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Exploring the Perspectives of the Saudi State's Destruction of Holy Sites: Justifications and Motivations

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Abstract

This thesis explores Saudi Arabia's perspective on the destruction of heritage sites before and after Saudi Arabia became a state, seeking answers to these questions: why does Saudi Arabia commit these acts in the name of Islam? How much influence does Wahhabism have on Saudi actions? How does the country justify these actions even while non-Wahhabi scholars oppose these acts?

Within the context of Islam, specifically Wahhabism, destruction of heritage sites occurred during the formation of the first Saudi state. But as time passed, the Wahhabi *ulama* (religious scholars) lost considerable power over religious affairs in Saudi Arabia, and it is apparent that religion is no longer at the helm of the Saudi society. Saudi Arabia claims that the destruction of heritage sites protects religious pilgrims from weak structures in danger of falling, and protects adherents whose faith is weak from the danger of committing *shirk* (associating others with God—a form of unbelief). I contend that in reality such destruction has no religious basis but rather reflects what suits the Saudi state, which in this case is financial gain. The Saudi state's aim is to make way for modernization so it can increase the government's financial resources which will enable investments in hotels and shopping malls. At the same time, the state maintains its religious hegemony by pacifying the Wahhabi *ulama*, giving them vague authority in matters of religion, such as the destruction of mosques in Kosovo.

If the motivation for such destruction were solely religious, many heritage sites in Saudi Arabia would not exist today. These sites existed for centuries, maintained by

previous Muslim rulers, and the government is enjoined to preserve them by both the Quran and the *Sunnah*, according to non-Wahhabi *ulama*. As such, although there is a need to accommodate an increasing number of pilgrims, there are several ways the state could safeguard not only the pilgrims but the historically relevant heritage sites, while still moving forward toward a modernized Saudi state.

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Glossary of Arabic Terms

al wala wal bara	Loyalty and disavowal
amir	Ruler
baqi	the oldest graveyard in Medina holding graves of Prophet Muhammad's family
bida	innovation in religious matters
dawah	an invitation to join Islam
fatwa	a jurist's legal or religious opinion
Fiqh	Islamic jurisprudence
fitnah	Dissent; chaos
hadith	Sayings or actions of the prophet Muhammad
haram	Sacred
ikhwan	Brothers
jahiliyya	A period of ignorance
jihad	holy war
Kufr	unbelief
masjid	mosque
muezzin	the person who calls out prayers
mufti	A jurist appointed by the state and serving on advisory councils

mujtahidin	Those who formulate independent judgments
Quran	the holy text, also known as the Koran
salah	Prayer
sira	the Prophet's life and events
sharia	Islamic legal codes and rules
shirk	a form of unbelief, associating other beings with God
Sunnah	the Prophetic tradition
taswir	picture, image, painting, drawing, sculpture, statue
tawhid	the oneness of God
ulama	religious scholars
zakat	an Islamic tax

Chapter I

Introduction

During the early Islamic conquests of the seventh century, Caliph Umar's (634-644) peace treaty with Jerusalem stated:

> This is the assurance of safety which the servant of God, Umar, the Commander of the Faithful, has granted to the people of Jerusalem. He has given them an assurance of safety for themselves, for their property, their churches, their crosses, the sick and the health of the city, and for all the rituals that belong to their religion. Their churches will not be inhabited [by Muslims] and will not be destroyed. Neither they, nor the land on which they stand, nor their crosses, nor their property will be damaged. They will not be forcibly converted. (Hamblin, 2001)

In Muslim culture, the prohibition against destroying religious sites, even those of enemies, has ancient roots. The terms of the seventh century peace treaty referenced above suggest that Umar ibn Al-Khattab, the second Sunni caliph and a senior companion of Prophet Muhammad, not only "oversaw major expansion of the Islamic empire, and transmitted numerous hadith" (sayings or actions of the Prophet Muhammad) but was also "considered a particularly authoritative source" on Islamic law (Umar ibn, n.d.). Umar believed that religious sites should be preserved, and that people of other religions should not be forced to convert to Islam. If Prophet Muhammad's own trusted companion and the second caliph in Islam refused to destroy non-Muslim places of worship, then a crucial contradiction arises as the world watches the destruction of Islamic cultural heritage being perpetrated in the name of Islam today.

This raises the question: is the destruction of historic Islamic sites permitted or even condoned within the context of Islam? According to those who carry out such destruction, the answer lies within the ultra-conservative branch of Islamic thought known as Wahhabism, an eighteenth-century revival and reform movement begun by Islamic religious and legal scholar Muhammad Ibn Abd al Wahhab. He declared that preserving such Islamic heritage sites leads to s*hirk* (associating other beings with God), which occurs when a person venerates such sites in addition to venerating God. It is viewed as a type of idolatry, and defies a core Islamic tenet of *tawhid* (there is one God, and He has no partners associated with Him) (*Shirk*, n.d.). *Shirk* is considered the ultimate sin one can commit in Islam.

To explore this question, this thesis focuses on the destruction of heritage sites such as mosques, grave sites, and residences of principal figures associated with early Islamic history. The destruction of these sites is studied, with a specific focus on the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia before and after it became a state. My decision to focus on Saudi Arabia arises from the fact that it is the country where both Islam and Wahhabism initially emerged and still coexist today. Additionally, follow up questions such as, has Wahhabi doctrine influenced the Saudi state during its many iterations to allow such destruction, how does the Saudi government justify its actions, and whether there are other Muslim scholars who oppose these acts of destruction will assist in answering the main question.

There are some limitations to the scope of this study. First, my focus is on Islamic heritage sites, in particular sites in and around the two holy cities of Mecca and Medina, which are connected to key figures in Islam such as Prophet Muhammad and his family.

Second, the acts of destruction considered are limited to those undertaken by Saudi Arabia before and after it became a state. Third, since most of the statements made by the Saudi government are in Arabic, some information may not be accessible, such as tweets by individuals or newspaper articles in the native language. Where available, translated documents will be used to determine intent and justification.

This thesis is organized into an introduction, four main chapters, and a conclusion. Chapters II and III provide the historical and ideological backgrounds of Saudi Arabia and Wahhabism. Chapter II covers the period leading up to the formation of the current Saudi state and the involvement of the Wahhabi movement in that formation. Chapter III addresses the current Saudi administration and the current status of Wahhabi power. These two chapters highlight the justifications offered by Saudi Arabia for the destruction of heritage sites in the context of religion, both before and after Saudi Arabia became a state. Chapter IV presents the counter-argument by Muslim scholars who, like Caliph Umar, do not believe such destruction should occur. Chapter V analyzes the justifications presented by Saudi Arabia and the motivations behind the destruction.

Chapter II

A Brief History of the Wahhabi Movement and Saudi Arabia

Before investigating the destruction of mosques, graves, and other sacred locations associated with Prophet Muhammad, it is important to consider the historical background that set the stage for the creation of the Saudi-Wahhabi ideology, which in turn led to the approval of such destruction.

Saudi-Wahhabi Ideology

Muhammad ibn Saud, a member of the Al Saud family, ruled interior portions of Arabia during the eighteenth century. The Al Saud family belonged to a landholding merchant class in Najd, a sedentary group that founded the small town of al Diriyah, whose population was made up of farmers, merchants, artisans, and lesser known *ulama* (religious scholars). According to social anthropologist Madawi Al Rasheed (2002), the Ottoman Empire tried to expand its authority into Najd and al Diriyah, but it did not succeed. Consequently, the absence of Ottoman rule meant that towns like al Diriyah were ruled by tribal confederations. Muhammad ibn Saud's authority as ruler was acknowledged by the residents due to a combination of factors: his mediation skills, his residence in the oasis, his ability to defend the colony against raids by other tribes, and his ownership of cultivated land and wells in and around the settlement (Al Rasheed, 2002, p. 15). However, the Al Sauds' power was limited to the settlement, as was

common in Arabia at that time, because their authority lacked two things: an "identifiable tribal origin" and a "surplus of wealth" (Al Rasheed, 2002, p. 16).

The Al Saud family fortunes changed once they embraced the Wahhabi movement associated with the reformer Muhammad ibn Abd al Wahhab (Al Rasheed, 2002, p. 16). Abd al Wahhab belonged to a Najdi family that produced several generations of religious scholars who followed the Hanbali school of Islamic jurisprudence, which was also known for its austere interpretation of Islam. Continuing in the path of his ancestors, Abd al Wahhab pursued his religious education by travelling to Mecca, Medina, Basra, and beyond before coming back to Najd where his father was a religious judge (Al Rasheed, 2002, p. 16; Menoret, 2005, p. 44; Commins, 2006, pp. 1-2; Bin Ali, 2016, p. 131).

Although Abd al Wahhab pursued religious education like his father, it appears that his father strongly disagreed with him on the issue of innovations in rituals that could amount to idolatry. Consequently, Abd al Wahhab remained quiet about his mission until after his father's death in 1740. Thereafter, however, he aggressively began to prohibit people from relying on anyone but God because he believed he was living in the time of *jahiliyya* (periods of ignorance) that had been prophesied by Prophet Muhammad back in the seventh century. During *jahiliyya* Prophet Muhammad taught the significance of worshiping one God. This concept was alien to local Arabs, but over time Prophet Muhammad gained many followers, but he warned that a time would come when Islam would again be as foreign to humankind as it had been during the seventh century (Commins, 2006, pp. 2-3). Abd al Wahhab believed Islam had become foreign to the Arabian community and had fallen back into *jahiliyya* during his life. To pull the

community out of *jahiliyya*, Abd al Wahhab preached the importance of *tawhid* (the oneness of God), and he censured all forms of innovation, such as having intercessors between God and believers, venerating saints or kings, and visiting holy men's tombs--all of which were endemic among the oasis dwellers and nomads of Arabia. Abd al Wahhab regarded visits to graves, and/or turning burial sites into shrines or mosques, to be emulations of Jewish and Christian rituals and he warned that such acts led to *kufr* (unbelief) and *shirk*. He required payment of *zakat* (an Islamic tax) and insisted on the duty of every believer to answer his call for *jihad* (holy war) against those who did not follow these principles. He sought to purify Islam of anything he designated as innovation, arguing for a strict interpretation of *sharia* (Islamic legal codes and rules). However, since Arabian politics at the time were in disarray, the purification of Islam and the application of *sharia* law needed the support of a new political authority (Al Rasheed, 2002, pp. 16-17; Bin Ali, 2016, pp. 131-132, 137).

Abd al Wahhab attracted a few supporters, but he also experienced opposition and subsequently moved to al Uyaynah in Hasa. Initially, Abd al Wahhab had the benefit of political support from the *amir* (ruler) of al Uyaynah, Uthman ibn Muammar, who endorsed Abd al Wahhab's reforms. With the *amir*'s support, Abd al Wahhab carried on with his mission of purifying Islam by combating innovations and applying *sharia*. Despite the *amir's* support, he soon faced considerable resistance to his mission. First, the local religious scholars convinced the ruler of Hasa, Sheikh Sulayman ibn Urayar, that the reformer's mission constituted a threat to the Sheikh's right to collect taxes. Second, the reformer's harsh retribution against those who resisted his religious opinions and his personal involvement in imposing a hard interpretation of *sharia,* aroused hostility among

the inhabitants of al Uyaynah and their ruler. Consequently, Muhammad ibn Abd al Wahhab was eventually expelled by the *amir* of al Uyaynah (Commins, 2006, p. 17-18; Al Rasheed, 2002, p. 17; Menoret, 2005, p. 48; Aarts & Roelants, 2015, pp. 6-7).

