⁴²

These developments show that the government is still trying to move away from religion and toward a more open form of secular nationalism that the kingdom is encouraging.¹⁴³ In short, since the emergence of the Wahhābiyya movement in Saudi Arabia resulted in the destruction of many religious cultural heritage sites. Today, the Saudi authorities are trying to preserve cultural heritage sites. Recent developments demonstrate that both crown prince Ibn Salman and King Salman are committed to raising public awareness of Saudi heritage. His time in Riyadh laid the groundwork for Saudi Arabia's change regarding heritage. The religious ulema, who until 2010 condemned these preservation efforts, have since changed their tune. In addition, the government body in charge of heritage has explicitly emphasised on its website the significance of maintaining cultural sites tied to the time of the prophet Mohammad himself. As an example, the Saudi government provides tour buses to historically significant sites during Umrah and Hajj. Before King Salman took the throne, this approach to Islam's heritage was unthinkable.

The prevailing view produced by this source, as well as the other inscribed locations, is that Saudi Arabia is open to secular inclinations. This is reflected in the kingdoms' efforts to join the international political system by working with Western organisations such as UNESCO to have specific heritage sites declared as world heritage. This change is a result of how Saudi Arabia's cultural norms are changing, and it shows how the identification process works, which is important to the discussion of cultural identity.¹⁴⁴ This has been reflected in sidelining the focus on Muhammad ibn ‘Abd al-Wahhāb and the Wahhābi movement. Next, the Kingdom's efforts to join the international political system. The Kingdom has also been working to improve its tourism industry, with the goal of getting more people to visit. This changing social

¹⁴² “Opinion | Saudi Arabia’s Crown Prince Wants to ‘Crush Extremists,’ But He’s Punishing the Wrong People.”

¹⁴³ Fadl, “Opinion | Saudi Arabia Is Misusing Mecca.”

¹⁴⁴ Hall, “Introduction.” 2-3.

context is what creates new identities and changes the ones that already exist.¹⁴⁵ However, in the process of pushing this change, certain narratives are being left out.

Modern Changes

Saudi Arabia targets cultural tourists with a massive investment program. Thanks to UNESCO's new world heritage registry and national investments, Saudi Arabia hopes to become a cultural tourism destination. The expansion of the country's tourist and cultural sectors, which have already achieved great progress, is one of the commercial and investment objectives commonly referenced in the Vision 2030 statement. The creation of the tourist visa was a significant step in the direction of this aim.

eVisa

In 2019, Saudi Arabia made the announcement that it will for the first time ever make tourist visas available to non-religious tourists.¹⁴⁶ Using the eVisa, the Saudi government hopes to speed up the visa application process and open the nation to foreign visitors. This eVisa is a multi-trip visa, and tourists can visit Saudi Arabia more than one trip.¹⁴⁷

Saudi Arabia's landscape, as depicted in Chapter 1, is one of the most intriguing parts of visiting the country. This is a previously undiscovered component of the cultural heritage of Saudi Arabia. However, the current reason of this cultural and touristic transformation is open to debate. Obviously, Ibn Salman has a new vision for the future. Future economic diversification is emphasized as a necessity for the kingdom. This goal is pursued by encouraging tourists to visit the kingdom's historical sites. Since 2019, Saudi Arabia has made its eVisa program available to international travelers. Using the eVisa, Muslim pilgrims can conduct Umrah and stay in Saudi Arabia for up to 90 days. The same visa can be used to do the pilgrimage and travel throughout Saudi Arabia. It is questionable whether this tendency will result in pilgrims visiting historic sites. Aside from Muslims, most people across the world were unable to visit Saudi Arabia unless they had a business visa or were migrant laborers until 2019. Prior to this change, individuals with umrah and hajj visas could only go to Jeddah, Medina, and Mecca unless they had special permission from the Saudi government. Thus, for the first time, both Muslims and non-Muslims can obtain a visa and visit to the country.

¹⁴⁵ Richard Jenkins, *Social Identity* (London; New York: Routledge, 2004), <http://www.myilibrary.com?id=7762>, 8.

