



Mapping the Saudi State, Chapter 7: The Destruction of Religious and Cultural Sites

I. Introduction

The Ministry for Islamic Affairs, Endowments, Da'wah, and Guidance, commonly abbreviated to the Ministry of Islamic Affairs (MOIA), supervises and regulates religious activity in Saudi Arabia. Whereas the Commission for the Promotion of Virtue and the Prevention of Vice (CPVPV) directly enforces religious law, as seen in *Mapping the Saudi State, Chapter 1*,¹ the MOIA is responsible for the administration of broader religious services. According to the MOIA, its primary duties include overseeing the coordination of Islamic societies and organizations, the appointment of clergy, and the maintenance and construction of mosques.²

Yet, despite its official mission to “preserve Islamic values” and protect mosques “in a manner that fits their sacred status,”³ the MOIA is complicit in a longstanding government campaign against the peninsula’s traditional heritage – Islamic or otherwise. Since 1925, the Al Saud family has overseen the destruction of tombs, mosques, and historical artifacts in Jeddah, Medina, Mecca, al-Khobar, Awamiyah, and Jabal al-Uhud. According to the Islamic Heritage Research Foundation, between just 1985 and 2014 – through the MOIA’s founding in 1993 –the government demolished 98% of the religious and historical sites located in Saudi Arabia.⁴

The MOIA’s seemingly contradictory role in the destruction of Islamic holy places, commentators suggest, is actually the byproduct of an equally incongruous alliance between the forces of Wahhabism and commercialism.⁵ Compelled to acknowledge larger demographic and economic trends in Saudi Arabia – rapid population growth, increased urbanization, and declining oil revenues chief among them⁶ – the government has increasingly worked to satisfy both the Wahhabi religious establishment and the kingdom’s financial elite. To do so, it has seized the dual opportunity to expand major Islamic sites and clear space for commercial development. The current Grand Mosque expansion project, for example, simultaneously benefits the wider Wahhabi proselytization mission⁷ and maximizes the profitability of the Hajj – the kingdom’s largest source of income besides oil.⁸ As these projects are almost entirely funded by the Saudi Ministry of Finance, they also provide a means by which the government can recycle its petrodollars for greater returns.

Though the government frames them in mostly innocuous or opaque technical terms,⁹ these development programs have disrupted traditional communities and caused irreparable damage to the peninsula’s historical landscape. In Mecca, state-sponsored ‘Islamic development’ has meant the paradoxical demolition of religious structures to make way for hotels, shopping malls, and cash-dispensing machines.¹⁰ The Grand Mosque expansion is just the largest of many comparable ‘development’ projects at work across the kingdom; taken altogether, these projects represent a broader pattern of creative destruction, targeting some of the oldest and most significant places in human history. Moreover, the government has exploited this confluence of religious and financial interests to justify a campaign aimed at the erasure of dissenting minority heritage sites and the imposition of wider religious uniformity. These concurrent efforts have worked to expunge from the historical record any culture existing prior to Saudi rule.



As the MOIA has primarily committed rights abuses by *failing* to act on its mandate, this chapter will focus less on its institutional structure and capabilities than on its facilitation of the trends described above. Rather than a subject of analysis proper, the MOIA will serve as a perspective from which to examine institutional complicity in the monarchy's destruction of religious sites, and as a target of related reform measures.

Accordingly, the first section of this chapter will briefly review the function and mandate of the MOIA within this context. The following section will survey the destruction of religious, cultural, and historical sites in the kingdom, as well as related infringements on basic religious rights and freedoms. This section does not seek to present an exhaustive list of every site demolished by the Saudi authorities. Instead, it will trace the history and breadth of the monarchy's campaign against these places, noting where applicable the MOIA's efforts to obscure or defend the damage. Ultimately, this chapter will conclude with recommendations to the Saudi government on how to restructure the MOIA in order to better protect the kingdom's heritage, rather than aid and abet its destruction.