In 1744, the reformer arrived in al Diriyah, a settlement forty miles away from al Uyaynah, and ruled by Muhammad ibn Saud. Ibn Saud afforded protection to Abd al Wahhab and indicated a willingness to endorse the reformer's mission on two conditions: "First, that he pledge to continue supporting Ibn Saud if their campaign to establish God's unity triumphed. Second, that Abd al Wahhab approve of Ibn Saud's taxation of al Diriyyah's harvests" (Commins, 2006, p. 19). Abd al Wahhab agreed to the first condition, but countered the second condition with a proposal of how "God might compensate the *amir* with booty from raids and legitimate taxes [zakat] greater than the taxes on harvests" (Commins, 2006, p. 19). A pact was established between the two men in 1744, in which Abd al Wahhab was guaranteed control over religious interpretation, and ibn Saud would be acknowledged as a political leader of the Muslim community (Al Rasheed, 2002, p.18).

Following through with his objection to taxation, Abd al Wahhab's first act was to put an end to the taxation of agricultural produce in the new emirate and to let revenue from *jihad* replace it. This economic measure was another pact made between Abd al Wahhab and Al Saud (Menoret, 2005, p. 48; Commins, 2006, p. 19). By "abolishing fiscal pressure on the agricultural produce of the al Diriyah emirate and making the state finances dependent upon conquests," Abd al Wahhab's religious reform quickly spread throughout Arabia because it allowed wealth accumulation for those who supported the movement (Menoret, 2005, pp. 50-51).

The First Saudi Emirate and the Wahhabi Movement

Between 1744 and Sheikh Sulayman ibn Urayar's death in 1792, the Saudi-Wahhabi coalition systematically expanded its dominion via *jihad* until it encompassed all of central Arabia. The coalition pursued expansion in order to obtain compliance with the tenets of Wahhabi Islam among the sedentary and nomadic populations. Expansion by *jihad* was the only way the Sheikh could reach beyond the confines of the settlement; because of the significance of *jihad* in Wahhabism, the conquest of new territories was accepted as permissible. This was the first time since the time of Prophet Muhammad that a great part of the peninsula was merged under a single political rule that implemented only one interpretation of Islam (Commins, 2006, p. 19; Al Rasheed, 2002, p.18). This reform movement gave legitimacy to the Al Saud family which it had been unable to achieve through traditional means of tribal origin and wealth. Abd al Wahhab promised wealth to Al Saud in the form of *zakat* and expansion through *jihad* and he delivered (Al Rasheed, 2002, p. 18).

Through *jihad,* and commanded by Abd al Aziz, son of Muhammad ibn Saud, the Saudi leadership spread into Riyadh, Kharj, and Qasim by 1792, and Wahhabism became the dominant religious doctrine. Thereafter, Saudi forces moved eastward into Hasa. When Abd al Aziz installed Saudi rule over Taif in 1802, over Mecca in 1803, and over Medina in 1804, the Wahhabi *ulama* commanded the destruction of the domed tombs in Medina to force compliance with Wahhabi doctrine, as the construction of monuments on graves is prohibited so as to keep them unmarked and to discourage veneration (Al Rasheed, 2002, p. 21).

The expansion of the Saudi emirate continued southward into Asir and also to the northeast, reaching the regions of Mesopotamia. In 1801, the cities of Karbala and Basra were attacked and pillaged (Al Rasheed, 2002, p. 22). Although Saudi forces attacked cities in Iraq and Syria with great success, these conquests did not result in the formation of a Saudi-Wahhabi presence there due to the distance from their power base in Arabia. Thus, the first Saudi-Wahhabi emirate created a "political realm with fluctuating boundaries" (Al Rasheed, 2002, p. 22).

In 1803, followers of Wahhabism, with support from the Al Saud family, carried out a campaign of destruction, leveling all existing domes in the holy city of Mecca (Ahmed, 2006, p. 71; Al Alawi, 2015; "Mecca's Changing Face", 2014). In 1806, they occupied Medina and left no "religious building, including mosques, without demolishing it, whether inside or outside the *Baqi*" (graveyard with graves of Prophet Muhammad's family) (Ahmed, 2006, p. 71). The destructive crusade continued, targeting the graves of the martyrs of Uhud, the Mosque of al Manaratain, the mosque of the Prophet's daughter Fatima, the tombs of the Prophet's wives and companions; structures in the *Baqi* were flattened to the ground leaving not a single dome in place (Ahmed, 2006, p. 71: Rizvi, 2015, p. 85).

This destruction seemed to be supported by clear reasoning. The followers of Wahhabism believed they were acting in alignment with what Abd al Wahhab presented in one of his major works, the *Kitab al Tawhid* (*The Book of God's Unity*). This book contained 67 short chapters: the first six define idolatry and monotheism, the rest use Quranic verses and *hadiths* to indicate what was permitted and what was forbidden. Each chapter started with text, either Quranic verses and/or *hadiths* on a particular topic, such

as *shirk*, followed by a list of important issues in the chapter that a follower should reflect upon. For example, in Chapters 20, 21, 22, and 61, Abd al Wahhab called attention to visiting and venerating graves and tombs, and the relationship of these acts to *shirk*. In Chapter 21, titled "Exaggeration in the Graves of the Righteous Persons Tends Them to Become Idols Worshipped Besides Allah," Abd al Wahhab shares a *hadith* that states: "Imam Malik recorded in his book 'Muwatt' that the Prophet said: O Allah! Never turn my grave into an idol to be worshipped. Allah's wrath intensified on a people who turn their Prophet's graves into Masjid (mosque)" (Abd al Wahhab, n.d., p. 59). Similarly, in Chapter 61, titled "What is the Punishment for the Picture-Makers?," the *hadith* declares:

> Muslim reports from Abu Haiyaj [Al-Asadi] that Ali [Prophet Muhammad's cousin] said to him: Should I not depute you on a mission on which I was sent by Allah's Messenger? Deface all the pictures which you come across and demolish all the high graves to the level of earth. (Abd al Wahhab, n.d., p. 121)

These statements, taken literally, gave followers of Wahhabism justification to destroy any such construction, for leaving structures like these standing would lead a Muslim to commit *shirk*. From this perspective, the followers of Wahhabism were cleverly complying with the book in nineteenth-century Arabia; however, in their quest to purify Islam, it also seems the followers of Wahhabism purged rather than purified Islam.

When the Saudi emirate expanded to the borders of Hasa and Hijaz, areas still under the control of the Ottoman Empire, the arrival of the Saudis did not sit well with the Ottoman *ulama*. They urged Istanbul to take steps to quell the Najdi movement in those regions, given that the Wahhabi mission threatened their position (Commins, 2006, p.30). After the Saudi conquests of Mecca and Medina in 1803 and 1804, respectively, they were no longer just an annoyance to the Ottoman Empire; they had become a threat

as they asserted their Arab authority as superior to the Turkish Empire. It was imperative that the Ottoman Empire first recover control of the Holy Cities and then completely destroy the ideological challenge posed by the Wahhabi mission (Commins, 2006, p. 32).

In August 1811, the Ottoman Empire responded to the Saudi-Wahhabi presence by sending a naval expedition into Arabia, with the assistance of the governor of Egypt, Muhammad Ali. The Saudis conducted a surprise attack and forced the Ottoman-Egyptian troops to retreat, but the troops recovered and marched into Medina, forcing the Saudis to evacuate in 1812 after a brief siege. In 1813, the Saudis withdrew from Mecca as the Ottoman-Egyptian troops approached.

During this time, Saud ibn Abd al Aziz, who had taken over from his father Abd al Aziz, died leaving his son Abdullah ibn Saud to face the Ottoman-Egyptian troops. In 1815, the Ottomans pushed into Najd, where fighting led to a ceasefire when the Saudis surrendered on 11 September 1818. Subsequently, the town of al Diriyah was ravaged by the Ottoman-Egyptian army and many of the Wahhabi *ulama* were massacred. The sacking of al Diriyah marked the end of the first Saudi-Wahhabi emirate (Commins, 2006, p. 33; Al Rasheed, 2002, p. 23).

The Ottoman war against the Saudis had both a tactical and a religious purpose: the offensive was aimed not only at crushing Saudi political power in the region but also destroying the Wahhabi mission. For the Saudis, the encounter with the Ottoman Empire was not just a political scuffle of Arabs versus Turks but also a religious fight between monotheism and idolatry. The Saudi-Wahhabi amirs were of the opinion that under Ottoman rule *shirk* had spread, and it was imperative that Islam needed to be purified of such *shirk*. At the end of 1818, with al Diriyah completely demolished, the first Saudi

state came to its end, and its leader Abdullah ibn Saud was returned to Istanbul for public execution (Commins, 2006, p. 40).

The Second Saudi Emirate

By 1824, the Ottoman-Egyptian army had pulled out of Najd due to frequent Saudi raids, logistical strains, and pressure from local inhabitants. This opened the way for Turki ibn Abdullah, son of Abdullah ibn Saud, to return to Riyadh, a larger town located south of al Diriyah. With a small force, Turki captured Riyadh and made it his capital, and by 1825 his jurisdiction covered central and southern Najd all the way to Qasim. In 1834, Turki was assassinated and his son Faysal ibn Turki became *amir* of the second Saudi-Wahhabi emirate (Commins, 2006, pp. 44-45; Al Rasheed, 2002, p. 23). When Faysal died at the end of 1865, internal disagreements over his successor created rifts in the Saudi family. This crisis of succession set off a long military contest that effectively eroded Saudi power, resulting in the fall of the second Saudi emirate in 1891 to the Rashidi emirate based at Hail (Al Rasheed, 2002, p. 24; Commins, 2006, p. 61).

Although the collapse of the first Saudi emirate was due in part to military intervention by the Egyptians on behalf of the Ottoman Empire, the second Saudi emirate fell apart for two reasons: (1) dissension within the Saudi family weakened the already frail Saudi leadership, and (2) while the Saudi family continued to fight among themselves, a rival central Arabian emirate, the Rashidis of Hail, threatened Saudi dominance and then stepped in to replace them (Al Rasheed, 2002, p. 25).

Third Saudi Emirate and the State of Wahhabi Power

As previously noted, the Rashidis, with support from the Ottomans, took over the Saudi capital of Riyadh. However, in 1902, Ibn Saud (also called Abd al Aziz) returned from exile in Kuwait to claim his rightful place as *amir*. With assistance from the Al Sabah family who were Kuwait's rulers, Ibn Saud began a series of campaigns against the Rashidis. By 1906, he controlled southern and eastern Najd, had extended his control over Qasi and Unayzah, and laid siege on the Rashidi capital of Hail, which eventually surrendered. The Ottomans confirmed Ibn Saud as the *de facto* ruler of Qasim and southern Najd (Al Rasheed, 2002, pp. 26, 40, 44).

During this time, Britain—which had treaties with several other Gulf rulers—did not involve itself with the Saud family since it still considered Ibn Saud to be an "Ottoman vassal"; it was not until the start of World War I that this impression changed when Britain realized it needed Ibn Saud's support to end Ottoman dominance in Najd. This led to the Anglo-Saudi Treaty of 1915, which acknowledged that Najd and Hasa were Ibn Saud's territories, and that the British government would provide Ibn Saud with aid if there were hostilities toward these territories. The treaty also accorded Ibn Saud a monthly subsidy of £5,000. This was the beginning of Britain's direct participation in the political affairs in Arabia (Al Rasheed, 2002, pp. 41- 43).