¹⁴⁶ "Saudi Arabia to Open Itself up to Foreign Tourists for First Time | Saudi Arabia | The Guardian."

¹⁴⁷ "Tourist EVisa for Saudi Arabia | Online Visa for Saudi Arabia," accessed May 15, 2022, <https://www.onlinevisa.com/saudi-arabia-visa/>.

Muslims who have completed their pilgrimage can utilize the e-visa to visit other cities in Saudi Arabia, including Riyadh, Jeddah, and Damman.

Nevertheless, the existing eVisa system has shortcomings. It is predominantly available to European, North American, Chinese, and a few Asian countries. It seems that Saudi Arabia has included nations that contribute significantly to global tourism earnings and has largely ignored poor nations and most Muslim nations. It implies that Saudi Arabia targets tourists from countries with high economic standards. The eVisa is presented in a manner that reflects the segregation of people. In this sense, the contrast resembles an 'othering' distinction. This highly political and economic discourse gives the impression that the Saudi administration is attempting to identify itself more closely with the West. It seeks to legitimize certain policies while excluding others.

Advertisements

The Saudi Arabian tourism body promoted and launched the e-visa service via Facebook and Instagram, reaching approximately 26 million potential visitors with innovative video advertising. In addition, to promote tourist visas, the tourism organization and the Gateway KSA program sent a select group of key individuals on supervised trips.¹⁴⁸ However, the ads for the e-visa campaign and promotional support from Western personalities were viewed as controversial and drew negative criticism. The state also released a video of two ladies wearing niqabs, one riding a horse and the other driving a Ferrari. It looked to demonstrate something extraordinary regarding liberty. Today, women who advocated for the right of women to drive are still prosecuted and imprisoned. A second observation is that this advertising depicts two ladies traveling without a male companion. It appears that these advertising operations are not aimed towards its own citizens or even fellow Muslims, but rather at Westerners. These ads are an attempt to play on the anxieties that most Westerners hold about Saudi Arabia. However, even now, it would be difficult to find women across the kingdom who matched those in the advertisement. These changes are a significant step forward for Saudi Arabia in its efforts to modernize and attract global tourism.

¹⁴⁸ Taylor Lorenz, "Influencers Face Criticism for Saudi Arabia Travel #Ads," *The New York Times*, October 3, 2019, sec. Style, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/10/03/style/saudi-arabia-travel-influencers.html>.

Legislation

In 2016, the Saudi government issued a royal order prohibiting the Saudi Commission for the Promotion of Virtue and Prevention of Vice (CPVPV), popularly known as the religious police, from functioning in public areas. The religious police were solely in charge of monitoring offenses and administering fines.¹⁴⁹ In 2018, Saudi women were officially able to hit the road.¹⁵⁰ In the same year, Crown Prince Ibn Salman announced that women do not need to wear a headcover or abaya.¹⁵¹ Nonetheless, they are expected to dress modestly. Though there is no specific legal code mandating what women should wear, Sharia-compliant dress codes have typically been enforced by the religious police and judges. As a result, it is odd that they are advertising something that is not technically prohibited. It all came down to who was carrying it out in the social environment, which used to be the religious police in public and still is the judge. Therefore, an important sidenote is that changing legislation has never been complied with. In Saudi Arabia, it's always been the interpretations or the individuals enforcing the law that have been strict. The decision is now entirely up to the individual woman.

As was noted earlier, Saudi Arabia took a historic step in 2019 by opening its doors to tourists and visitors. In the same year, the Saudi government announced the introduction of 19 charges related to "public decency," such as immodest attire and public displays of affection for visitors and tourists. The penalty ranges from 50 to 6,000 riyals (\$13 to \$1,600).¹⁵² The government also stated that physical barriers between genders in public locations, such as restaurants and cafes, as well as malls, would be prohibited. While the new 19 public decency charges provide guidance for tourists on how to behave in Saudi Arabia, Saudi women are exempt. These steps are likely to divide Western tourists with a tourist visa from Muslims and locals, which may cause some discomfort. The Saudi authorities will face difficulties in defining the two.

