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Crude Imaginations: Capitalism, Space, and the Politics of History in Saudi Arabia

In 1994, the deputy minister for town planning at the Ministry of Municipal and Rural Affairs (MOMRA) was tasked with resurrecting the historical areas of Riyadh, the capital of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia.ⁱ Ironically, many of the city's historical sites had been demolished during the 1973–1979 oil boom to make way for wider roads and taller buildings. Somehow, the deputy minister had to reimagine and recreate what the old city had once looked like. It was meant to be a rebirth of sorts. The deputy minister was particularly concerned with how the built environment changed social relations and engendered, in particular, a loss of what he understood to be traditional Saudi identity and culture. At the same time that he was to resurrect Riyadh, he was tasked with Mecca's spatial redevelopment. There, he would oversee the accelerated destruction of sacred and historical places, including the site on which the prophet Muhammad's home once stood, as essential for the success of large-scale urban redevelopment projects. On the one hand, the deputy minister employed the world's most celebrated experts and technologies to replicate historic Riyadh. On the other hand, he personally oversaw the replacement of Mecca's historical sites and thousand-year-old topography with imposing steel-and-glass skyscrapers.

The destruction of one form of historical memory in Mecca, which Wahhabi religious sensibilities support, has been critical for the consolidation of Saudi political authority since its very inception. It has also been complemented by the belated creation and memorialization of an official, secular history in Riyadh. I explore this dissonance through a genealogical reading of the material and spatial politics that have been central to Saudi petro-modernity.ⁱⁱ In particular, I look at the ways in which the challenges of the 1990 Gulf War effected the multibillion-dollar

remaking of “historic Riyadh” and the creation of a heritage industry therein,ⁱⁱⁱ and the massive investments that have led to the demolition of much older historical sites in Mecca. I address the political contours of practices of commemoration and its necessary complement, “creative destruction,”^{iv} as a particular aspect of practices of history making, political legitimation and economic diversification.^v I do so for two interconnected reasons: First, to illustrate the longer-term and far more complex processes of Saudi state formation in the twentieth century. Second, to at once decenter and nuance the focus on petroleum and religion in discussions of Saudi Arabia while seriously engaging with questions of historical contingency, crisis, and causality that allow us to reexamine Saudi history and politics.

The 1990 Gulf War was one such incident that drastically altered the political economy of Saudi Arabia. The anti-regime popular mobilizations that emerged during the war, coupled with the post-war global economic recession, shaped the ways in which the ruling Al Saud monarchy managed its monopoly on political power and economic resources. On the one hand, the rulers adopted multi-pronged strategies of coercion and cooptation to pacify oppositional movements. Doing so foregrounded the urgency of revising state mechanisms of consent generation and subject formation, to which the rulers responded by embarking on a new project of historical memorialization and political commemoration. On the other hand, these same rulers relied on land speculation, and the development of real estate schemes in particular, as new modes of political legitimation and capital generation, given the post-war narrowing of investment opportunities abroad. Specifically, the Saudi regime targeted Mecca and Riyadh as objects of cultural and urban redevelopment. Central to this restructuring were the manifestation and circulation of new visions of the Saudi modern. Thereafter, land speculation and the development of real estate schemes assumed a central role in both economic and political life.

Manipulating and managing the built environment with petro-capital surplus, the political and economic elites were able to transform profits into rent in drastically divergent ways while territorializing and spatially circulating the official version of the past.^{vi} In Saudi Arabia, therefore, the post-war crisis of legitimacy has at once centered on *historicizing* a national space, territorializing a national history, and refracting both through new modes of capital generation.^{vii}

History's Turns: War as Opportunity

The 1990 Gulf War was a watershed in contemporary world history, one that had local and global reverberations, from the restructuring of economic systems to the reordering of geopolitical power. In Saudi Arabia, not only did the war alter the political economy, but it also enabled the Saudi regime to reorganize state-society relations in such ways as to strengthen the monarchy's political control and further entrench its economic alliances. The regime had accrued extraordinary oil revenues from 1970 through 1979, which allowed it to invest in the country's structural and infrastructural landscapes. However, the regime's inability to capture similar revenue levels from 1980 at least until 2004 due to collapsing oil prices strained its developmental capabilities. Furthermore, the diminishing oil revenues of the 1980s and 1990s coincided with Al Sa'ud's support for the region's costly wars. The regime single-handedly paid over half of the cost of the 1990 war, after largely financing Saddam Hussein's regime during the 1980–1988 Iran-Iraq War.^{viii} As a swing producer, Saudi Arabia immediately compensated for the loss of Iraqi and Kuwaiti oil production by increasing its own output days after the advent of the 1990 Gulf War, thereby stabilizing the price of oil. All the while, the country continued to suffer from a globally driven recession and the subsequent constriction of global investment opportunities. By 1995, prices were barely starting to recover when the 1997 Asian financial

crisis reduced the price of oil to levels not seen since before 1973, thereby limiting productive worldwide investment opportunities.^{ix} The war thus exacerbated the extreme fluctuations in wealth revenue streams of the previous decade and increased the urgency of realizing other, regular sources of income.