In 1918, the end of World War I also brought the end of the Ottoman Empire's authority in Arabia. In 1924 and 1925, there were several more changes within the Saudi emirate. For example, the monthly subsidy that Ibn Saud received from Britain stopped, which caused him to seek other avenues to support his financial affairs. One possibility was income generated from pilgrimage taxes; another was customs duties assessed in the

region of central Hijaz (Al Rasheed, 2002, pp. 43, 45-46). To secure this income, Ibn Saud attacked Taif and then marched on to Mecca. Although the invasion was motivated by the need for money, Ibn Saud proclaimed to all that the reason for capturing the holy city was to ensure the safety and security of the holy land and the pilgrims that arrived there each year. Interestingly, this same reasoning was again used a few centuries later when Saudi rulers demolished several historically relevant sites in and around Mecca and Medina. After securing Mecca in 1924, Ibn Saud's troops captured other cities, such as Medina and Jeddah, and with these and the other main cities of Hijaz under his jurisdiction, Ibn Saud declared himself King of Hijaz in December 1925 (Al Rasheed, 2002, p. 46; Commins, 2006, pp. 72, 77). In 1932, the third and final revival of Saudi rule began when Ibn Saud designated his realm the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia on 22 September 1932 (Al Rasheed, 2002, p. 26; Commins, 2006, p. 72).

Following the captures of Medina and Mecca, the Najdi *ulama* celebrated the seizures because they viewed Hijaz under the rule of the Ottoman Empire as the center of operations for disseminating numerous innovations within Islam. Capturing this area was an opportunity to take back and purify Islam from the influences of the Ottoman Empire (Al Rasheed, 2002, p. 64). For example, the *Baqi*, the oldest cemetery in Medina, and the monuments at Uhud that were destroyed during the first Saudi emirate, were rebuilt between 1848 and 1860 during the reign of the Ottoman Empire. In 1925, with Hijaz under Saudi control, the Wahhabi *ulama* again removed this Ottoman idolatry by destroying or painting over many historical heritage sites (Ahmed, 2006, p. 72; Al Alawi, 2015; "Mecca's Changing Face," 2014).

How was all this achieved? Ibn Saud and the *ulama's* conquests occurred because a religio-tribal military force, the *ikhwan* (brothers), helped them fight the Ottomans. But after conquering Hasa, Hail, and Hijaz, the *ikhwan* leadership rebelled against Ibn Saud because the *ikhwan* believed themselves to be full partners in the newly created Kingdom and wanted their share. Assuming that this new Kingdom was theirs, they began to destroy shrines built on the tombs of the Prophet's relatives and companions in the belief that they were purifying the land from religious innovations (Al Rasheed, 2002, pp. 65-66; Commins, 2006, p. 76).

In 1928, as the *ikhwan* were getting out of hand, Ibn Saud sent letters to the Najdi tribal chiefs and the *ulama* reminding them how he conquered the holy cities from the Ottoman Empire. He also referred to the pledge Abd al Wahhab had made to continue supporting Ibn Saud if their campaign to establish God's unity triumphed. Further, he reminded them of the Wahhabi precept that obedience to the ruler is compulsory for all subjects, including the *ulama* and the *ikhwan*. Ibn Saud informed them that if no steps were taken to stop the *ikhwan*, he would abdicate. In response the *ulama* announced that the *ikhwan* leaders were in the wrong, and the *ulama* restated their commitment and oath of allegiance to Ibn Saud (Al Rasheed, 2002, pp. 50, 67; Commins, 2006, pp. 90-91). By March 1929, with the assistance of the British, Ibn Saud had built a fighting force to end the *ikhwan* rebellion, which led to the rebels' surrender to the British in January 1930 (Al Rasheed, 2002, p. 69).

In time, the role of the *ulama* became one of state apologists who were called on by the King when needed, such as when decreeing *fatwas* (a jurist's legal or religious opinion), which gave legitimacy to the King's actions. In due course, it became clear to

the *ulama* that for them to have a role in the new Kingdom, they had to accept the subordination of religion to politics (Al Rasheed, 2002, p. 68; Commins, 2006, pp. 98-99).

Chapter III

Present-Day Saudi State and Wahhabism

The military and diplomatic campaigns undertaken by Abd al Aziz ibn Saud from 1902 to 1932 resulted in the formation of the modern Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. He also was responsible for installing Wahhabism as the "official religion of the twentieth century Arab nation" by reinstating the descendants of Muhammad ibn Abd al Wahhab to their traditional role (Commins, 2006, p. 71), making sure, however, that their Wahhabi impulses were restrained. Eventually the Wahhabi *ulama* acknowledged their limited role as "guardians of ritual correctness and public morality" while surrendering to Ibn Saud and the Saud family the "right to pursue what he deemed necessary for the Kingdom's and his dynasty's welfare" (Commins, 2006, p. 71).

Taking back Riyadh from Rashidi control in 1902 and suppressing the *ikhwan* in 1930 gave ibn Saud the leverage he needed with the *ulama*. He could make changes within the emirate, with or without consulting them, and override any objection the Wahhabi *ulama* raised against his policies (Commins, 2006, pp. 98-99). Consequently, when the Wahhabi *ulama* defended policy measures taken by the Saud government to stamp out religious disagreement and political unrest, the *ulama* lost their credibility and influence within the Saudi state, influence they had enjoyed since the first Saudi emirate (Commins, 2006, p. 156). It became obvious that the government ultimately made all the rules.

Wahhabism or Salafism

Before discussing the contemporary role of Wahhabism in Saudi Arabia in the context of the destruction of early Islamic sites, I will clarify the terms *Wahhabism* and *Salafism,* as they are often used interchangeably:

- Wahhabism takes an ultra-conservative and austere approach to Islam with regard to the teachings of Muhammad ibn Abd al Wahhab. A Wahhabi subscribes specifically to Wahhabism (Bin Ali, 2016, p. 130).
- Salafism subscribes to the ways and teachings of early Muslim ancestors. All Wahhabis are Salafis, but not all Salafis are Wahhabis. Salafism "ideologically is a wider concept, as Salafi thought has existed for hundreds of years and has spread throughout the Muslim world and beyond. Whereas, Wahhabism only existed from the mid-eighteenth century onward. Wahhabism is only one of Salafism's many orientations" (Bin Ali, 2016, p. 49).

To avoid confusion, in this thesis I use the terms Wahhabi or Wahhabism, since these are the most prevalent terms used when scholarly works discuss Saudi Arabia in the context of religion.

Contemporary Saudi *Ulama*

Since Saudi Arabia's constitution is based on the *Quran* (the holy text), and *sharia* is the legal foundation from which the country is governed, it is reasonable to look at what power the *ulama* hold in the country and which Wahhabi doctrines are utilized to justify actions taken by the Saudi government (Aarts & Roelants, 2015, p. 9). As stated previously, the alliance between the Wahhabi clerics and the House of Saud can be

characterized as a "power-sharing arrangement" in which the *ulama* guarantee the political legitimacy of the Al Saud in exchange for the clerics' religious legitimacy and recognition, limited though it may be (Aarts & Roelants, 2015, p. 15). Wahhabism "dictates obedience to a ruler unless he commands a believer to violate Islamic law." When or if this occurs, it puts the clerics in one of two situations: either defending the rulers or criticizing them (Aarts & Roelants, 2015, p. 20; Commins, 2006, p. 5). The religious and "social sphere in Saudi Arabia is controlled by the official scholars who are appointed by the state . . . and occupy the highest religious positions in the Kingdom" (Bin Ali, 2016, p. 149). The state needs these scholars to manage the social sphere in order to establish conformity among the people. The *ulama* are, in turn, aware that in order to execute their religious policies, they need to remain compliant with the Saudi rulers because their ideas can only go into effect with the protection of a ruler. It is therefore debatable how independent the clerics truly are in their religious proclamations (Bin Ali, 2016, p. 150; Aarts & Roelants, 2015, p. 16).

Proclamations by Saudi *Ulama*

The impact of most *ulama* has gradually lessened over time, but especially in recent years. Under contemporary Saudi leadership, *ulama* power is limited to acting as guardians of ritual correctness and public morality, but nothing more. However, the Senior Council of Ulama—the highest religious body in Saudi Arabia, the members of which are all appointed by the King—have the task of declaring *fatwas* (Boucek & Boucek, 2010). The next few paragraphs review the *fatwas* of contemporary Wahhabi *ulama* in Saudi Arabia, specifically *fatwas* by Abdul Aziz ibn Abdullah ibn Baz. Ibn Baz

was not only the *mufti* (a jurist appointed by the state and serving on advisory councils) of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia from 1993 until his death in 1999, and President of the Permanent Committee for Scholarly Research and Fatwa, but he was also Head of the Council of Senior Scholars of Saudi Arabia (Bin Ali, 2016, p. 277). He issued several *fatwas* in his lifetime, which had considerable leverage in the Wahhabi community. Below are some of his rulings on *taswir* (picture, image, painting, drawing, sculpture, statue) (see Table 1) and other rulings for *masjids* and graves (see Table 2), specifically about visiting them and building mosques on them based on *hadith*. Since some of the *fatwas* convey similar ideas, only a few are provided below; the list is not exhaustive.

Table 1. Fatwas on *Taswir* and *Surahs*

Fatwas on *Taswir* and *Surahs*
"The basic rule states the prohibition of *taswir* of living beings. But, if the objects containing the pictures are given menial value or torn, it is permissible to use such objects such as carpets, etc." (Permanent Committee Fatwa no. 7857, n.d.).
"*Taswir* of beings with a soul is not an act of major *kufr*; it is however one of the major sins because it can lead to major *shirk*" (Permanent Committee Fatwa no. 6541, n.d.).
"Making images of beings with a soul is prohibited, whether it is in the form of a sculpture or a painting on a wall, cloth, or paper, or embroidery because it is emulating Allah's creation (Permanent Committee Fatwa sculpture, n.d.).
"There is no difference between *surahs* of humans and other beings with souls and the *surahs* of kings, scholars, etc. In fact, the degree of prohibition regarding the *surahs* of kings, scholars, and other influential people is severe, because the *fitnah* (dissent; chaos) that might be caused by them is greater" (Fatwa of ibn Baz on Taswir, n.d.).

Table 2. Fatwas on *Masjids* and Graves

Fatwas on *Masjids* and Graves
"It is not permissible to build *masjids* (mosques) above the graves or bury the dead in *masjids*. Moreover, it is not permissible to perform *salah* (prayer) in *masjids* which are built over graves" (Permanent Committee Fatwa no. 7353, n.d.).
"It is not permissible to perform salah in a *masjid* where one person or more are buried. This grave or graves should be dug up and moved to the public graveyard" (Permanent Committee Fatwa no. 6425, n.d.).
"It is prohibited to include the grave or any part of the cemetery in the *masjid*" (Permanent Committee Fatwa no. 7095, n.d.).
"If they (*masjids*) are built on them (graves), the Muslim rulers should demolish them, provided that this will not cause any *fitnah* which cannot be overcome" (Permanent Committee Fatwa no. 3201).

In view of the fact that there is a strong prohibition on building mosques over graves, there are those who point to Al Masjid Al Nabawi, the Prophet Muhammad's Mosque, in Medina where one not only finds the grave of the Prophet but additionally two of his companions buried within the confines of the Mosque. Therefore there are several *fatwas* regarding the graves of the Prophet Muhammad and two of his companions buried in Al Masjid Al Nabawi. According to the *fatwas,* the Prophet Muhammad was not buried at the mosque after his death; rather, he was buried inside the house of Aisha, his wife. When Abu Bakr, first Caliph and father-in-law to the Prophet (Afsaruddin, 2014a) died, he was buried with the Prophet in the same room. When Umar,

second Caliph after Abu Bakr, died, he was also buried there (Afsaruddin, 2014b). This room was not inside any *masjid*. Through several expansions of the *masjid*, the room stayed outside the boundaries of the *masjid*. However, when the *masjid* was expanded during the era of Al Walid ibn Abdul Malik, an Umayyad Caliph, he included the room in the *masjid*. This is not considered burial in the *masjid*; rather the room in which these three graves were buried was included in the *masjid* for the purposes of expansion. So the understanding is that what was done by Al Walid is no excuse for contradicting the *Sunnah*, of prohibition on building mosques over graves (Permanent Committee Fatwa no. 1644, Fatwa no. 4521, & Fatwa no. 11086, n.d.; Fatwa on wisdom, n.d.; Fatwa on burying, n.d.).