Basically, since Crown Prince Salman took over as the real leader of the kingdom, several laws, particularly concerning women, have changed in recent years. Some suggest that it is likely to allow additional liberties in the future. After all, Saudi Arabia used to be seen as one of the most rigid countries in the Middle East, and this appears to be changing. However, Saudi women continue to endure numerous restrictions in Saudi Arabia. For example, consider

¹⁴⁹ Stephen Kalin, "Saudi Arabia Implements Public Decency Code as It Opens to Tourists," *Reuters*, September 28, 2019, sec. Emerging Markets, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-saudi-tourism-idUSKBN1WD08B>.

¹⁵⁰ "Saudi Arabia's Ban on Women Driving Officially Ends," *BBC News*, June 24, 2018, sec. Middle East, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-44576795>.

¹⁵¹ "Saudi Crown Prince Says Abaya Not Necessary," accessed May 19, 2022, <https://gulfnews.com/world/gulf/saudi/saudi-crown-prince-says-abaya-not-necessary-1.2190993>.

¹⁵² Stephen Kalin, "Saudi Arabia Implements Public Decency Code as It Opens to Tourists."

the latest changes surrounding women who are now permitted to drive. Despite these beneficial advances and efforts to portray Saudi women as more liberated, some Saudi women remain imprisoned, despite their support for all female drivers. While these women in Saudi Arabia are still imprisoned, they are demonstrating to the rest of the world that it is theoretically possible to drive a car or ride a horse without a male chaperon.

Saudi Arabia attempts to appear as moderate as possible in order to be accepted by the West and attract tourists to visit the kingdom. On the one hand, the kingdom is aggressively investing in its cultural preservation projects; on the other hand, it is altering its laws to make them more accommodating to tourists and foreigners. Saudi Arabia has been criticized for its human rights record and for its treatment of women, religious minorities, and political dissidents. The kingdom has also been criticized for the way it treats its own citizens, especially those of the Shia minority. However, the kingdom has also been praised for its efforts to preserve the cultural heritage of its people and for its support of the arts, including the arts of dance, music, and theatre. Saudi Arabia's King Abdullah ibn Abdulaziz Al Saud has been described as a "pioneer of modernity" and a "reformer" who has been credited with modernizing the country. This is an indicator of a shift in discourse that is primarily political and, to a lesser extent, economic, as it attempts to achieve the Vision 2030-proposed economic diversification.

Under Vision 2030, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia appears to have modified a few societal standards, in particular the changes to the legislation. However, legislative changes do not necessitate a shift in cultural norms. Even though Saudi citizens are permitted to engage in a particular activity, this does not imply that they will do so. This does not demonstrate that society is prepared. It will take time for Saudi Arabia to undergo this cultural shift. The following chapter will elaborate on the response to these changes, notably the Vision 2030 cultural preservation initiatives.

Chapter 4: Response to the changing cultural preservation programs

As part of the kingdom's objective to diversify its economy, investing in tourism and thereby cultural preservation programs was a main tenet. The kingdom's changing cultural sphere drew a lot of attention in the international media. It provided headlines with both positive and negative slants on recent developments concerning this development. This was a top-down decision by the government representatives of the Al-Saud family. It is important to consider how the world but also the nation reacted and responded to these initiatives. As aforementioned, on the one hand, the religious class in the kingdom was side-lined over the years. What is their take today or was it over the years? On the other hand, how did the Saudi people respond to this? This chapter will assess and contrast how the Saudi public, media, statesmen, and international audience reacted to these changes. In short, this section will demonstrate the responses to such changes nationally and internationally.

Domestic response

In 2019, a study was carried out on the motivations and attitudes toward domestic tourism in Saudi Arabia. The data was collected in the past 5 years. Due to a lack of good tourist sites and services (such as entertainment venues), tourism information, and tourism organization services, Saudis opt to take their holidays within the kingdom.¹⁵³ The Saudi Kingdom has put a lot of money into all of these services over the years to uplift its domestic tourism, and it looks like they are now starting to work.