Economic and political conditions during and following the war also led to a popular backlash against the regime and threatened its legitimating foundation. Opposition to the rule of Al Saud had emerged with the family's imperial wars of conquest and subsequent early twentieth-century state-building project. Confronting a world that was being radically altered by forces of Western hegemony, petro-capitalism and authoritarianism, men and women in Arabia appropriated various currents of Arab nationalism, socialism and communism to make sense of their lives and attempt to define their futures. In seeking social justice, independence and political participation, these popular mobilizations challenged the very idea, and form, of the Saudi state and the emerging global oil order to which it was pivotal. The mobilizations, however, never reached critical mass and could not withstand the regime's symbolic and material means of coercion, unlike the widespread opposition movements of the 1990s. Therein, the Islamist movement in particular was mass based, well organized and deeply entrenched in society. It unprecedentedly challenged the ruling family on official religious grounds.^x Together with the constitutionalists and feminists, Saudi Islamists maintained that the ruling family was supposed to safeguard the sanctity of the holy lands of Mecca and Medina. Instead, King Fahd's regime had allowed US troops, men and women, to be stationed inside the kingdom.^{xi} Oppositional mobilizations publicly revealed the contradictions of an unabashed self-proclaimed Islamic state that was inherently authoritarian, economically unjust and reliant on foreign powers.^{xii} The economic recession only exacerbated such sentiments. The attendant popular

mobilizations thereby called for the severing of ties with the United States, the equal distribution of social and economic rights and, importantly, the institution of a constitutional monarchy in which Al Sa‘ud played a symbolic role at most. These demands threatened the triangulation of oil revenues, Wahhabi Salafism and US support that had sustained political authority.

The Saudi regime adopted a multipronged strategy to manage the emerging threats to its rule. It launched a ruthless attack against the Sahwa Islamists, killing, exiling and imprisoning many of their supporters, or otherwise intimidating them into silence, in the first half of that decade.^{xiii} On the one hand, the regime appeased non-establishment Islamists and gave in to some of their demands in order to bolster the rulers’ religious legitimacy. It also brought them into the regime’s fold through employment and inclusion in largely symbolic national debates, which were centralized in the institution of the King Abdulaziz Center for National Dialogue. On the other hand, the regime began a long-term policy of limiting the religious establishment’s influence on cultural power in the kingdom, especially over the realm of cultural production and subject (re)formation. Having temporarily crushed the most popular movement in Saudi Arabia, the regime turned its attention further east to Qatif and managed to strike a deal with the exiled Qatafi Islamists after a decade of confronting their oppositional mobilizations.^{xiv} Their leaders were largely co-opted by the ruling family and returned home to Qatif, where they found new homes and, in some cases, generous monthly salaries awaiting them. Finally, the regime swiftly dealt with the constitutionalists and political reformists. Both these forces had also taken advantage of the regime’s weakness and vulnerability, and were now making public demands for a constitutional monarchy as well as citizen representation and participation.^{xv} The regime’s tactics on this front included co-opting, jailing, intimidating or exiling the leaders, and crushing all forms of dissent. In the same time period, in order to appease its critics, the regime adopted

the Basic Law of Saudi Arabia and soon thereafter introduced the appointed Consultative Council (Majlis al-Shura) and new administrative laws that led to the emergence of provincial councils.^{xvi} In 1995, King Fahd (r. 1982-2005) also established the Supreme Council of Islamic Affairs, made up of the most loyal royal family members and their religious allies, in order to counter the increasingly challenging Council of Ulama, who refused to toe the regime line more times than the regime could tolerate.^{xvii}

Having pacified its opponents, King Fahd's regime then looked to the broader issues of citizen-subject formation, social engineering, national belonging and regime legitimacy—beyond what the founding petro-social contract previously undergirding the Saudi state had allowed. The 1990 Gulf War and its immediate aftermath made ruling members of the royal family especially wary of how religion, including the same Salafi version of Islam they had themselves propagated, became a site of mass opposition. They understood this popular backlash against their rule as resulting from the lack of a national sense of belonging that they had actively prevented from emerging in the country.^{xviii} Al Sa'ud had feared secular nationalism, especially in its mid-twentieth century, revolutionary manifestation. Popular nationalist mobilizations in the Arab world, embodied in calls for social justice, people power and freedom from colonial and imperial governance, especially threatened the Saudi ruling family's hereditary, authoritarian form of rule, which ultimately depended on US support for its survival.^{xix}

Unlike nationalism in neighboring states, the founding ideology in Saudi Arabia had been rooted in strict obedience to the official Saudi Salafi interpretation of Islam and loyalty to the monarch as the protector and enforcer of religion. This ideology had also been framed by a developmentalist mentality that excluded subjects from political participation, denied them their agency, and made the petro-regime responsible for all modernization plans and the welfare of the

country's inhabitants.^{xx} At the close of the twentieth century, the Saudi regime needed to revise its politics and technologies of state building and subject formation in order to confront the swelling challenges that the war had wrought, least of which was the theretofore-unprecedented crisis of legitimacy. Many scholars of Arabia have largely portrayed the role of legitimization ideology as static at best and insignificant at worst. Undergirding such a portrayal is the assumption that oil wealth has produced a stable state formation process in which ideology is either unnecessary or does not require modification. But mechanisms of consent generation in Arabia have, since the creation of the state in 1932, been historically contingent on a plethora of challenges, from competing religious subjectivities to anti-authoritarianism and water scarcity.^{xxi} In fact, Saudi Arabia and its economy were never pre-determined entities. Like states and markets elsewhere, they were forged through political, social, and economic struggles, and continue to rely on symbolic and material practices for their consolidation. In the late twentieth century, it was because of the post-war crisis of legitimacy that the Saudi regime turned its gaze to both memorializing a revised, state-sanctioned secular history and diversifying the economy as a means of reconfiguring the petro-social contract. The turmoil of the 1990s was therefore central not only to the shifting relationship between religious and secular powers, but also to the very mechanisms of producing consent, reordering social relations and generating wealth.