To summarize, these *fatwas* mainly target two issues: first, the prohibition on creating, having, or venerating a *taswir*, whether of human or animal; and second, the forbidding of building mosques on graves or building elaborate grave sites, as both of these lead to *shirk* because a fundamental Islamic tenet states that a Muslim should not venerate anything or anyone but the one true God.

Proclamations by the Saudi Government

While the *ulama's* proclamations on why destruction is necessary came in the form of *fatwas*, the Saudi government produced its own notifications, but on the subject of preservation. For example, in 2000 the Saudi government initiated the Saudi Commission for Tourism and National Heritage (SCTH, 2017), formerly known as the Saudi Commission of Tourism and Antiquities (SCTA), "to stimulate and develop not only tourism but also the national heritage sectors in the Kingdom" ("SCTH Initiatives,"

2017). In 2013, the Islamic History Sites Care Program was inaugurated by the SCTH to care for Islamic historical sites that are "associated with the Prophet's *Sira* (Prophet's life and events) and the era of early Muslim Caliphs" ("SCTA President," 2017). The program "participates in the supervision of their restoration, rehabilitation, and maintenance projects, and develops the necessary action plans to conserve these sites" (SCTA," 2015.). According to the official SCTH website and the President of SCTH, Prince Sultan bin Salman bin Abdul Aziz, the preservation works "are totally carried out in compliance with the *sharia* laws and rules and respecting Islamic faith and principles," because the country, since its establishment by King Abdul Aziz, is based on "the *sharia* laws and the Prophet Muhammad's *Sunnah* (the Prophetic tradition), and pure faith of Islam" (SCTA President", 2017). The program supervisor, Saad Al Rashi, provided a comprehensive report on "documenting Islamic history sites, rehabilitating water resources and wells associated with the Prophet Muhammad's *Sira*, in addition to rehabilitating Prophet's migration route" ("SCTA President", 2017). The Saudi state's claim of efforts to preserve the sites included "sites in Makkah and Madina and protecting them from misuse and encroachment." The President of SCTH Prince Sultan stated:

> I would like here also to refer to the great efforts made by government in preservation of antiquities during current expansion in the Holy Mosque. During the expansion process surrounding the Holy Mosque, which aims to facilitate pilgrims' performance of *hajj* rites in particular in Makkah as well as facilitating the visitation to the Holy Mosques in general. The government is also keen to document the historic landmarks and ensure they are not being removed or destroyed. ("SCTA President," 2017)

Similar assertions have been documented by the local news. For example, *Arab News* published what the President of SCTH, Prince Sultan bin Salman, had stated

"regarding the expansion works in the two holy cities of Makkah and Madinah and their impact on archaeological and historical sites, and how the government is keen to protect such sites as they are part of Islamic history" ("Thousands of Artifacts," 2014).

Saudi Government Actions

These government statements show a desire to protect Saudi national heritage according to *sharia* law, which means they would be aligned with proclamations made by the *ulama* in the form of the *fatwas*. However, actions taken by the Saudi government contradict the proclamations made by both the government and the Wahhabi *ulama*. For example, in Madain Saleh, there are 131 tombs dating from the first century A.D., and instead of leveling these tombs per Wahhabi principles, the SCTH website boasts of the government's efforts to register it as one of four heritage sites on the UNESCO World Heritage List (Aarts & Roelants, 2015, p. 5; SCTH, "Saudi Sites," 2018). This location also has twenty shrines in good condition with statues of winged lions with human heads (SCTH, "About Madain Saleh", 2014). At a location in Hail, there is rock art that is also on the World Heritage List. The rock art, spread across two locations, which together form the Jubbah site, is one of the largest and oldest rock art sites in the Saudi kingdom. Additionally, there is another site, the Rata and Al Manjor, which "include anthropomorphs and bovine figures, along with numerous representations of human figures" (SCTH, "Rock Art", 2015; SCTH, "Jubbah Site", 2015; SCTH, "Rata and Al Manjor Site", 2015). These sites raise the question: why have they not been destroyed according to the Wahhabi creed? If the government follows *sharia* guidelines as far as ancient sites are concerned, then these sites should have been destroyed.

Another instance of Saudi rulers not following *sharia* and going against the Wahhabi principles relates to pictures. The *fatwa* prohibiting *taswir* is not limited solely to statues and pictures of animals. The prohibition regarding the *taswirs* of kings, scholars, and other influential people is in fact more severe because revering them leads to *shirk*. So it's intriguing to note for instance, the centennial celebration, designed to mark 100 years of Al Saud rule. This celebration created opportunities for the Saudi government to develop "an ancestor cult around Ibn Saud" in which Ibn Saud, the deceased ruler, was venerated for his accomplishments; he became a symbolic figure, and things related to him became icons portraying his many attributes (Al Rasheed, 2002, p. 209). The Ministry of Information "captured all these in pictures and portraits of the King," encouraging "a sense of his immortality, an omnipotent symbolic ancestor" (Al Rasheed, 2002, pp. 209, 211, 214).

As an ideology, Wahhabism disparages commemorative history because such festivities represent a form of *bida* (innovation). Likewise, Wahhabism denounces saint worship so the staging of the centennial spectacle illustrates how the Saudi royal family overrules the *ulama* and their Wahhabi doctrine by celebrating the deceased king with god-like devotion (Al Rasheed, 2002, p. 215; Hameed, 2015). The array of portraits of the king and of senior princes, which were created and distributed in a country where statues, images, and even paintings of human figures are banned due to Wahhabi ideology, showed the power that the Saudi government wields over its *ulama* and the reality of how negligible the *ulama*'s power has become since the first Saudi emirate (Al Rasheed, 2002, p. 217).

It seems that Saudi rulers follow Wahhabi ideology when it suits them and disregard the principles of Wahhabism when it is not in their interest. For instance, in 1998, "the grave of Amina bint Wahb, the Prophet's mother, was bulldozed in Abwa and gasoline was poured on it" (Ahmed, 2006, p. 74). Sites in Mecca and Medina have seen similar destruction:

- The house of Khadija (first wife of Prophet Muhammad) was excavated during the sacred mosque's extensions. This was the house where the Prophet received some of his first revelations and where his children were born. Dar al Arqam, the first school where the Prophet taught, was demolished. There are plans to demolish the house of Mawlid where the Prophet was born, a house that some 60 years ago was turned into a cattle market then later converted into a library. Now there are plans to build a palace on the site for King Abdullah (Ahmed, 2006, p. 74; Al Alawi, 2015; Peer, 2012; Power, 2014).
- According to Irfan Al Alawi, Executive Director of the Islamic Heritage Research Foundation, "17th century Ottoman era porticos and Mamluk columns dating back 660 years were also demolished [in Mecca]. The Ottomans had marked certain historical locations, such as the house of Umm Hani where the Prophet commenced his famous night journey" (Al Alawi, 2015).
- In Medina, only two of seven original mosques at the site of the famous Battle of the Trench still remain; the demolished mosques were replaced by ATM machines (Ahmed, 2006, p. 74; Power, 2014). One of the two remaining mosques, Masjid Fath, is scheduled for demolition. It was built where the Prophet stood during the Battle of the Trench praying for victory, and where he received God's assurances of victory

and the eventual capture of Mecca (Ahmed, 2006, p. 74; Al Alawi, 2015; Power, 2014).

All this destruction comprises just ten percent of the proposed changes the Saudi government wants to bring to Mecca and Medina (Al Alawi, 2015). What is not readily understood is why some sites are placed on the UNESCO World Heritage list while others are destroyed—when all of these sites, according to Wahhabi doctrine, should be destroyed.

As far as the government is concerned, this "development" is necessary for two reasons. First, the destroyed sites pose "security risks for visiting pilgrims" due to their structural instability ("Mecca's Changing Face," 2014; Peer, 2012). According to Abu Bakr Bagader, an official with the Organization of Islamic Cooperation which represents Muslim-majority countries, the construction is supported by the government and Saudi officials because it will alleviate mobility issues facing Muslim pilgrims by expanding the space for them to perform their rituals ("Mecca's Changing Face", 2014; Peer, 2012). Second, the demolition of historically relevant heritage sites was done to ensure that worshipers would not commit *shirk* by revering structures with ties to the Prophet and his family ("Mecca's Changing Face", 2014; Peer, 2012).

This type of "development" also occurs abroad. For instance, this same viewpoint was taken in Kosovo after the Kosovo war ended in 1999. Harvard University Fine Arts librarian Andras Riedlmayer, who surveyed the area, found that historical buildings such as mosques built during the Ottoman rule, which were damaged during the war, were demolished by the Saudis rather than repaired so as to make way for a proper Islamic structure (Naegele, 2000). The destruction was not limited solely to mosques; cemeteries

were targeted and Ottoman-era gravestones were bulldozed. Riedlmayer believes these gravestones were removed because "they [the Saudis] consider gravestones to be idolatrous" (Naegele, 2000).

Likewise, Riedlmayer noted that immediately after the war in Bosnia, a Saudi aid agency applied for permission to restore the Gazi Husrev Beg mosque. But when it came time to restore it, the Saudis ordered the Ottoman-style decorations to be "stripped off and discarded" and replaced with the whitewashed Saudi style (Naegele, 2000). Robert Bevan (2006) reports similar incidents in his book *The Destruction of Memory*. He states that when the sponsors of mosque restoration are Saudi, strings are attached to the funding, and "the richly decorated interiors, characteristics of Balkan Islamic architecture, give way to the austere whitewash" (p. 180). He offers a similar example to Riedlmayer with the restoration of the Gazi Husrev Beg mosque. In his opinion, "the damage caused by its rebuilding, by its whitewashing, and the removal of applied decoration was more thorough than the damage that was caused by Serbian shelling" (p. 180).

Yet if these are the steps taken—under the guidance of Wahhabism, by the Saudi government within and outside of the Saudi Kingdom—then why did the Saudi government allow the preservation of structures in Jubbah, Rata, and other similar sites? Why has the Saudi government paid to erect the Faysal Mosque in Pakistan, which shows elements of classical Ottoman style such as a dome surrounded by tall minarets (Rizvi, 2015, pp. 28, 90)? Unlike the whitewashed interiors of "restored" mosques in Bosnia, the inside walls of the Faysal Mosque are covered in rich blue and gold calligraphic tiles. The *minbar*, from which the imam gives his sermon, is decorated with large circular

medallions of cut lapis lazuli mosaic. The platform for the *muezzin* (the person who calls out prayers) is embellished with an immense abstract mural. Breaking from traditional Saudi ideology, the mosque also has on its grounds the tomb of a military leader credited with spreading Wahhabi-inflected Islam in Pakistan (Rizvi, 2015, p. 91-92). It is ironic that the mosque has so many embellishments and that it commemorates both a military leader (via construction of the tomb) and a King (by naming the mosque in his honor) given that Wahhabism strongly renounces erecting memorials of any sort in the belief that they might lead Muslims to *shirk*. The differences between the simple whitewashed mosques in Kosovo and the elaborate and intricately decorated mosque in Pakistan, or the preservation of historic sites registered on the World Heritage List compared to the destruction of heritage sites related to Prophet Muhammad's life, reveals clear contradictions as to how Saudi Arabia practices Wahhabi concepts.