According to the numbers, despite COVID-19, domestic tourism surged in the Kingdom. In 2020, the Saudi Minister of Tourism, Ahmed Al-Khateeb, claimed that despite a projected shrinking of the tourism sector, a sudden surge in domestic travel occurred that was 50 percent more than officials projected.¹⁵⁴ The first impression is that these investments in the tourism sector are working out for the kingdom. An important example is that in 2021, the predictions for Al-Ula were to have 95.000 and ended up with 146.000.¹⁵⁵ This shows that a large number of visitors are Saudi citizens that show interest in their heritage site. There is also

¹⁵³ Mourad Mansour and Alhassan G Mumuni, "Motivations and Attitudes toward Domestic Tourism in Saudi Arabia," *European Journal of Tourism, Hospitality and Recreation* 9, no. 1 (May 1, 2019): 27–37, <https://doi.org/10.2478/ejthr-2019-0004>.

¹⁵⁴ "Saudi Domestic Tourism Bucks Trend amid Global Travel Slump," Arab News, December 21, 2020, <https://arab.news/wzf7t>.

¹⁵⁵ "AlUla Expands with Luxury Accommodation as Demand Spikes," Arab News, March 28, 2022, <https://arab.news/za62r>.

research that supports this development. Almosafer, the leading travel agency in Saudi Arabia and also the Middle East, conducted two surveys with 3000 respondents to measure the impact of COVID-19. The first survey was held in 2020 and claimed that 35% were keen on discovering their own country through domestic leisure trips. This was related to the promoting of the vast and diverse beauty of the kingdom, which triggered this development. Furthermore, Makkah, Medina, and Jeddah were identified as top domestic destinations, which is very much related to religious tourism in terms of travel purpose. Furthermore, other metropolitan cities amongst the top choices were Al-Riyadh, where also ad-Dir'iyah is located. Next to these locations, the survey also showed emerging destinations such as Al-Ula. The second survey showed that more than half the respondents (65%) have travelled domestically over the past year and will continue to do so in 2021 after the reopening of the borders.¹⁵⁶ According to Almosafer, this strengthened its ongoing efforts to expand and diversify its domestic product offering in line with the Kingdom's agenda to increase the contribution of the tourism sector to the national economy. This becomes evident by the locations of Al-Riyadh, Mekkah, Jeddah, and Al-Ula, which are also the sites where the Saudi kingdom is heavily investing its money to develop tourism both domestically and internationally. Another piece of research that confirms this picture is research that was carried out to understand the sentiment that Saudi tourists have regarding the new tourism campaigns in KSA by extracting and analysing data from Twitter. The research illustrates a high percentage of positivity and neutrality and a low percentage of negativity.¹⁵⁷

This also becomes evident through the active participation in preserving heritage sites. Another interesting case is related to the Saudi village of Rijal Alma, in which the residents played an important role in preserving their village. The residents are known for their drive to raise more awareness of their cultural heritage.¹⁵⁸ This is an important example that showcases the readiness and acceptance of preservation initiatives by the Saudi citizenry. Other examples are the participation rate for cultural festivals.

¹⁵⁶ “Saudi Travel 2021 - Saudi Travel Sentiments - Year into the Pandemic,” almosafer, accessed June 7, 2022, <https://www.almosafer.com/en/saudi-travel-sentiments-2021>.

¹⁵⁷ Faisal Mohammed Aldakhil, “Tourist Responses to Tourism Experiences in Saudi Arabia” (Master of Science Hospitality Management, Florida International University, 2020), <https://doi.org/10.25148/etd.FIDC009814>.

¹⁵⁸ “Saudi Village of Rijal Alma Prepares to Join UNESCO World Heritage List.”