Commemoration as Device: Materiality, History, Politics

The centennial commemoration of Al Saud's conquest of Riyadh in 1902 was the perfect device through which to launch the regime's post-war legitimization mechanism, rooted as it was in the monumentalization of Al Sa'ud's history and the diversification and financialization of the economy. That the celebration commemorates the passing of one hundred Hijri years since the

so-called founding father ‘Abd al-‘Aziz ibn Sa‘ud conquered Riyadh—and not the creation of the Saudi state in 1932—speaks to the centrality of the event in Saudi historical consciousness. ‘Abd al-‘Aziz ibn Sa‘ud’s regime had even attempted to celebrate the fiftieth Hijri anniversary of the takeover of Riyadh on July 20, 1950. However, the semicentennial celebration was canceled because the religious establishment, powerful as it then still was, opposed it, seeing the celebration as a heretical and mediated form of worship and an association with, and thereby a diminution of, the oneness of God—in short, an innovation (*bid‘a*).^{xxii} Wahhabi doctrine equates submission to the political ruler with submission to God. Yet it strictly forbids the monumentalization of such a ruler, and indeed of *any* symbolic material structures writ large, seeing them as a mediated form of worship and an association with God. They equate all such actions with polytheism, which is seen as a grievous sin.

Half a decade later, especially following the 1990 Gulf War, the power dynamic between the religious and secular establishments had shifted, privileging the latter. From the start, ‘Abd al-‘Aziz subdued the religious establishment, comprised of scholars, *mutawwa‘a* (“religious ritual specialists”),^{xxiii} the Ikhwan and the *muhtasibūn*^{xxiv} (Salafī Wahhabi inspectors charged with maintaining public order, morality, health, cleanliness and trade fairness and honesty). The importance of subduing the religious establishment became especially salient after it had infringed upon political decisions and imperial interests, as the Ikhwan had done in 1928. The official religious establishment remained largely, though not consistently, bound by political necessities and deferential to the unbending will of the ruler as well.^{xxv} Yet state-allied religious leaders were the bedrock of political legitimation, enshrining the notion of obedience and acquiescence to the ruler as a religious obligation. King Fahd’s reforms bureaucratized the

religious establishment, further incorporating it into state institutions and stripping it of decision-making power.

By the mid-1990s, the regime was not in the least concerned about official religious opposition to the secular celebration and was able to use the event as a political device to cement the new set of power relations. In 1996, the regime passed a royal order declaring January 16, 1999, the beginning of the yearlong centennial celebration—the first official nonreligious holiday in the country’s history.^{xxvi} The conquest of Riyadh thereafter served as a myth of origin on which the ruling family based its legitimacy and its historical right to sole control over the land and its resources. The revised official historical narrative diluted the centrality of the so-called marriage between politics and religion, that union that had ostensibly enabled the emergence of the modern state.^{xxvii} The importance of the eighteenth-century Islamic Salafi scholar Muhammad ibn ‘Abd al-Wahhab and his Wahhabi movement to Al Sa‘ud’s political project was increasingly marginal in the revised official historical narrative. Religion was no longer the ideology through which state formation was legitimated. Instead, the revised narrative centers more on Al Sa‘ud’s genealogy and secular history than on religious ideology.^{xxviii} In so doing, the new legitimation mechanism confined, to a certain extent, the role of the religious establishment to the spiritual and the moral, distancing it as much as possible from positions of power and decision-making. The national fiction then glorified Al Sa‘ud’s past and the role of its ruling members in bringing *their* nation into being, and developing and sustaining it. Without the ruling family, the narrative holds, there would be no nation, no petro-resources, no religion and thus no future.

The late twentieth-century shifts in legitimation mechanisms, and the centennial celebrations that heralded them, centered on memorializing the revised official history. Doing so

involved the production of that history's source materials and the archives that would house them as well as the territorialization of the revised history in the built environment. The belated turn to historiography was being instantiated, monumentalized and circulated in everyday material life through the production of national museums, archives and memorial spaces, specifically in Riyadh's "old city" as well as the adobe fortress of Dir'iyya—home of both Al Sa'ud and Al 'Abd al-Wahhab.

Yet sites of memory formation were not altogether new in the kingdom. State archives and museums first emerged in the 1970s, as did countrywide archeological excavation projects. These, however, were largely the result of individual, and on rare occasions, institutional efforts responding to the fast-paced change that drastically transformed the economic, social and cultural landscapes following the 1973 oil boom. Many of the Saudi graduates of higher education who had studied history, archeology and museology in Egypt, Lebanon, France, Great Britain and the United States returned home in the 1970s and embarked on projects to preserve Arabia's past. They were responding to anxieties that archeologist 'Abdallah Masri best expressed when he alarmingly explained in 1980 that, "Unless our cultural heritage is carefully preserved, 20 years from now Saudis may be walking around like zombies with only a veneer of modern life to call civilization."^{xxix} Jobs in these fields remained scarce, which led some to pursue their careers at the Arabian American Oil Company (Aramco) as archeologists, becoming members of ongoing excavations. A few joined the ranks of the fledgling Ministry of Higher Education as well as the Ministry of Education and its Department of Antiquities and Museums.

The new graduates initiated some of the major material cultural projects, including the King Abdulaziz Foundation for Research and Archives (KAFRA) in 1972 and six years later, the Museum of Archeology and Ethnography, the first museum of its kind in Arabia.^{xxx} The museum

showcased material life from the different areas of the Arabian Peninsula that have made up the modern state since 1932.^{xxxii} Importantly, it included a minor exhibit on Dir‘iyya, representing its material artifacts as *remnants* of the town, which the Ottomans had destroyed in 1818. In this cultural and historical imaginary, Dir‘iyya represented one among many of Arabia’s demolished material lifeworlds. Two decades later, the town would receive a complete makeover and be at the forefront of Riyadh’s post–1990 Gulf War cultural and urban redevelopment plans, a transformation I will address shortly. Until then, these cultural projects aimed to uncover and document the diverse histories of the Arabian Peninsula. The construction of archives and museums represented unsolicited efforts to safeguard that which was familiar—history in its multiple forms—from the ravages of a fledgling petro-modernity. These efforts were not yet concerted, centralized state projects that privileged a singular form of history, that of Al Sa‘ud, for specific political, economic and social aims.