Chapter IV

Scholarly Perspectives on the Destruction of Heritage Sites

It is apparent that although the Wahhabi *ulama* would like the Saudi state to follow the principles of Wahhabism and destroy such historically relevant heritage sites, Saudi rulers in fact apply those principles where they deem necessary, leading to inconsistencies, especially when it comes to *shirk*. In contrast, global non-Wahhabi Muslim scholars are of the opinion that such destruction is not allowed by Islam.

Opposition to Wahhabi Ideology in the Eighteenth Century

Opposition to Ibn Abd al Wahhab's ideology existed long before the twenty-first century. In the early 1740s, many Muslim *ulama* in Mecca wrote treatises attacking Abd al Wahhab's views as well as his qualifications (Commins, 2006, p. 1). He faced opposition from Sulayman Ibn Suhaym, a religious leader in Riyadh in the eighteenth century, when ibn Suhaym criticized Abd al Wahhab for destroying the tomb of the Prophet's companion, Zayd ibn al Khattab, "even though there were practical, not idolatrous reasons for erecting a tomb. The story was that the area was too rocky to dig a grave, so the Prophet's companions had to set up a stone tomb to protect Zayd's corpse from beasts of prey" (Commins, 2006, p. 20). Abd al Wahhab's brother, who was a judge like their father, also opposed Wahhab's teachings. Citing the same scholars on whom Abd al Wahhab relied to support his position, the brother contradicted Abd al Wahhab's perspectives on several issues, including the matter of intercession (Commins, 2006, p.

23). Even in the face of such opposition, however, Abd al Wahhab's ideology survived not because he made stronger arguments, but through the sheer force of the Saudi military establishment with which he had formed an alliance (Commins, 2006, p. 24).

Opposition to Wahhabi Ideology in the Twenty-First Century

Henri Lauziere (2016) calls the ideology followed by the Wahhabis *purist* Salafism, using the adjective *purist* to "convey the persistent preoccupation of today's Salafis with religious purity, which they seek to embody" (p. 6). Quintan Wiktorowicz (2006) also talks about the purists as those Salafis who "emphasize a focus on nonviolent methods of propagation, purification, and education" (p. 208). Most points of view taken by scholars against the destruction of heritage sites in the name of Islam focus on those who follow *jihadist* Salafism. Both Lauziere and Wiktorowicz state that the *jihadi* Salafi terrorist groups, like the Taliban in Afghanistan and Islamic State (also referred to as IS, ISI, ISIS, and Daesh) in Iraq and Syria, take a more violent or militant approach to their adversaries (p. 9, 208, respectively). Of course, most Salafis reject such labeling since, from their point of view, there is only one authentic Salafism, to which "the pious ancestors of the first three generations of Muslims conformed, revealed, unsullied by any innovation, deviation, or accretion," and which was unadulterated by outside forces (Lauziere, 2016, p. 6).

There are reasons for disagreement among scholars regarding the destruction of heritage sites. For example, Islam is not a "centralized religion" like Catholicism rather Islam has cultivated a system of jurisprudence called *fiqh*, with guidelines that are designed to solve practical problems (Mallon, 2015). The Quran is the highest authority

within *fiqh,* followed by the *Sunnah,* and then followed by examples from Islamic history that function as types of precedents (Mallon, 2015; UNESCO, 2001, p. 57). Therefore, specialists in Muslim law and religion use these guidelines to validate their opposition to the destruction of heritage sites done in the name of Islam.

Although much of the expert commentary condemns acts of destruction perpetrated by *jihadist* Salafi groups such as the Taliban and Islamic State, I focus on the significance of these scholarly statements as they pertain to destruction caused by Saudi Arabia specifically. While this might be construed as overly generalized, the Quranic verses and *Hadiths* cited in the next few pages hold the same authority whether they are applied to *jihadist* or *purist* Salafi groups. If the act of destruction is condemned by the Quran or the *Sunnah*, the outcomes remain the same, whether such destruction is undertaken by terrorist groups or by legitimate states such as Saudi Arabia; the guidance remains unchanged.

Non-Wahhabi Scholars' Perspectives

The first denunciation by an assemblage of experts for the destruction of historical sites occurred in 2001 at the Doha Conference of Ulama on Islam and Cultural Heritage, shortly after the Taliban demolished the Bamiyan Buddhas in Afghanistan. The next major statement was issued in 2014, when scholars collaborated on a letter critiquing and condemning Islamic State's destruction of Muslim and non-Muslim sites in Iraq and Syria. In both instances, specialists in Muslim law and religion employed Islamic jurisprudence, both Quranic verses and Islamic history, to condemn these acts of destruction. The scholars called attention to three things: (1) the evolution of Islam and

how it has historically accommodated diversity; (2) the use of history to acquire knowledge and learn lessons from ancient sites and people; and (3) the fact that many historical sites have been deliberately preserved by Islamic rulers for centuries. Each of these is discussed in more detail below.

Diversity in Islam

The 2001 Doha Conference emphasized that civilizations are not formed in a vacuum but rather as a result of contributions made by diverse peoples, religions, and creeds (UNESCO, 2001, p. 19). Furthermore, Islamic civilization was formed by amalgamating various pre-existing civilizations, cultures, and features that were in tune with the basic principles of Islam (p. 24). According to the Quran, "And of His signs is the creation of the heavens and the earth, and the difference of your languages and colours. Lo! herein indeed are portents for men of knowledge" (Pickthall, Quran 30:22). In the opinion of Abdul Hamid Al Ansari, Dean of the Faculty of Sharia, Law and Islamic Studies at University of Qatar, who gave the keynote paper at the Doha Conference:

> God supports the diversity of nations, religious laws, faiths, and civilizations. No single belief or religion can be universally imposed, nor can the human race be subjected to a single religious authority or any one particular civilization. It should be understood that *jihad* in Islam was prescribed solely in order to protect such diversity and guarantee freedom of choice for all. Islam prescribes freedom of choice in regard to belief and the practice of worship and religious rites. The diversity of religions, the difference in religious laws and the variety of methods share common origins in that they all acknowledge God. (UNESCO, 2001, p. 28)

The Quran says: "Had Allah willed, He could have made you one community. But that He may try you by that which He hath given you (He hath made you as ye are). So vie

one with another in good works" (Pickthall, Quran 5:48). Similar sentiments of diversity appear in other places in the Quran: "And if thy Lord had willed, He verily would have made mankind one nation, yet they cease not differing" (Pickthall, Quran 11:118). What these Quranic verses and Ansari himself suggest is an argument for the value of diversity in Islam. Such an argument enables Muslims to embrace the fact that while Islam was introduced to newly conquered peoples (e.g., Persians, Armenians, Kurds, Abyssinians) the conquering Muslims amplified and embraced some of the characteristics from these other lands and cultures (UNESCO, 2001, p. 58).

Scholars believe that the value Islam places on diversity should teach Muslims to be less severe about practices such as visiting graves or preserving historical sites. God says in the Quran, "Keep to forgiveness (O Muhammad), and enjoin kindness, and turn away from the ignorant" (Pickthall, Quran 7:199). Non-Wahhabi *ulama* state that "the more severe opinion should not be considered more pious, religious or sincere to God. Even the Prophet Muhammad said, 'Be gentle, and beware of violence and foul language"' ("Letter to Baghdadi," 2014). However, this perspective runs counter to what Wahhabi scholars preach. The point is that although many countries and provinces were conquered by Muslim forces, the conquered people were never forced to convert. *Dawah* (an invitation to join Islam) was offered with fairness and gentleness, not with violence ("Letter to Baghdadi", 2014). The Quran says: "And if thy Lord willed, all who are in the earth would have believed together. Wouldst thou (Muhammad) compel men until they are believers?" (Pickthall, Quran 10:99) "There is no compulsion in religion" (Pickthall, Quran 2:256). "Say: (It is) the truth from the Lord of you (all). Then whosoever will, let him believe, and whosoever will, let him disbelieve" (Pickthall, Quran 18:29). In all these

verses, the Quran states that people must not be forced to accept a certain creed—unlike what the Wahhabi *ulama* assert. Since none of the companions of the Prophet Muhammad forced their beliefs on those they conquered, it is apparent that any assault or destruction due to fear of *shirk* leads to what is wrong, not right, and "If God wanted this, He would have obliged them over the minutest details of His religion" ("Letter to Baghdadi," 2014).

These writings suggest that God gave humanity choices and freedom. He could have written out every detail for pious Muslims to follow yet he did not, thereby encouraging freedom of choice. The destruction of heritage sites underscores an excessive harshness, raising questions of whether the Wahhabi *ulama* in Saudi Arabia are forcing their uncompromising views on Muslims in apparent opposition to the faith itself. In a letter sent to Islamic State leader Abu Bakr Al Baghdadi, non-Wahhabi scholars declared that although they disagree among themselves on the subject of graves, they do agree that where there is disagreement the best option is to be more merciful and to avoid harshness. The scholars believe:

> It is not permissible to blow up the graves of Prophets and companions and disinter their remains, just as it is not permissible to burn grapes under the pretext that some people use them to make wine. The Prophet said: I had previously prohibited you from visiting graves. Permission has been granted for Muhammad to visit his mother's grave, so visit them [i.e., graves] for they remind one of death and the hereafter. ("Letter to Baghdadi," 2014)

In summary, then, do not destroy grave sites in fear that it might lead to *shirk*; rather, go to these graves so that Muslims are reminded that death comes to all at some time.

Where *fatwas* and *sharia* laws are concerned, scholars talk about "practical jurisprudence":

> What is meant by "practical jurisprudence" is the process of applying *sharia* rulings, and dealing with them according to the realities and circumstances that people are living under. This is achieved by having an insight into the realities under which people are living and identifying their problems, struggles, capabilities and what they are subjected to. Practical jurisprudence considers the texts that are applicable to people's realities at a particular time, and the obligations that can be postponed until they are able to be met or delayed based on their capabilities. Religious edicts (*fatwas*) change with the change of time, place, customs and circumstances, and all of this is from the religion of God. ("Letter to Baghdadi," 2014)

Hence, decisions are best made in the context of circumstances at the time, and flexibility is needed to ensure one does not endorse an overly severe position simply to be perceived as more pious, religious, or sincere to God. Similarly, since *fatwas* may change with time, place, and circumstances, it is best not to consider these religious opinions as written in stone.

Diversity enables mutual connection and cooperation and is a source of joy and happiness. It encourages the exclusion of harshness and generates knowledge. Without diversity, knowledge would be hollow, and instead of enlightenment, darkness would overcome. According to Abdelouahed Belakziz, former Secretary General of the Organization of the Islamic Conference (OIC), "For Muslims, faith is associated with knowledge, and the Quran and *hadith* contain so many passages which emphasize the importance of knowledge" (UNESCO, 2001, p. 25). In this line of Islamic thought, diversity strengthens knowledge, enhances life, and encourages human progress through the process of writing and discussions among civilizations and cultures.

Utilizing History to Acquire Knowledge and Learn Lessons

Numerous verses of the Quran focus on the idea of heritage and past civilizations as one way to acquire knowledge, given that all human history is connected (UNESCO, 2001, p. 28). In many verses, the Quran states that "antiquities should be contemplated and lessons drawn from the indications which they provide as a way of remembering the feats of earlier nations" (UNESCO, 2001, p. 31). Thus, preserving the past in order to gain present knowledge is encouraged.

Both the *Sunnah* and the Quran endorse the pursuit of knowledge and suggest that lessons can be learned from history and heritage. The Prophet said: "He who desires life in this world must seek knowledge and he who desires the afterlife must seek knowledge. And he who desires life in this world and the afterlife must seek knowledge" (UNESCO, 2001, p. 57). The Quran relates the story of Pharaoh to serve as a warning: "But this day We save thee in thy body that thou mayst be a portent for those after thee" (Pickthall, Quran 10:92). With this story, the Quran teaches that history offers lessons, and for this reason we should preserve and study history, since the Prophet has said; "The pursuit of knowledge is obligatory upon every Muslim" (UNESCO, 2001, p. 62; "Letter to Baghdadi," 2014).