Cultural festivals

In 2014, the Historic Jeddah Festival was established, attracting in just ten days some 750,000 people, mostly from Jeddah.¹⁵⁹ It was also a success in 2015. These stats and developments show that Saudi citizens are indeed interested in their culture and heritage and create and enact their socio-mnemonic experiences that allow them to commemorate their heritage together, to enforce or trigger a particular national phenome. The fact that most were also residents in Jeddah puts an emphasis on an emotional bond between Jeddah residents and their heritage. It also allows for the cultivation of a distinct Jeddah identity that is exclusive to the place to an extent. By attending these festivals and cultural heritage sites, the residents, to an extent, acknowledge the role of heritage in their identity. More interestingly, the kingdom also launches modern music festivals with famous Western artists. Last year, a total of 732,000 people attended Saudi Arabia's MDLBeast festival over four days, making it one of the largest music festivals in the world.¹⁶⁰ The fact that the kingdom is allowing music is a clear deviation from the Wahhābi doctrine. Saudi Arabia's Islamic institutions have undergone massive reform as the monarchy consolidates its vision for the country's future. These reforms are incremental and reversible, but together they represent a systematic restructuring of religion's role in Saudi politics and society.¹⁶¹

Ulama

It seems that Saudi clerics remain silent regarding concerts held within the kingdom. In 2016, the majority of the Council of Senior Scholars and Committee for the Promotion of Virtue and Prevention of Vice members accepted the Wahhābi doctrine, which prohibits singing with music and between men and women. The Royal Court appoints these religious members, who refrain from revealing their genuine beliefs to try and appease the court.¹⁶² On May 7, 2016, the government established the General Entertainment Authority by Royal Decree No. (A/133),

¹⁵⁹ Simone Ricca, "Urban Heritage in the Arabian Peninsula, the Experiences of Jeddah and Dubai," *Built Heritage* 2, no. 3 (September 2018): 108–22, <https://doi.org/10.1186/BF03545713>.

¹⁶⁰ "More than 700,000 Thousand People Attended Saudi Arabia's MDLBeast in 4 Days," *Al Arabiya English*, December 20, 2021, <https://english.alarabiya.net/life-style/2021/12/20/More-than-700-thousand-people-attended-Saudi-Arabia-s-MDL-BEAST-in-4-days>.

¹⁶¹ Yasmine Farouk Brown Nathan J., "Saudi Arabia's Religious Reforms Are Touching Nothing but Changing Everything - Islamic Institutions in Arab States: Mapping the Dynamics of Control, Co-Option, and Contention," *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, accessed January 1, 2022, <https://carnegieendowment.org/2021/06/07/saudi-arabia-s-religious-reforms-are-touching-nothing-but-changing-everything-pub-84650>.

¹⁶² "Saudi Clerics Keep Mum about Concerts in the Kingdom - Al-Monitor: The Pulse of the Middle East," accessed June 8, 2022, <https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2017/02/saudi-arabia-religious-gender-mixing-music-concerts.html>.

with the mission of regulating and developing the entertainment sector. Saudi Arabia will hold concerts and fashion exhibitions; open theatres; enable women to attend sporting events and drive cars; and make other rapid social changes.¹⁶³ As a response to these developments, Adel al-Kalbani, the former imam of Mecca's Grand Mosque, stated the official agency created to promote the Kingdom's entertainment agenda "violates human nature." However, he is not a member of the state-appointed Council of Senior Scholars, and therefore his opinion does not carry any weight.¹⁶⁴ According to activists on social media, it seems that scholars in Saudi Arabia no longer share or can convey their opinions and fatwas regarding the tremendous changes that have taken place in Saudi society, especially as they contradict what they believe in and what they deem to be violations of Islamic law and taboo. In a seemingly paradoxical move, establishment religious leaders endorsed the memorialization of secular history—which side-lined 'Abd al-Wahhāb's past. At the beginning of the 2010s, they started to praise memorial sites in Saudi media as great examples of modernization projects.¹⁶⁵

According to ADA planners, some religious scholars as well as the *mutawa'a* (religious police) regularly showed up at different cultural and historical sites, such as the National Museum and ad-Dir'iyah, while the sites were under construction and after completion. They harassed workers and accused them of being unbelievers and practicing religious innovation. Despite differences of opinion among religious scholars and enforcers, some Saudi Arabians used these as justifications to sabotage historical sites throughout the kingdom.¹⁶⁶ Regarding al-Ula, some clerics in the kingdom oppose visiting this site based on religious dogma. Other clerics debated this position, with some arguing that it should be accessible to the public. However, within the Saudi community, this location still has a negative reputation. According to local media, a local school was temporarily closed when students sighted jinn (spirit or demon).¹⁶⁷ This indicates that the Saudi community has negative connotations with this site, which may discourage domestic as well as foreign visitors.