These new institutions and projects therefore remained incomplete, and largely hollow, not simply because practices of memorialization counter official Salafi (Wahhabi) beliefs, as is commonly assumed, but primarily because they did not receive the necessary state support. While Ottoman-era Wahhabi forces took up the Shi‘i shrines of Najaf and Karbala’ and the Sufi houses of worship in the Hijaz as prime idolatrous targets, historically, such acts of destruction were equally motivated by economic and territorial conquest. They were not purely symbolic in nature. As such, the religious establishment took up places of religious importance as sites of material and discursive contestation against those they considered non-Orthodox Sunni Muslims—a flexible term that was used for those who opposed Al Sa‘ud’s political project. With the advent of the mandate system and the newly established state borders in the Middle East, the British no longer tolerated the transgressions of Al Sa‘ud’s Wahhabi forces into Iraq. With the

1928 Ikhwan Revolt,^{xxxii} the Saudi regime had to first crush the movement and then manage the iconoclastic desires of its religious zealots, using these for political purposes when necessary.^{xxxiii} Doing so became part and parcel of modern techniques of governance.

While the religious establishment opposed the production of material culture on religious grounds, in reality, the regime more broadly was not interested in material cultural politics and engineering. It had even rejected several fully funded proposals it had received since the 1970s for preserving Al Sa‘ud’s own material heritage in Riyadh, seeing such projects as futile and frivolous. By the turn of the century, however, with the post-war crisis of legitimacy, sites of memorialization such as Dir‘iyya, Masmak Fortress, the National Museum and the Governance Palace assumed new life and urgency for the rulers. Indeed, the regime even used the official religious establishment to legitimate and enable their construction. State-allied religious leaders initially condemned the establishment of museums and memorialization spaces as well as the showcasing of statues and other artifacts. By the 2000s, however, not only had they bestowed their blessings on the regime’s commemoration projects, but they also openly visited the actual sites, hailing them as exemplary modernization projects.

Since the shift in the politics of memorialization, the capital city has undergone an urban and cultural redevelopment that has seen the Saudi regime investing hundreds of billions of dollars in the production of material heritage that privileges Al Sa‘ud’s past. These cultural sites, situated in Riyadh and its outskirts, include several state archives, the National Museum and other regional ones, the King Abdulaziz Historical Center, Dir‘iyya, Masmak Fortress and “historic” Riyadh, among others. Together, these sites monumentalize Al Sa‘ud’s genealogy and oil modernity at the same time that they centralize political power in Al Sa‘ud’s Riyadh. In so doing, they reify Najd as the political, cultural and economic center at a time when societal

fragmentation, popular opposition, and heightened regionalism have challenged such consolidation. At the same time, these sites of historical knowledge production and circulation were, simultaneously, new sources for economic production. On the one hand, they were the bedrock of a national tourism plan that was, and is, still in the making. On the other hand, they enabled the financialization of capitalism, whereby the regime encouraged and enabled capital investment within and surrounding emerging sites of memorialization. Investments in space, in particular, and the consequent rise of the real estate industry and land speculation, overhauled postwar political, economic and social realities.

Cultural Redevelopment and The Politics of Preservation

The new reinvigoration of Riyadh's urban and cultural plans saw the pouring of over twenty-eight billion dollars, as of 2011, into the renovation of the adobe fortress town of Dir'iyya, the historic home of Al Sa'ud. Located twenty kilometers northwest of Central Riyadh, the conventional historical narrative depicts this walled town overlooking Hanifa Valley as the capital of the so-called first Saudi "state" (1744–1818). In 1818, Ibrahim Pasha—son of Egyptian governor Muhammad 'Ali—led Ottoman troops in a war against the rebellious Al Sa'ud clan.^{xxxiv} Emerging as victors from the yearlong siege of the fortress, the Ottomans subdued the area's new rulers, exiled them and their followers from Dir'iyya, and after destroying much of the town, set what was left on fire. The level of destruction prevented Al Sa'ud from ever making Dir'iyya their seat of power again. Instead, in their next attempt to secure political dominance in the region, Al Sa'ud successfully relocated to Riyadh, leaving behind a decrepit town that was neglected until the 1990s.

It was Arabia's second king, Sa'ud' ibn Abd al-'Aziz Al Sa'ud, who first expressed interest in the abandoned town of Dir'iyya. He was particularly concerned with unregulated construction taking place in the town's al-Turaif District, where his ancestors are thought to have resided, and wanted the government to purchase all properties there. With limited financial resources to purchase the titles to the land and develop it, he requested that people from lower socioeconomic classes who needed housing be allowed to temporarily move there to prevent others from seizing property within the site. Interestingly, doing so suggests the existence of political rivals who would have been able to establish property claims that, in turn, would have been construed as ownership rights, either because of their status or their political connections. Since then, the regime has attempted to control the right to development, seeing it as an economic and political resource to weaken rivals or reward allies. In 1973, King Faisal, who had dismissed a plan for building a national museum, also rejected an Egyptian consultant's proposal to develop Dir'iyya. Illegal construction and habitation in the area continued, until the Department of Antiquities bought the adobe town in 1982 during the reign of King Fahd and expropriated its inhabitants.^{xxxv}