The Quran and the *Sunnah* both advocate obtaining knowledge, so much so that in the quest for knowledge, if a Muslim has to travel, he/she should do so. The Quran says: "Have they not travelled in the land to see the nature of the consequence for those who disbelieved before them? They were mightier than these in power and (in the) traces (which they left behind them) in the earth" (Pickthall, Quran 40:21). It also says: "Have they not travelled in the land and seen the nature of the consequence for those who were

before them? They were stronger than these in power, and they dug the earth and built upon it more than these have built" (Pickthall, Quran 30:9). In this way, Muslims are enjoined to learn from history and avoid repeating the mistakes of their ancestors, even if it means one travels far and wide to do so.

The Quran discusses "education and learning through exploration of the universe and recommends travel on land and even on the seas with the clear objective of seeking lessons from history. It encourages believers to travel in order to understand the reasons for the rise and fall of earlier civilizations" (UNESCO, 2001, p. 50). Muslims are to learn from the histories of earlier nations by scrutinizing their experiences, cultures, and heritage in order to improve their own understanding. The Quran says: "Travel in the land, and see the nature of the consequence for those who were before you" (Pickthall, Quran 30:42). It describes a believer as one who travels through the land for the purpose of gaining knowledge from past civilizations that have been left behind by previous generations (UNESCO, 2001, p. 66). When learning from past nations, the Quran says: "Do but travel in the land and see the nature of the consequence for those who did deny" (Pickthall, Quran 3:137); also: "Say (unto the disbelievers): Travel in the land, and see the nature of the consequence for the rejecters" (Pickthall, Quran 6:11). These verses suggest that it is important to preserve the cultural heritage of the past so we can see what lessons might be obtained from the mistakes of our ancestors. In the absence of such histories, we may repeat their mistakes and fall prey to the same fates as our predecessors (UNESCO, 2001, p. 66). Even the former Mufti of Egypt, Nasr Farid Wasil, states that for the ancient forefathers, "antiquities were preserved on account of the examples and lessons which they provide" (UNESCO, 2001, p. 31).

Neither the Quran nor the *Sunnah* advocate limits on the study, preservation, or examination of heritage. Rather, the excerpts quoted here focus on the idea that to seek knowledge, it is necessary to study and analyze past civilizations and their heritage (UNESCO, 2001, p. 62). Islam recognizes the value of cultural heritage, including historical monuments. Maulana Wahiduddin Khan, an Islamic scholar and peace activist, expresses this point:

> According to Islam, historical monuments are indeed worthy of preservation as indispensable records of the past. If such records were not maintained, future generations would lose authentic sources of knowledge, which would be an irremediable loss. Islam is a religion of nature. Everything which is in accordance with nature and reason is regarded as important in Islam. One important and accepted principle of the Islamic *sharia* holds that all things are essentially lawful if they are not forbidden. Viewed in the light of this principle of *sharia*, the preservation of a cultural heritage is certainly lawful in Islam, for nowhere in the Quran or the *Sunnah* are we commanded not to preserve our cultural heritage. (UNESCO, 2001, p. 65)

In his view, the preservation of heritage is lawful and worthy for it not only connects the present to the past but allows knowledge to be extrapolated from the past for the benefit of the future.

Historical Sites Preserved

Islamic tradition has long accommodated the cultural heritage of previous civilizations by respecting and preserving historical monuments for future generations. These sites were viewed as an inheritance that belonged to the entire human race, serving as an important source of knowledge and posing no threat to the sanctity of Islam (UNESCO, 2001, p. 27). Sheikh Muhammad Abdu, a modern master of the *mujtahidin* (those who formulate independent judgments) states:

> Look at the figure of the Sphinx, next to the Great Pyramid, and you either see the lion as a man or the man as a lion. Preserving these monuments is, in fact, to preserve knowledge and pay recognition to the creativity of the workmanship. What does the *sharia* have to say about such figures if they are meant to depict the psychological reactions or physical states of the human being? On the whole, the Islamic *sharia* is most unlikely to prohibit one of the best media of knowledge, having ascertained that it poses no threat to the religion in terms of either belief or action. (UNESCO, 2001, p. 30)

Abdul Muti Bayumi, former Dean of the Faculty of Religious Principles at Al Azhar University writes:

> Why didn't the companions who were the first conquerors, destroy the idols found in Egypt, Persia and Afghanistan? It was because they realized that they were no longer graven images, having instead become nothing more than a token of the past. They did not overlook the historic value of these monuments because they tell the story of the development of the human mind. (UNESCO, 2001, p. 31)

Similarly, Fahmi Huwaydi, a Muslim intellectual, states:

> The Muslims conquered the lands of Persia and Egypt and arrived in India, a country which harbors some of most ancient temples and statues in the entire world. . . . Nevertheless, no one has ever been known to regard these statues as idols, nor has it ever been known for the Muslims to declare war on them. It should be borne in mind some of these conquests took place in the time of the Rightly Guided Caliphs and that those who led the Muslim armies were mostly companions or followers of the Prophet, whose commitment to and understanding of Islam no one can doubt. (UNESCO, 2001, p. 32)

Each of these scholars believes that the preservation of historical monuments is an embedded tenet within Islam, for these sites have existed for many years suggesting that the companions of the Prophet and the pious ancestors that followed all intentionally preserved these historical sites for the future generations so they might gain knowledge and learn from previous civilizations and cultures about heritage and diversity.

On the subject of the Prophet's companions, the *ulama* at the Doha conference spoke about how the early followers of Islam, such as the first Caliph, Abu Bakr, acted in

accordance with the Prophet Muhammad by following his example. For instance, Abu Bakr instructed his commanders to have regard for the freedom and culture of the peoples and lands they captured (UNESCO, 2001, p. 58). Another example is the fact that Abu Bakr prayed in the Church of the Nativity, in Bethlehem, which contained many images and statues—a testament to the Islamic tradition of tolerance toward non-Muslim cultural and religious heritage (UNESCO, 2001, pp. 52, 58). If Abu Bakr, who is considered by the Wahhabis as an example to be followed by all Muslims, can pray in a church with images and statues, then domes above mosques or embellishments within and outside of a mosque or on a grave should not be associated to leading one to *shirk.*

The non-Wahhabi scholars present at the Doha conference also drew attention to the tolerant nature of Islam. They highlighted the fact that Islamic tradition "requires respect for the human heritage in general, whatever its sources, forms or manifestations" (p. 7). Muslims have preserved a diverse range of historical monuments and cultural heritage so that future generations can learn from the past. The fact that the Islamic world has preserved such a huge part of world heritage lends support to the idea that Muslims traditionally preserved ancient monuments; otherwise, most of that heritage would already have been lost or destroyed. "The position of Islam regarding the preservation of the cultural heritage is a firm position of principle which expresses the very essence of the Islamic religion" (pp. 7-8).

Other Voices

The scholars at the Doha conference are not the only experts on Muslim law and religion to condemn the destruction of historical monuments such as mosques and

gravesites. Other independent scholars have given their thoughts on this issue, further corroborating what the scholars at the Doha conference and the signatories of the Letter to Baghdadi expressed.

At the 2007 Proceedings of the International Conference of International Scientific Committee on Theory and Philosophy of Conservation and Restoration (ICOMOS), Secretary General Mehr Azar Soheil highlighted the idea that when Islam underwent a period of expansion, it absorbed the ancient cultures of conquered lands and adapted itself to them (p. 63). Soheil (2007) cites Quranic verses that state, "Is it not a guidance for them (to observe) how many generations We destroyed before them, amid whose dwelling places they do walk" (Pickthall, Quran 32:26). The Quran calls attention to the fact that these ancient sites, as well as previous civilizations and cultures, are a testament to lost glories left behind to guide future generations (Soheil, 2007, p. 67). Additionally, Soheil reveals, similar to what other non-Wahhabi scholars touched on previously, how the Quran invites the reader to travel the earth, see the ancient sites and learn from them, because the past is connected to the present and future. For example, the Quran says "Systems have passed away before you. Do but travel in the land and see the nature of the consequence for those who did deny (the messengers)" (Pickthall, Quran 3:137). Soheil continues by stating that the Quran grants awareness to ancient nations and their heritage, and underscores the need to study their histories. This implies that past cultures are a great source of guidance and knowledge, and that preservation of cultural heritage is a duty upon the Muslim community (p. 68).

Remah Gharib (2017a), Assistant Professor of Urban Design and Architecture in Muslim Societies at Hamad Bin Khalifa University, Qatar, makes similar points to those

already presented in regard to how Islam expanded to far regions of the world: it inserted itself within communities and civilizations, integrating with existing history and heritage (p. 44). Gharib echoes many of the same Quranic verses presented earlier while also referring to similar scholarship on the preservation of heritage. Gharib cites comments made by Sheikh Yusuf Al Qaradawi stating that preserving built heritage not only secures the future of the city but the future of the next generation, for it provides diversity for the city and knowledge for the coming generation (p. 45). Gharib points out that in 1903, Sheikh Mohamed Abdu of Egypt, issued a *fatwa* entitled "Figures and statues, their advantage and the ruling in their regard," (quoted earlier) which emphasizes how little threat the Sphinx poses to the practice of Islam (p. 45). Gharib (2017b) states that "Islamic jurisprudence toward the built environment relies on a general rule of do no harm and cause no harm and this is captured from a famous speech of the Prophet which states that: There should be neither harming nor reciprocating harm" (p. 372).

According to Gharib, Abdel al Latif al Baghdadi, a thirteenth-century philosopher, insisted that earlier Muslim leadership accepted the value of historical monuments and heritage, and therefore curbed their destruction (2017b, p. 373) Al Baghdadi wrote: "And still the Kings take into account the survival of this built heritage and prevent damaging it" (Gharib, 2017a, p. 44; Gharib, 2017b, p. 374). This demonstrates that Islamic principles before and during the thirteenth century protected and preserved ancient heritage, whether in the form of buildings, monuments, or sculptures (Gharib, 2017a, p. 44; Gharib, 2017b, p. 374). According to Islamic scholar Yusuf al Qaradawi, "the intent of the Islamic law is strongly related to preservation and conservation. Islam is driven by the strategic objectives extracted from the Quran and the

Sunnah and the intent and objectives of the Islamic law is to sustain God's creation" (Gharib, 2017b, p. 375).

Although most of the previous commentary by Muslim scholars focuses on acts of destruction by *jihadist* Salafis such as the Taliban and Islamic State, some scholars have directed their commentary directly toward Saudi Arabia. For example, Abdul Wahhab Abu Sulaiman, a historian, researcher, and Islamic educator, presented a *sharia* ruling on development in and around Mecca, asserting that historical sites such as the birthplace of Prophet Muhammad should be protected under Islamic law (Al Alawi, 2015). Other scholars indicated concerns about such destruction after reading a 61-page document prepared by a faculty member at Imam Muhammad bin Saud Islamic University in Riyadh. That cleric proposed that the Prophet Muhammad's remains be moved to the nearby *Baqi* cemetery. In 2014, in response to this proposal, the Indonesian Religious Affairs Minister asked the Saudi ambassador for clarification on this issue. In reply, the ambassador assured the Minister that the report was false. Indonesia's largest Muslim organization, Nhadlatul Ulama (NU), issued a strong criticism when it heard the news that the Prophet's remains might be moved from their current location. The chairman of NU's executive council, Slamet Effendi Yusuf, equated the plan with "stupidity and ignorance" and stated that "NU would be in vanguard of opposition to it" (Woodward, 2014). Even Indonesian Salafi organizations, such as Muhammadiyah and Persatuan Islam, both of which oppose tomb veneration, condemned that news. The Correct Islamic Faith Foundation, an Indian foundation linked to over 300 Sunni traditionalist organizations, issued similar strong condemnation upon hearing the news and called upon all Muslims of the world to unite and stand against such an act (Woodward, 2014).