¹⁶³ "أمام التغييرات بالبلاد.. علماء السعودية: 'اعمل نفسك ميت'" الخليج أونلاين", accessed April 27, 2022, <https://alkhaleejonline.net/>

¹⁶⁴ "Comics and Music Shows in Saudi Arabia Draw Rebuke from Clerics," *Reuters*, February 23, 2017, sec. World News, <https://www.reuters.com/article/uk-saudi-entertainment-comic-con-idUKKBN16228T>.

¹⁶⁵ 132

¹⁶⁶ 131

¹⁶⁷ "Saudi Antiquities Site, Long Seen as Haunted, Tries to Woo Visitors," *Reuters*, February 4, 2019, sec. Emerging Markets, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-saudi-tourism-alula-idUSKCN1PT1CK>.

International response

Saudi Tourism Authority CEO Fahd Hamidaddin told Reuters in an interview that Saudi Arabia's tourism sector increased over 130% in the first quarter of 2022 versus pre-pandemic levels.¹⁶⁸ In 2021, the Saudi ambassador to Britain praised the Kingdom for its efforts to modernize the country in many ways.¹⁶⁹ In particular, Ibn Salman's comments are in line with Vision 2030, in which he asserted that the kingdom will be "open to all religions" and eradicate "extremist thoughts".¹⁷⁰ But more importantly, the West actively participates in these cultural preservation programs and thus promotes these initiatives. Recently, the French Ambassador to Saudi Arabia, Ludovic Pouille, has shared his 18-month experience living in the Kingdom, in which he talked positively about the kingdom.¹⁷¹ On the other hand, the Western media criticized influencers for promoting their travel to Saudi Arabia, mainly for political and human rights reasons.¹⁷² But it ignores the fact that most of these efforts to protect the environment were led by the West.

An important feature of these new trends is that important functions are represented by Westerners, indicating the target audience for these sites. The Saudi Arabian Ministry of Tourism has appointed Gloria Guevera Manzo as Tourism Minister Ahmed Al Khateeb's Chief Special Advisor. She was previously the chief executive officer of the World Travel and Tourism Council (WTTC).¹⁷³ She will serve as a special advisor, foster international collaborations, develop human capital, and contribute to the implementation of Vision 2030's ambitious, large-scale tourism projects.¹⁷⁴ Over the past two decades, the Saudi kingdom has appointed notable Westerners to tourism-related positions. This is also a political ploy designed to attract more attention and approval inside the international political system.

eVisa application

¹⁶⁸ Yousef Saba, "Saudi Arabia Aims for 70 Million Tourism Visits This Year," *Reuters*, May 9, 2022, sec. Middle East, <https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/saudi-arabia-aims-70-million-tourism-visits-this-year-official-2022-05-09/>.

¹⁶⁹ "Saudi Envoy to UK Details Rapid Modernization under Crown Prince," *Arab News*, October 16, 2021, <https://arab.news/5a422>.

¹⁷⁰ "Saudi Crown Prince Promises 'Return to Moderate Islam,'" accessed June 5, 2022, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2017/10/25/saudi-crown-prince-promises-return-to-moderate-islam>.

¹⁷¹ "Italian Parliament Delegation Briefed on Saudi Reforms during Visit to Shoura Council HQ," *Arab News*, June 1, 2022, <https://arab.news/m8r24>.

¹⁷² Lorenz, "Influencers Face Criticism for Saudi Arabia Travel #Ads."

¹⁷³ "Former WTTC CEO Joins Saudi Arabia's Tourism Ministry," accessed June 6, 2022, http://www.tradearabia.com/news/TTN_382690.html.

¹⁷⁴ Ttr Weekly, "Saudi Arabia Appoints Special Advisor | TTR Weekly," accessed June 6, 2022, <https://www.ttrweekly.com/site/2021/05/saudi-arabia-appoints-special-advisor/>.