Until recently, the ruling family had generally regarded Dir'iyya as a doomed place (*makān mash'ūm*) that only resurrected memories of defeat and weakness. The town was altogether marginal to the rulers' political or historical consciousness, until they rediscovered its potential for political and social maneuvering at the turn of this century.^{xxxvi} The urban redevelopment projects of the 1990s drove home the importance of this infrastructurally vulnerable historic site. King Fahd's regime approved its redevelopment as a heritage site under the management of Arriyadh Development Authority (ADA) in 1998.^{xxxvii} Then Riyadh governor (and current king) Salman was to chair the High Committee for the Development of Dir'iyya, the

project's supervisory body.^{xxxviii} His son, Sultan, chairman of the Saudi Commission for Tourism and Antiquities (SCTA), was a committee member. It was the ADA's biggest historical project yet, and they worked closely with the SCTA and the Municipality of Addir'iyah as consulting institutions, among other agencies, in order to rehabilitate the fort town and develop it as an international cultural tourism site.^{xxxix} Actual work on the site began only in 2004, after the Ministry of Finance approved the project's historic budget.

Historical preservationists and experts in "commercializing heritage sites" from the United States, the United Kingdom, Egypt, Morocco and Canada visited Dir'iyya and submitted proposals for its redevelopment.^{xl} Companies from the world over collaborated over the project's various phases, from conception and brainstorming to planning, preservation and execution.^{xli} The planning regime did not want to simply display the space. They wanted to somehow inject life into this otherwise deserted place and to invigorate cultural and economic vibrancy in its vicinity. The main point of contention among the different parties involved in developing the site was whether to reconstruct or attempt to preserve the severely deteriorated adobe structures. The challenge for reconstruction, according to the planners, was the lack of accurate depictions of the site and what the whole of it had actually looked like before the 1818 Ottoman invasion. Existing images were rudimentary, partial and did not hold up to expert scrutiny. Those who had inhabited the site in the last century had also built extensions on the different buildings, further complicating the conservation process. The ADA refused to demolish the town and then reconstruct it based on "imagination" and "conjecture."^{xlii} The pressure to do so, however, was so great that the ADA considered resorting to an experimental software that a renowned British structural engineering company was developing at the King Abdullah University of Science and Technology.^{xliii} The program would deduce what an original building had once looked like based

on 3D images of the remnants of existing building structures. But the engineers, and their speculative software, failed to convince the Dir‘iyya planners of the viability of the program. After months of expensive consultations, the planners rejected the proposals and instead decided to conserve as much as possible of the existing buildings.

In 2006, the Saudi Commission for Tourism and Antiquities decided to submit the al-Turaif District of Dir‘iyya for inscription as a UNESCO world heritage site. Since then, redevelopment necessarily assumed a different trajectory that prioritized the organization’s stringent regulations, goals and definitions. The planning regime commissioned an “army of experts” that worked daily to meet the conditions of UNESCO and the International Council on Monuments and Sites (ICOMOS), one of the three advisory bodies of UNESCO’s World Heritage Convention. Yet planners simply could not adhere to all the regulations. While most adobe structures are short-lived, engineers preserved Dir‘iyya with the help of the world’s best human and technological expertise. In some cases, structural engineers reconstructed buildings or parts thereof as they had existed over two centuries ago based on the closest visual approximations. They also needed to develop a completely new, modern infrastructure for water, power and sewage—aggressive practices that unavoidably affected the integrity of the site. They sought to make Dir‘iyya accessible to pedestrians and people with disabilities, which also necessitates building new roads, walkways and ramps. The regime’s actual goals for the site, then, conflicted with those of the heritage convention. The former’s aim was primarily to turn the site into the country’s foremost tourism destination in order to circulate the state’s official founding and legitimating order. ICOMOS was primarily concerned with the impact of the planned Living Heritage Museum, whose blueprint seemed to especially threaten the integrity of the site. In its review of the nomination of al-Turaif District of Dir‘iyya, the ICOMOS report

stated that “the museum and tourism development programme must in its turn be no more than a part of this [management] plan, and must be completely subordinated to the conservation of the property’s attributes of integrity and authenticity, under the surveillance of a scientific conservation committee.”^{xliiv} It further stated,

ICOMOS considers that the architectural integrity of many buildings has been affected by the history of the property and by its abandonment for more than one and a half centuries. The buildings that have not been rebuilt or restored are in ruins. The integrity of these ruins and remains from the old town is, moreover, subject to erosion and to substantial natural degradation in a manner that is specific to adobe. ICOMOS considers that the structures on which work has been carried out have been profoundly transformed and that they can no longer be considered to demonstrate integrity. The overall architectural integrity of the nominated property is therefore inadequate. . . . The severely degraded state of the property partially reused at the end of the 20th century did not allow the carrying out of simple repairs in order to make its reuse possible; this led in most cases to reconstructions and interpretations of the past state, or even to mere architectural similarity. For example, the enclosure wall was rebuilt in stone, although it was originally earthen, and Unit 5 of the Salwa Palace was entirely rebuilt using modern techniques.^{xlv}

ICOMOS concluded that because of the planners’ intervention, the conditions of authenticity, in architectural terms, had not been met, and recommended deferral until the state adhered to these requirements. ICOMOS stressed that conservation goals should be prioritized, and everything else, such as museology, should be subordinated to that goal. Given these conditions, the reality of the built environment of Dir‘iyya was alarming, given “the architectural integrity” of its sites has been regularly abused. Those working on the project faced many political obstacles and interventions. Most shocking to them were the historical ambiguities and inaccuracies, silenced and presented as historical truth by the rulers based on political motives. For instance, the team of planners, archeologists and historians working on the site simply could not find evidence locating the actual house of Muhammad ibn Sa‘ud, Al Sa‘ud’s first amir of the Dir‘iyya settlement and the one who initially harbored the religious preacher Muhammad ibn ‘Abd al-

Wahhab in 1744.^{xlvi} Visitors to the site, however, were to be directed to Qasr Salwa as the historical home of the first amir.