Beyond the criticism by Muslim scholars of destruction in Mecca and rumors of the removal of the Prophet's tomb from Medina, there have been other Muslim condemnations regarding the possible destruction of historic Muslim sites, such as the destruction of graves and mosques in Kosovo after the war. Saudi Arabia brought its Wahhabi influence into Kosovo by offering monetary funds as aid. Historic buildings, such as 400-year-old mosques that were damaged during the war, were torn down rather than repaired, to make way for "proper" Islamic structures. The Ottoman-style mosques and cemeteries where Ottoman-era gravestones stood were also bulldozed (Naegele, 2000). Such purposeful damage did not go unnoticed by the local imams and religious figures. Idriz Bilalli, imam of the central mosque in Podujevo, initially welcomed help from any source. But when he saw the Wahhabi influence permeating his community, he grew concerned. He had trained at the University of Medina in Saudi Arabia in the late 1980s and he "understood there was a campaign of proselytizing, pushed by the Saudis" (Gall, 2016). He campaigned against the spread of Wahhabism, but eventually the influence of Arab sponsors won and Bilalli was removed from his post (Gall, 2016).

Although there are a few Muslim scholars who have voiced their criticism against Saudi destruction of historical sites within and outside of Saudi Arabia, it seems many more remain silent. Two reasons could be behind such absence of criticism: (1) pilgrim quotas, and (2) financial support. The issue of quotas on pilgrim arises from a fear in many Muslim countries that if they challenge the Saudi government on the issue of destruction of historical sites that the Saudi authorities might limit how many *hajj* pilgrims can come from that country (Chehata, 2014; Taylor, 2011; Power, 2014). On the issue of financial support, most imams and countries that receive monetary aid choose to

remain silent about the destruction of historical sites. For example, Saudi Arabia has donated as much as 18 million Saudi riyals to restore Al Zaytuna Mosque, and 2 million Saudi riyals to maintain the King Abdulaziz Mosque, both in Tunis. Similarly, the Saudi government continuously supports restoration work at Al Azhar Grand Mosque in Egypt ("Prince Sultan", 2017; "Saudi Arabia Donates," 2018). To criticize a state for destroying its own historical structures when that state is providing millions to restore the historical structures of one's own country could pose a threat to future aid.

Chapter V

Motivations for the Destruction of Religious Sites

Previously in this thesis, I showed that during the formation of the first emirate and before the Saudi state existed, Saud ibn Abd al Aziz installed Saudi rule over Taif in 1802, over Mecca in 1803, and over Medina in 1804 via *jihad.* At the same time, Wahhabi *ulama* ordered the destruction of the domed tombs in Medina in line with Wahhabi doctrine, which prohibited the construction of monuments such as mosques or domes on graves so as to keep them unmarked and discourage veneration (Al Rasheed, 2002, p. 21). Followers of Wahhabism, with support from the Al Saud family, carried out a campaign of destruction, leveling all existing domes in the holy city of Mecca as well (Ahmed, 2006, p. 71; Al Alawi, 2015; "Mecca's Changing Face," 2014). Wahhabi followers occupied Medina and razed to the ground every religious building and grave, whether inside or outside the *Baqi* (Ahmed, 2006, p. 71). This destructive crusade continued through the nineteenth century, targeting the graves of the martyrs of Uhud, mosques outside the *Baqi*, the Mosque of al Manaratain, and many more historically relevant heritage sites, leaving not a single dome in the locale (Ahmed, 2006, p. 71).Thus, in the nineteenth century, during the pre-Saudi state era, the argument for destroying Islamic heritage sites was based solely on Wahhabi doctrine that led followers toward *tawhid* and away from *shirk*.

The military and diplomatic campaigns undertaken by Abd al Aziz ibn Saud during the formation of the third Saudi state resulted in the modern Kingdom of Saudi

Arabia. Additionally, ibn Saud laid the base for installation of Wahhabism by reinstating the Al al Sheikh, descendants of Muhammad ibn Abd al Wahhab, as the religious leaders in Saudi Arabia (Commins, 2006, p. 71). In due course, however, the impact of the *ulama* slowly lessened. Under the contemporary Saudi leadership, their power was limited to acting as guardians of ritual correctness and public morality. The Wahhabi *ulama* acknowledged their constrained role while surrendering to the Saud family the "right to pursue what the ruler deemed necessary for the Kingdom's and dynasty's welfare" (Commins, 2006, p. 71). This approach of politics over religious policies continues today; the *ulama* are aware that in order to implement their religious policies, they need to stay compliant with the Saudi rulers. (Bin Ali, 2016, p. 150; Aarts & Roelants, 2015, p. 16).

According to the official Saudi government website, all preservation works are executed under *sharia* laws respecting Islamic faith and principles because the country, since its establishment by King Abdul Aziz, has been based on *sharia* laws, the Prophet Muhammad's *Sunnah*, and the pure faith of Islam (SCTA, 2017). The current government position regarding the destruction of heritage sites is that there is no destruction, only development, and that this development is necessary for two reasons. First, the sites pose security risks for visiting pilgrims due to their structural instability ("Mecca's Changing Face," 2014; Peer, 2012). The construction projects will alleviate mobility and crowd issues that Muslim pilgrims face, by expanding the space allotted for performing their rituals ("Mecca's Changing Face," 2014; Peer, 2012). Second, these construction projects are all undertaken to ensure that worshippers will not commit *shirk* by revering structures with ties to the Prophet and his family ("Mecca's Changing Face", 2014; Peer, 2012). Thus, in the twenty-first century, the argument for destroying sites

such as graves and mosques is two-fold: first, that it will protect and accommodate worshipers, and second, that it will keep Muslims from committing *shirk*.

Are these the real motivations of the Saudi government for destroying such sites: protecting Muslims not only from weak faith but also from weak structures? I have clarified the apprehension that non-Wahhabi scholars and intellectuals have expressed about connecting such destructive actions to Islam. Although many scholars have commented on the destruction wrought by *jihadist* groups such as the Taliban and Islamic State, the sources they cited to criticize the terrorists' action—the Quran and the *Sunnah*—can also be employed to criticize Saudi Arabia as well. Both the Quran and the *Sunnah* advocate a path that requires a pious Muslim to first, appreciate diversity and freedom instead of coercion; second, preserve such heritage sites so as to learn lessons from their history; and third, appreciate the fact that previous rulers—some of which were the Prophet Muhammad's companions and early Muslim ancestors, the *Salaf*—did not destroy such historically relevant heritage sites. The few religious scholars that have voiced criticism of Saudi Arabia have mainly targeted the idea of destroying the dome at the Prophet Muhammad's tomb in Medina and the subsequent removal of his body to *Baqi*.

Although I accept that religion, specifically Wahhabism, may have been the main (if not the only) argument used during the first Saudi emirate, the pre-Saudi state, the current regime's motivation for such destruction is not motivated solely by religion or security. I believe that the justifications behind the current wave of destruction, specifically around the holy cities of Mecca and Medina, are in response to economic motivations focused specifically on (1) real estate, and (2) tourism.

Before I explore these justifications, I will suggest reasons why this destruction could not be solely based on religion, in this case Wahhabism. One reason was provided earlier, in Chapter Two: the fact that the Saudi government allowed not only the preservation of 131 tombs dating from the first century A.D. but going one step further and registering the site on the UNESCO World Heritage List (Aarts & Roelants, 2015, p. 5; "Saudi Sites," 2015). Furthermore, the government also tolerated the Rock Art of Hail, with its anthropomorphs, bovine figures, and numerous representations of human figures, rather than leveling the tombs or erasing the art in deference to Wahhabi principles (SCTH, "Rock Art", 2015; SCTH, "Jubbah Site,"2015; SCTH, "Rata and Al Manjor Site,"2015). If the government were in fact following Wahhabi doctrine as its main motivation, then the tombs and art should have been destroyed.

It is also interesting to note that the Kingdom has a non-profit organization dedicated to promoting visual art such as paintings and sculptures. The organization, named Painting & Patronage, was established in Riyadh in 1999 by Prince Khalid Al Faisal bin Abdul Aziz Al Saud, who is not only the Governor of Mecca Region but also the Adviser to King Salman bin Abdul Aziz Al-Saud, custodian of the two holy mosques,. The fact that there are several *fatwas* against visual arts such as paintings and sculptures, and yet the Saudi rulers have dedicated a non-profit for the sole promotion of such art, is another example of how the current rulers of Saudi Arabia are demonstrably not bound by Wahhabism or influenced by its *ulama* (Al-Saud, 2009).

Another example is the *fatwas* issued by the *ulama* to prohibit *taswir.* Whether of rocks or in the form of a picture, the prohibition against *taswir* is severe because revering such objects in any way leads one to *shirk*. Yet, the centennial celebration designed to

mark one hundred years of Al Saud rule created opportunities for the Saudi government to develop "an ancestor cult around Ibn Saud," in which he was venerated by capturing all his accomplishments in pictures and portraits, encouraging a perception of immortality (Al Rasheed, 2002, pp. 209, 211, 214). As an ideology, Wahhabism disparages the commemoration of history because such festivities represent a form of *bida*, and as such the tradition denounces saint worship (Al Rasheed, 2002, p. 215; Hameed, 2015). Even Shaykh Abd al Aziz ibn Baz issued a *fatwa* in which he declared that the centennial celebration was an imitation of non-believers. Therefore, had the Saudi rulers strictly followed Wahhabism, these events would not have occurred (Al Rasheed, 2002, p. 205).

Another reason this destruction cannot be associated primarily with religion is a Wahhabist concept called *al wala wal bara* (hereafter referred to as WB) which translates as "loyalty and disavowal": *wala* means loyalty to the Muslim community, *bara* means rejection of the non-Muslim and their culture. Wahhabis believe that WB safeguards them from *bida* and strengthens unity among true believers of Islam. WB requires that Muslims not imitate non-Muslims in their dress, language, morality, or culture. Similarly, a true Muslim refuses to take part in celebrations or festivities invented by non-Muslims. The only celebrations a Muslim can participate in are the two Eids: one that marks the end of Ramadan, and one that marks the pilgrimage season; any other festival or celebration is *bida* (Bin Ali, 2016, pp. 136-141), and celebrating the Al Saud centennial is in direct violation of *al wala wal bara*.

In the nineteenth century, followers of ibn Abd al Wahhab accused the Ottomans of corrupting Islam and were labeled as heretics as only Arabs were deemed worthy Muslims because they believed in *tawhid* and stayed away from *bida*. However, if one

looks at what now occupies the current sites that were destroyed to protect Muslims from *bida* and *shirk,* it is apparent that religion was not the basis for such destruction. For example, a Hilton hotel and a Burger King, both symbols of Western capitalism, stand on the site where the house of the Prophet's closest companion and Islam's first Caliph, Abu Bakr, once existed (Power, 2014; Hameed, 2015). Surrounding the holy site in Mecca are shopping plazas filled with designer fashions, food courts, luxury hotels, parking lots, helipads, and much more, all promoting Western capitalism and conveying the feel of New York or Las Vegas rather than a place to venerate the one true God (Peer, 2012; Al Alawi, 2015). Thus, the pious Muslim is being pulled away from God by flagrant capitalism. The construction of hotels and shopping malls goes against the concept of *al wala wal bara* because it allows an otherwise pious Muslim to easily access the culture of non-Muslims by living and dressing like them.