The Saudi Arabian Ministry of Tourism confirmed that more than 400,000 tourist visas were given out in the first six months of the country's new tourist visa system, which started in September 2019.¹⁷⁵ This is a vast number considering the negative publicity surrounding the Kashagoshi case and the reaction Salman and Saudi Arabia faced. Based on this number, one may claim that these preservation measures, together with new legislation, were successful. These data suggest that these activities, in combination with the adoption of new legislation, had a good effect on tourist arrivals. However, these statistics are rough, and it remains unclear if these tourist permits were utilized to visit certain historical sites. Moreover, it is quite likely that most of these visa applications were submitted by Muslims. Due to the COVID-19, it is difficult to assert that Saudi Arabia is an alluring worldwide hotspot. The partnership with Western organizations and governments is a good trend and a sign that Saudi Arabia might become a global tourism destination soon. In general, though, there is an increase. This is closely associated with the expanding capacity of Makkah and Medina.

Religious tourism

RAs Maha is the director of the Saudi Heritage Preservation Society (SHPS), a non-governmental organization (NGO) dedicated to preserving Saudi Arabia's tangible and intangible heritage. She argues, surprisingly, that the Saudis approve of the destruction of Mecca's cultural heritage in order to accommodate more pilgrims. She emphasized that identity derived from anything other than religion, even a mud hut, is not "identification." Your identity consists exclusively of your religion. Today, this view of identity diverges significantly from the Wahhābi perception of identity, which was centered solely on the concept of tawhid. Today, as pointed out by Maha, identity is more closely tied to culture, and one could say that it has become secularized because the government owns and influences these cultural developments without religious reference.¹⁷⁶

¹⁷⁵ "Saudi Arabia Issued More than 400,000 Tourist Visas in Six Months," Arab News, December 14, 2020, <https://arab.news/8khgy>.

¹⁷⁶ Heather Radke and Maha Al-Senan, "Fusion Cuisine and Bedouin Handcraft: The Transformative Power of Heritage Preservation in Saudi Arabia," *The Public Historian* 37, no. 2 (May 1, 2015): 89–96, <https://doi.org/10.1525/tph.2015.37.2.89>.

Conclusion

Organizations such as the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) are a Western creation and depiction of what heritage should be. In recent years, it appears Saudi Arabia has attempted to imitate modern global heritage culture based on the earlier Western concepts and agenda settings. This is noticeable when we examine tourist policies through the lens of Vision 2030. In addition, the Saudi government is implementing reforms for centralized objectives with the purpose of greater international economic and financial governance. Despite its efforts to coexist with Western cultural norms and international policies, its heritage policies must also be studied from its own perspective. In this way, Saudi Arabia under Ibn Salman's leadership may be exemplary in terms of its own culture without any foreign media suspicion. This is not to suggest that Ibn Salman's rule was flawless, but rather that it was a stride forward for the nation.

Saudi Arabia is seeking to sell itself as a major worldwide and domestic tourist destination through its heritage policy. Although Saudi Arabia is also attempting to increase domestic tourism, international tourists are the primary target market. To attract more international tourists, the kingdom promoted UNESCO historic sites through many initiatives and western influencers. The major objective of any current advertisement for Saudi Arabia as a vacation destination is to raise awareness, not to get people to immediately arrange a trip there. It is still a fairly new phenomenon, and the most recent measures taken by the kingdom have been impeded by COVID. It is debatable if its efforts to expose the kingdom to the world would result in a world-renowned tourist destination comparable to Dubai. While the kingdom intends to boost its tourism industry, it has access to financial resources. Along with hotels and other accommodations, the kingdom is currently constructing a substantial amount of infrastructure in collaboration with Western corporations. In comparison to other more popular or well-established tourist locations in the region, Saudi Arabia has a significant amount of ground to cover. Especially in regards to a nation's human rights record. In fact, the kingdom attempts to adhere to Western human rights ideals through partnering with Western organizations that set the standard. This again demonstrates that the West is the global hegemon in Saudi Arabia's view of the international system. The government has been able to assert itself as a contemporary and progressive nation that continues to value its rich heritage through the use of historic places. This demonstrates that, despite their desire to modernize their country, the Saudis are unwilling to sacrifice their heritage or reputation as custodians of Islam's two holiest cities.