There were major discrepancies in these and other historical details, which the technocrats decided on based on utility. As the project consultants surveyed the site in the initial stages,^{xlvii} they found artifacts and rare material evidence that dated back to earlier settlements. Again, the technocrats ordered the archeologists to disregard any material heritage that does not refer to Al Sa‘ud’s era. This historical reimagination extended to the country’s religious founders as well. In its new life, the area where Muhammad ibn ‘Abd al-Wahhab actually lived, across from Qasr Salwa (Qasr al-Hukm), was compromised. Instead of renovating or conserving buildings there, planners, with the consent of the rulers, demolished them and built an amphitheater-like seating area where visitors can look out at the district that housed Al Sa‘ud, which lied a few hundred meters away. In line with the revised history, then, the evidentiary terrain displays the primacy of Al Sa‘ud and their secular past. In 2010, despite these political maneuvers, Dir‘iyya’s al-Turaif District earned the long-sought status of a UNESCO world heritage site on the basis that it “illustrates a significant phase in the human settlement of the central Arabian plateau, when in the mid-18th century Dir‘iyya became the capital of an independent Arab State” and showcases “Najdi architecture and its ingenious use of adobe.”^{xlviii}

One of the conditions for inscribing a historical place as a world heritage site is its potential contribution to the world through tourism. Yet Saudi Arabia lacks an international tourism strategy and forbids travel to the country for touristic purposes. According to officials at the Saudi Commission for Tourism and Antiquities, there is no short-term plan to open up the kingdom to the world either. Instead, the regime has spent a vast amount of resources on developing a *local* tourism industry, with its cultural and historical heritage in Riyadh wholly

aimed at Saudi citizen-subjects. This new spatial reordering is the final phase of implementing the regime's political imaginary, one which reinscribes a hierarchy of national belonging and identity in the built environment with the aim of shaping national subjectivity, and perhaps in the future, collective memory as well. Global recognition such as UNESCO's endorses this national history-making project and conceals the political nature of memorialization. It decenters the precarity of political authority and allows the regime to depict historical preservation as apolitical. But in fact, the regime's turn to historical legitimation is a political strategy aimed at renegotiating the state and countering ongoing claims against the ruling family. It is a strategic move that speaks directly to the heightened popular opposition and accelerated fragmentation of Saudi society following the 1990 Gulf War, exacerbated as they later were by uneven development across the kingdom. This conventionally national project of producing heritage and organizing history spatially^{xlix} discloses an ongoing cultural production of the Saudi past, but one that remains unstable and contested, dependent on petro-capital resources and the privatization of state institutions.

Mecca: A Contractor's City

The monumentalization of secular Saudi history in Riyadh and its focalization through sites of memorialization is all the more paradoxical given the Saudi regime's active neglect of historical space outside the capital, and specifically, its wholesale destruction of historical and religious sites in Central Mecca, site of the yearly Muslim pilgrimage. Indeed, the regime's quest for economic diversification and capital accumulation through the built environment drastically accelerated in the 1990s. It was then that the regime began the unprecedented development of the real estate and tourism sectors of the economy. Mecca, one of the most visited cities in the world,

with over 15 million visitors a year, was a central site of this new strategy. On the one hand, previous development projects had reached their structural limits in Mecca. On the other hand, the city's historic landscape offered new spaces for this real estate- and tourism-based development. Accordingly, official religious leaders found common cause with developers, contractors, and other economic elites in the construction of billion-dollar development projects on historical landmarks a stone's throw away from Mecca's Grand Mosque.

Until the mid-1990s, those overseeing construction, renovation and urban planning projects had largely respected the sanctity of some of Mecca's religious and historical sites. In 1996, however, as the rulers were preparing Riyadh for a major redevelopment plan with an eye to commemorating Arabia's history and heritage, their approach to Mecca also changed. They increasingly intervened in the built environment of Central Mecca and started imposing their vision of the city, which rested on commercial real estate development. It was also then that they sanctioned the destructions of major landmarks in Mecca, including those associated with the prophet as well as Ottoman sites and artifacts. After all, the material heritage of Central Mecca, Arabia's gateway to the country^l and the world, posed a problem for both Al Sa'ud's revisionist history and their notion of what modernity should look like or "do" in Mecca.^{li} Many historical sites and evidence of pre-Al Sa'ud architectural innovations and renovations (such as those of the Ottomans and the Hashemite Ashraf) undermined Al Sa'ud's justifications for their bloody conquest wars of the first three decades of the twentieth century.^{lii} These included accusations that the Ottomans and their intermediaries in the Hijaz were neglecting the social, religious and physical infrastructures of the holy cities of Mecca and Medina. Since Al Sa'ud could not rely on the past to commemorate their rule outside of Najd, they manipulated the built environment to anchor their rule for future generations. At the same time, by signing off on upscale

megaprojects steps away from Mecca's Grand Mosque, the regime was able to further capitalize on hajj revenues and increase returns on profit.

Schemes for Mecca's urban redevelopment, gleaned from the ever-changing urban master plan as well as Saudi Binladin Group (SBG) planning documents, reflect the turn to historical legitimation and the consequent changing meaning of national space and the national economy. Religious space initially stood at the center of Saudi Arabian nation-state building and ideology, until Al Sa'ud moved the capital from Mecca to Riyadh in the mid-1950s. Thereafter, the regime used religion as symbolic capital based on developing the infrastructure of the holy cities. In the post-Gulf War world and the ensuing crisis of legitimacy, Mecca came to serve a different purpose.