Is it reasonable to argue then that such destruction is not for religious reasons (Commins, 2006, p. 100)? During the eighteenth century, both Muhammad ibn Abd al Wahhab and Muhammad ibn Saud agreed to finance their conquests with *zakat* and *jihad*. Later, when there was less money, Abdul Aziz ibn Saud attacked Mecca for the purpose of gaining access to pilgrimage taxes and custom duties—although he claimed it was to protect the pilgrims. Thereafter, the Treasury continued to depend on pilgrims and *zakat*. However, after Ibn Saud founded the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia in 1932, his finance minister signed an agreement in 1933 with Standard Oil of California (SOCAL) to begin exploration for oil (Al Rasheed 2002, p. 91). From that point, through the 1970s, considerable income was realized from the sale of petroleum. However, in the 1980s weak demand for oil and lower prices drove down revenues, causing a budget deficit

until 2000 (Menoret, 2005, pp. 140-41). Since 1938, Saudi Arabia has enjoyed considerable revenue from oil, but today the oil-rich country is entering a post-oil era in which it wants financial resources that are less dependent on oil (Mufson, 2017; Ellyatt & Gamble, 2018). The slowdown in oil revenues during the 1980s was a reminder to the country of the need to diversify its economy. Thus, Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, as part of the country's move to diversify its oil-based economy, has developed a plan to reinvent the Saudi economy by 2030, calling his plan Vision 2030 (Mufson, 2017; Ellyatt & Gamble, 2018). As part of this quest, the evidence I have cited points to two main motivations for the destruction of historical religious sites: real estate and tourism.

Real Estate

During the 1970s, real estate became a "profitable and prestigious investment" in Saudi Arabia, and land surrounding the holy cities became the object of attention (Menoret, 2005, p. 160). Mecca is one of, if not the most, expensive area of real estate in the world; the price of one square meter ranges from $130,000 to more than $500,000 (Atassi, 2015; Peer, 2012). It is no wonder that the house of Mawlid, where the Prophet was born, is under threat: not because it might lead Muslims to venerate the house where the Prophet was born, but because a large real estate development project, the new Jabal Umar, would transform the site into car parks and hotels (Ahmed, 2006). Around the Grand Mosque in Mecca, recent sites were destroyed and replaced with luxury hotels where rooms range from $500 to $5,880 per night. Such economic returns become a persuasive motivation for destroying an ancient, historically relevant religious site (Chehata, 2014; "Mecca's Changing Face," 2017).

Another example is Bani Saad village. The SCTH recently stated that "Bani Saad village in Taif had nothing to do with Halima Al Saadiya, the wet nurse of the Prophet Muhammad" ("Site in Taif", 2016). The site is popular among Muslim travelers and pilgrims because of its connection to the Prophet's life, yet the SCTH believes there is no evidence to prove this is the case: "After studying historical texts and geographical sites, the team later reached the conclusion that Bani Saad, where the Prophet had spent his childhood" is located elsewhere ("Site In Taif", 2016). Was it just coincidence then that Saudi Arabia's King Salman approved approximately $3 billion for projects in Taif that will include a new airport, the tourist city of Souq Okaz, a residential suburb, and an industrial and university city, all of which will contribute to Taif's economy and tourism ("King Inaugurates," 2017; Anderson, 2017; "New Taif Projects," 2017)?

Tourism

Up to this point, I have focused on tourism as it relates to pilgrimages to the holy cities of Mecca and Medina ("Saudi Arabia to Open," 2017; "Saudi Crown Prince," 2017). However, the Crown Prince's Vision 2030 economic reform program views religious tourism as one way to expand and diversify the economy away from oil, hoping that pilgrims will visit not only the holy cities but eventually spend their money at luxury resorts, food courts, and designer fashion stores that surround these holy cities ("Islamic Tourism," 2017).

Even before the discovery of oil in the Kingdom, state revenues had been drawn from *zakat* and pilgrimage taxes. Therefore it makes sense that the country would again look to religious tourism and pilgrimage taxes as sources of revenue. Some estimates say

that over four million Muslims make the pilgrimage to Mecca each year, and the rulers have always regarded pilgrims as a major source of revenue, typically exceeding $30 billion. In 2025 close to 17 million pilgrims are expected to visit Mecca (Peer, 2012).

The SCTH has said that it plans to restore the historical mountains of Mecca as yet another way to attract pilgrims. For example, the Jabal Al Noor, a mountain in the city of Mecca where Hira Cave is located, has great significance in the history of Islam. Hira Cave was where the first verses of the Quran were revealed to the Prophet, thus people seek out this historic cave. Another site that attracts many religious tourists is the Cave of Thawr where the Prophet Muhammad and his companion Abu Bakr took shelter from pagans who pursued them during their migration to Medina ("Saudi Tourism Authorities," 2017; "Saudi Arabia to Promote," 2018). Many pilgrims and visitors to Medina also visit Mount Uhud, known for the famous battle of Uhud in 625, where Muslim forces battled against a pagan tribe from Mecca. Mount Uhud is associated with several historical sites, one of which is the burial site for 70 of the Prophet's companions killed during the battle ("In Picture," 2017; Mohammed, 2017). Had the Saudi government been serious about following the fundamental teachings of Wahhabism, it would have destroyed or closed Mount Uhud, the Cave of Thawr, and Hira Cave, since visiting these sites would lead many of the pilgrims to venerate them due to their connection to the Prophet Muhammad, eventually leading the pilgrims to *bida* and *shirk.* However, these sites are not only open to visitors and pilgrims, but the Kingdom highlights these sites and plans to rehabilitate the historic mountains to appeal to pilgrims and encourage them to visit the sites. An example of this is when in 2016, the SCTH investigated the erasure "of historic writing[s] on Uhud Mountain near the graveyards of

the martyrs," submitting a report to the President of SCTH, Prince Sultan bin Salman, and Saleh Abbas, the Director of the SCTH's branch in Medina, recommending preservation of the writings on rocks ("Tourism Body Probes", 2016).

Although the influence of Wahhabism was strong in the earlier Saudi states, which led to much of the destruction of historically relevant heritages sites, even then financial motivation was part of the plan. Conquests in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries not only expanded the domains of the Saudi state, but also expanded its finances due to the raids and pillaging of lands such as Hasa, Basra, and beyond. Pilgrims have long been the main source of revenue, even before the formation of the first Saudi state. The discovery of oil only shifted the focus temporarily. The reality is that with two of the holiest cities of Islam—Mecca and Medina—it is not likely that Saudi rulers will ignore Muslim pilgrims and the consistent revenue they bring to the state.

The destruction of historically relevant sites has not come about solely because of Wahhabism; rather, given the evidence cited in this thesis, the Saudi state appears to have two agendas behind its actions. One is to make way for modernization in the state that will increase its financial resources, as exemplified by the luxury hotels that surround Mecca. The other is to maintain its religious hegemony by placating the Wahhabi *ulama,* allowing them some authority in matters of religion, similar to what was done in Kosovo. Had the motivations for destruction been solely religious, many of the locations mentioned previously would not exist today.

Chapter VI

Conclusion

At the beginning of this thesis, I proposed one main question for which I sought answers and three follow-up questions:

- Question #1 asked: should the destruction of historic Islamic sites be permitted or even condoned within the context of Islam, as such structures could lead a Muslim to *shirk*?
- Question #2 asked: has Wahhabi doctrine influenced the Saudi state during its many iterations to allow such destruction?
- Question #3 asked: how does the Saudi government justify its actions?
- Question #4 asked: do Muslim scholars who do not follow Wahhabi ideology oppose these acts of destruction?

The first Saudi emirate was characterized by conquests and motivated by the desire to spread pure Islam. Before the discovery of oil, the Saudi state acquired its authority and validity via Islam in the form of Wahhabism. Saudi rule was legitimized by the support of the *ulama;* in turn, the *ulama,* backed by the Saudi emirate, demolished what they considered *bida* or *shirk*. However, after the formation of the third Saudi emirate and the discovery of oil, the situation changed: whereas Islam was originally the driving force of conquest, it now took a back seat to modernization. The Wahhabi *ulama* of the first Saudi emirate lacked the power they once held. Limited to acting as guardians of ritual correctness and public morality, the role of the *ulama* became that of state

apologists, to be called upon by the King when needed. In due course, it became clear to the *ulama* that if they wished to have a role in the new Kingdom, they had to accept the subordination of religion to politics.

With the *ulama*'s role constrained, the Saudi government pursued the following actions, which it deemed necessary for the Kingdom's and the Saud family's welfare, even if that meant going against Wahhabi teachings:

- the preservation and listing of the Rock Art of Hail on the UNESCO World Heritage List,
- the creation of a non-profit specifically to promote visual arts,
- the centennial celebration of Al Saud rule by venerating ibn Saud's legacy, and
- allowing Western capitalism to surround the holy cities of Mecca and Medina.

Each of these actions points to a country that has changed over time, focusing more on its economy and future modern state rather than its religious ideology.

Although the Saudi government might claim that removing heritage sites affiliated with the Prophet Muhammad and his family, and expanding the area surrounding the holy city of Mecca, were done not only to accommodate pilgrims but also to stop pilgrims from committing *shirk*, the fact is that the destruction of relevant historic sites did not come about solely because of Wahhabism. Rather, the Saudi state demonstrates by its actions, often in contradiction with its statements, two objectives behind the destruction:

1. to make way for modernization in the state that will move it forward financially, for example, by removing the house of Abu Bakr, Prophet Muhammad's

companion and Islam's first Caliph, and replacing it with luxury hotels and shopping malls.

2. to keep religious hegemony intact by appeasing the Wahhabi *ulama* by allowing them some control in matters of religion, such as replacing Ottoman-styled mosques in Kosovo with whitewashed plain mosques devoid of decorations and embellishment.

Most non-Wahhabi Muslim scholars are of the opinion that Islam does not condone such acts, which is why it is not possible to assign culpability to Islam. According to many non-Wahhabi scholars, the Quran, the *Sunnah*, and many examples throughout history highlight the importance of preserving ancient heritage sites. Scholars advocate a path that requires a pious Muslim to first appreciate diversity and freedom instead of coercion; second, preserve such heritage sites so as to learn lessons from their history; and third, appreciate the fact that previous rulers such as Prophet Muhammad's companions and the early Muslim ancestors, the *Salaf*, did not destroy such historically relevant heritage sites.

Several possible courses of action could be considered by the Saudi state to stop further destruction of these sites. For example, hotels and other commercial structures could be built several miles from holy sites and roads constructed to accommodate the pilgrims (Atassi, 2015). Emphasis could be placed on improving services, such as hospitals and fire departments, if pilgrims are truly the main concern of the Saudi state (Hameed, 2015). The state could limit the number of pilgrims that arrive each year, which would profoundly lower the number of negative incidents involving pilgrims. The Saudi government has sufficient resources that it could manage a smaller crowd without

having to create more room by expanding the mosques in Mecca or Medina or destroying ancient heritage sites to build luxury hotels. To avoid veneration by the visiting pilgrims, the state could simply block off sites that have a connection to the Prophet and his family instead of leveling them off. Such sites could be transformed into museums or libraries for Muslims to visit and expand their knowledge—something emphasized by both the *Quran* and the *Sunnah*.

Destroying historically relevant heritage sites in an effort to comply with Wahhabist philosophies occurred during the formation of the first Saudi state. But as time passed and the Wahhabi *ulama* lost their power over religious affairs in Saudi Arabia, it became obvious that religion was no longer influencing Saudi society. These religious sites have been around for centuries, maintained by previous caliphs and sultans, each of whom was enjoined by both the Quran and the *Sunnah* to preserve them. While there is a need to accommodate ever-increasing numbers of pilgrims, I have highlighted the need to preserve these historically relevant heritage sites even as the country moves toward a modern Saudi state.

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