Based on the Quran and Mohammad himself, certain sites, such as Madain Saleh, have negative intertextuality among Saudis. Even though this is not historically accurate or true, the current high value of the object departs from its religious foundations. Similarly, it reveals that religious leaders have little to say in the country. After all, it is improbable that Ibn Bāz, one of the most prominent academics within and beyond the Wahhābi community, would have approved of this development. During his reign, religious clerics exercised considerable political influence in the country. Today, this is obviously not the case. Commemorating landmarks related to the life of the Prophet Mohammed has been described as an effort to encourage religious tourism and revitalize the kingdom's tourism economy.

Over the past two decades, the organizations responsible for tourism and heritage have merged into a single centralized institution, a process that is both intriguing and crucial in regard to the Al-Saud family's consolidation of power under the leadership of Ibn Salman. These innovations influenced Saudi cultural standards and highlighted the identification process, which is crucial to the cultural identity discourse. This is demonstrated by the marginalization of 'Abd al-Wahhāb and the Wahhābi movement. Consequently, the Kingdom's efforts to integrate into the international political system and modernize itself through legislation that suits foreigners represent a clear departure from its Wahhābi roots. Through these historical preservation projects, the Saudi government acts as a focalizer, granting its audience access to its own perspective on identity and subjectivity. This can be seen as an attempt to identify with the past and exert control over the future responsibilities of history. In addition, this nomination of heritage sites to UNESCO provides a unique insight into how the Saudi government promotes a style of cultural heritage preservation that incorporates a historical narrative that helps to strengthen a more secular Saudi subject position. This emphasizes the political rhetoric underpinning the Saudi government's heritage policies.

These historical preservation activities illustrate that the Vision 2030 approach seeks to construct a national identity based on the nation's "modern" and "traditional" histories by providing an environment in which both locals and foreigners can appreciate them. This is a departure from how the Wahhābi ideology saw and addressed inheritance. Regarding legacy, Saudi Arabia is adopting a more progressive stance and utilizing it to forge ties with the rest of the world. Vision 2030 aspires to alter the discourse on Saudi Arabia from one that is exclusive to Saudis who share the Islamic faith to one that is more inclusive by focusing on the development of the nation's identity and a visitor experience centred on cultural heritage.

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Appendix I: The Criteria for Selection, UNESCO

Selection criteria

- i.** to represent a masterpiece of human creative genius.
- ii.** to exhibit an important interchange of human values, over a span of time or within a cultural area of the world, on developments in architecture or technology, monumental arts, town-planning, or landscape design.
- iii.** to bear a unique or at least exceptional testimony to a cultural tradition or to a civilization which is living, or which has disappeared.
- iv.** to be an outstanding example of a type of building, architectural or technological ensemble or landscape which illustrates (a) significant stage(s) in human history.
- v.** to be an outstanding example of a traditional human settlement, land-use, or sea-use which is representative of a culture (or cultures), or human interaction with the environment especially when it has become vulnerable under the impact of irreversible change.
- vi.** to be directly or tangibly associated with events or living traditions, with ideas, or with beliefs, with artistic and literary works of outstanding universal significance. (The Committee considers that this criterion should preferably be used in conjunction with other criteria).
- vii.** to contain superlative natural phenomena or areas of exceptional natural beauty and aesthetic importance.
- viii.** to be outstanding examples representing major stages of earth's history, including the record of life, significant on-going geological processes in the development of landforms, or significant geomorphic or physiographic features.
- ix.** to be outstanding examples representing significant on-going ecological and biological processes in the evolution and development of terrestrial, fresh water, coastal and marine ecosystems and communities of plants and animals.
- x.** to contain the most important and significant natural habitats for in-situ conservation of biological diversity, including those containing threatened species of outstanding universal value from the point of view of science or conservation.¹⁷⁷

¹⁷⁷ Centre, "The Criteria for Selection."