Indeed, the Development of King Abdul Aziz Endowment Project (DOKAAE) on Ajyad Mountain, overlooking the Grand Mosque, was the engine that propelled the massive redevelopment of Mecca in the image of its political rulers and contracting overlords. Conceived in the mid-1990s, work on design began in 1999 and was finalized in two and a half years. It was a time of economic stagnation following the two Gulf Wars and the 1997 Asian economic crisis, which saw investments in the developing East Asian economies collapse as the price of oil lingered at eleven dollars per barrel. There was a major lull in the construction industry, and prices were much lower than the exponentially increasing inflationary amounts they would reach only a few years later as a result of the DOKAAE. As the developer of this multibillion-dollar project,^{liii} the Saudi Binladin Group actually took on much of the construction costs.^{liv} Reaching an undisclosed deal on repayment with the ruling family, the goal was to stimulate Mecca's economy and real estate market—where both family and company were heavily invested—and to increase returns from hajj revenues. To do so, the plan necessarily rested on demolishing the

mosque's immediate surroundings, the most profitable and desired real estate in Mecca. Many of these were private endowment lands (*waqf dhirri*),^{lv} largely belonging to the Hashemite Ashraf, with some belonging to the Turkish and other governments, all of which have contested the regime's schemes. According to sharia, endowment land can be neither transferred nor sold. Any revenues generated by or within the endowment land should be used only for its upkeep. The project manager for the DOKAAE claims that once revenues cover the initial project investment and expenses, the endowment's revenues will start providing for the maintenance of the Grand Mosque.^{lvi} Many within Mecca's contracting industry and several Mecca Development Authority employees have expressed skepticism about the accuracy of these claims. Instead, they believe that the endowment's revenues will return to the SBG, members of the ruling family and other investors, while only a fraction will be diverted to the maintenance of the Grand Mosque, pointing to the ways in which Al Sa'ud's practices are in fundamental violation of shari'a.

Megaprojects and Spatial Logics

In early 2002, the Saudi Binladin Group began work on the Development of King Abdul Aziz Endowment Project (DOKAAE). In a feat of major secrecy, the company demolished the Ajyad Fortress, an eighteenth-century Ottoman military site that was once the Grand Mosque's major defense against invading forces.^{lvii} The whole of Mount Bulbul on which the fortress stood—two million cubic meters of rock—has fallen to the force of dynamite to make way for the sixteen million square foot Abraj al-Bayt Towers.^{lviii} According to Hatun al-Fassi, then governor of Mecca Province Prince 'Abd al-Majid ibn 'Abd al-'Aziz Al Sa'ud strongly denied rumors widely circulating in late 2000 that neighborhoods surrounding the Grand Mosque, such as al-Shamiyya, Misfila, Harat al-Bab and Ajyad, would be demolished, or even altered.

The Hashemite sharif Surur ibn Masa‘id and a group of Hijazi craftsmen and builders had constructed Ajyad Fortress in 1781, when the Ottomans had sovereignty over the holy city. The fortress and the neighborhood where it stood were one of many historical places sacrificed to satisfy the demands of historical territorialization. According to the SBG, this destruction and subsequent development was necessary to compensate for the shortage of accommodation in the Grand Mosque’s surroundings. The company claimed that the mosque’s expansion plans, which it undertook in 1982, had led to the destruction of many hotels and residential buildings, limiting the lodging market. Yet according to one of its project managers, the goal of the development was to upgrade the quality of services available in Mecca while providing investment opportunities to local and international investors.^{lix} Despite these justifications, the demolition engendered so much public criticism—local, regional and global—that the regime claimed that the Saudi Binladin Group did not demolish the Ottoman fortress. Rather, the developer had relied on world-renowned experts to professionally dismantle the eighteenth-century site and move it to a government warehouse, where allegedly it is currently stored. The regime would then reconstruct the fortress on a different mountain once the redevelopment of Mecca is complete in 2020, according to the former deputy minister for town planning—the same person who had advocated for the preservation of Riyadh’s historical sites and critiqued the DOKAAE as “disastrous.”^{lx}

Dwarfing the Grand Mosque and those praying in it, DOKAAE is one of the biggest endowment investments in the world. One of its many towers is the tallest building in Saudi Arabia today and the world’s second tallest building. It also lodges the largest clock in the world, dubbed “the capitalist clock” by those who oppose these designs. While this was a last-minute design addition, “The idea of the clock came to establish a recognized Islamic timing for prayers

and also create an internationally visible landmark.”^{lxix} The project’s designers also pointed out that the top two floors of one of the towers would become the king’s new Mecca quarters. The new quarters would replace the existing King’s Palace—located on Mount Abu Qubays—which had cost millions of dollars and covers an area over one hundred thousand square meters. The palace overlooks the Grand Mosque and had required the demolition of major Islamic artifacts and historic sites for its construction less than two decades ago.^{lxxii} In its place, the SBG will construct more prayer space.

Most importantly, the DOKAAE also includes a massive prayer hall facing the Grand Mosque, in the Abraj al-Bayt Towers;^{lxxiii} there, pilgrims with means can pray as if they were inside the Grand Mosque but without leaving the hotel. In 1998, the grand mufti of Saudi Arabia ‘Abd al-‘Aziz ibn Baz declared that pilgrims can perform congregational prayers (*ṣalāt jamā‘a*)^{lxxiv} anywhere around the holy mosque and it would amount to praying *in* the mosque.^{lxxv} This included, and indeed legitimated, the newly built international hotels adjacent to the mosque, such as the DOKAAE, on the condition that the buildings are connected to the cement foundations of the holy mosque; they could not be separated from the mosque by an actual road. Effectively, people who can afford the multi-million-dollar apartments or pay upward of three thousand dollars per night for a hotel room do not have to hear, smell, touch, or be near other pilgrims. They can pray from the luxury of their homes or hotel rooms. Originally, this measure was intended to keep Saudi kings from praying with the people and allowed them to do so in their royal palace. It was later expanded to allow the affluent to make their pilgrimage experience just that much more luxurious and exclusive while offering them smart investment opportunities.^{lxxvi}

Indeed, this “infrastructural link” became an underlying condition for the other construction projects in central Mecca, for which the DOKAAE henceforth acted as a model. It also acted as a platform for justifying the need to develop the areas immediately surrounding the Grand Mosque. By the time construction on the DOKAAE took off in 2002, some of the world’s most prominent developers had already started to invest—largely in partnership with the most powerful members of the ruling family—in the construction of other sites in Central Mecca, increasing market confidence. The economy started to show signs of recovery and the real estate market in Mecca ballooned, leading, in turn, to a new construction boom that would begin to transform the religious destination into what the regime viewed as a “model twenty-first century city for development and modernization.”^{lxvii} A wave of wholesale destruction of the remaining historical and religious sites ensued to make way for megaprojects, such as the 5.5 billion dollar Jabal Omar Development Project among others.^{lxviii} In fact, over one hundred buildings are under construction around the Mosque and will soon replace the archeological, historical and religious landscape of this rapidly developing city.

With the destruction of hundreds of sites in Islam’s holiest city over the last twenty years, Mecca has undergone a drastic and irreversible change. The archeological sites that recorded the temporality of Islam, Ottoman rule and political, economic and cultural life before Al Sa‘ud are today nothing but demolished remains. These unrecognizable remnants are a powerful testament that the very evidence of the peninsula’s alternative history threatens the foundation of the Saudi state. They reveal the official historical discourse as thoroughly constructed, shallow and permeated with power relations. The demolition projects therefore complement Al-Saud’s selective invocations of the past. They erase material evidence that counters the official historical discourse. As in other cases, the Saudi narration of “history” is premised on and necessitates a

relentless erasure. And also, as in other cases, this relentless drive to erase, demolish, rebuild and renarrate exposes a deep and abiding insecurity about claims to historical, cultural, and even religious legitimacy.

The Saudi regime has marketed the overhaul of Mecca as necessary to accommodate the increasing numbers of Muslim pilgrims and to enhance the infrastructure of the pilgrimage. Mecca Province's governor claims that the aim of the construction (and destruction) is to bring the religious capital into the twenty-first century, to turn it into a model global city and to embody the urban model for development.^{lxi} In the words of the governor, modernization is meant to transform Mecca into the "most beautiful First World" city in the world.^{lxx} The lucrative construction projects have in reality also changed the religious experience of modern hajj, along with other Islamic rituals. They have, for one, increased class inequalities and created "gated communities" where rich worshippers can separate themselves from the crowds. This separation defeats the purpose of the pilgrimage and the sense of spiritual communion it is meant to generate as well as the erosion, if only temporarily, of boundaries (national and class) that it customarily enforces, represented in the humble, white robe that pilgrims wear. In addition to creating class inequities and distinctions among pilgrims, these development projects have thus far forced a hundred thousand residents of Mecca from different socioeconomic classes out of their homes. The former residents have received meager compensation in return and are without legal recourse. Many have ended up in slums less than a mile away from the Grand Mosque, hidden from visitors' eyes by the DOKAAE and other megadevelopments.^{lxxi}

Conclusion

The 1990s heralded the Saudi regime's micromanaging of the conservation of its material heritage in Riyadh. It also led the regime to efface another form of historical memory in Mecca. The regime regularly justifies these practices based on its new vision of the Saudi modern that the redevelopment plans circulate. These trends, according to the regime, are necessary to improve the infrastructure of the pilgrimage as well as bring the country into the twenty-first century. This Saudi modernity is rooted in the valorization of a singular past, that of Al-Saud's Riyadh. It is this very same vision that rests on the destruction of other material histories, mainly in Mecca, for its own success. Not coincidentally, the reconfiguration of the built environment was simultaneously a new strategy for capital accumulation: it went hand in hand with political legitimation. The massive development of local tourism and urban planning has accompanied the twinned transformation of the built environment and the consolidation of capital accumulation. Mecca and Riyadh thus present a point of intersection of multiple forces of economy, society, culture and ideology. They are sites where different social orders, time, and densities exist in the same social space and for different ideological and material goals. The redevelopment of both cities, and the contradictions therein, are central to practices of statecraft and techniques of governance. The erasure of alternative accounts of state formation through commemoration in Riyadh and destruction in Mecca is, at heart, a continuation of Al Saud's imperial project and the deep-seated violence to the everyday, the spiritual, and the temporal.

This reading of the Saudi regime's material politics speaks to how historical time and space are being captured retrospectively by the victors while elucidating the multiple silences that co-constitute Saudi history. More importantly, it shows how the regime aims to reengineer the social order and to simultaneously transform the Saudi landscape into a revenue-generating asset, one that has consolidated the power of the ruling family and its economic allies. Indeed,

the lucrative construction projects further entrenched the economic elites within Al Saud's fold and tied them to the regime's political and economic longevity. The social-political and the economic are at once evident in the regime's efforts to generate symbolic and material capital, legitimate its genealogy, and monumentalize its power. Together and separately, these sites mediate and reproduce state sovereignty and legitimacy while reshaping Saudi society and the economy.

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