II. The Ministry

Royal Decree 3/A established the MOIA in 1993 to act "in the service of mosques, developing and sponsoring endowments, propagating Islam, considering Islamic issues, and cooperating with Islamic societies and centers to help Muslims worship Allah."¹¹ According to the MOIA's official website, its day-to-day operations work to achieve seven overall objectives. These objectives can be summarized as follows: 1) the dissemination of Islamic materials, 2) the proselytization and preservation of Islamic values, 3) the provision of support for international Islamic communities and institutions, 4) the maintenance and protection of mosques, 5) the preparation of Islamic books and research, 6) the proper management and investment of endowed property, and 7) the improved efficiency of Islamic services writ large.¹² In addition to these duties, the MOIA also supervises the King Fahd Complex for Printing the Holy Quran and the circulation of its materials, as well as the variety of Saudi charities that promote Quran recitation and memorization.¹³ Essentially, the MOIA functions as a centralized regulatory and coordinating body for the range of Islamic services provided in and by the kingdom--public and private, domestic and international.

Nevertheless, the establishment of the MOIA has apparently had little mitigating effect on the kingdom's destruction of mosques, tombs, and other heritage sites. As the government has escalated its urban development and expansion campaigns in the wake of the MOIA's establishment, the latter has widely failed to meet key aspects of its second and fourth objectives. More precisely, it has chosen to disregard nearly all religious, cultural, or historical sites in Saudi Arabia, opting for the narrowest interpretation of its broad mandate to preserve Islamic values and protect mosques.

From 1996 to 2014,¹⁴ and then again from 2015¹⁵ – almost as long as the MOIA has existed – Saleh bin Abdul-Aziz Al ash-Sheikh has served as the Minister of Islamic Affairs. The Al ash-Sheikh is one of the most powerful families in Saudi Arabia, tracing its lineage back to Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahhab, the founder of Wahhabism.¹⁶ In addition to his two appointments as Minister of Islamic Affairs, Saleh bin Abdul-Aziz Al ash-Sheikh was also appointed as one of the kingdom's first muftis (or official Wahhabi



religious authorities).¹⁷ Two of the minister's relatives have risen even higher in the Wahhabi hierarchy, each being appointed to serve as the Grand Mufti of Saudi Arabia; notably, Abdulaziz ibn Abdullah Al ash-Sheikh, the current Grand Mufti, has allegedly endorsed state-sponsored religious destruction in the past, calling for the demolition of "all the [Christian] churches of the region."¹⁸

The near-constant leadership of Saleh bin Abdul-Aziz Al ash-Sheikh is only one example of the MOIA's formal connections to the Wahhabi establishment. More generally, the absence of any institutional separation from this establishment has rendered the MOIA unable to function as an independent government agency. To the contrary, it has functioned as an extension of the political and religious elites, selectively interpreting and applying its mandate to support pre-approved policy, such as destructive state-sponsored development projects. This arrangement has not entailed a strict commitment to the protection of certain mosques and religious sites, or even a begrudging acquiescence to the king's direct authority over the two holy shrines.¹⁹ Instead, it has meant a reactive validation of any demolition based on the exigencies of the project at hand.

III. Destruction of Religious Sites and Infringements on Religious Freedom

A. Early Destruction

Although the government's development campaigns have intensified over the last 20-30 years, the systematic destruction of heritage sites did not begin with the establishment of the MOIA. In fact, the leaders of the Al Saud family first adopted a policy of targeting "idolatrous" religious structures during their re-conquest of the peninsula in the mid-1920s.

As early as 1926, six years before the official unification of the kingdom, Abdulaziz bin Abdul Rahman bin Saud (also known as Ibn Saud, the first king of modern Saudi Arabia) razed the holy tombs at the al-Mo'alla Cemetery in Mecca.²⁰ The cemetery, which predates Islam, contained the resting places of Abdul Manaf (the Prophet Muhammad's great-great-grandfather), Abdul Muttalib (the Prophet's grandfather), Abu Talib (the Prophet's uncle), and Khadija bint Khuwaylid (the Prophet's first wife). That same year, Ibn Saud demolished most of the al-Baqi Cemetery in Medina,²¹ destroying the graves of Ibrahim (Abraham of the monotheistic faiths), Fatima Zehra (the Prophet's daughter), Imam Hasan al Mujtaba (the second Twelver Shia Imam), Imam Ali Ibnul Hussain (the fourth Twelver Shia Imam), Imam Mohammed Baqir (the fifth Twelver Shia Imam), Imam Ja'afar Sadiq (the sixth Twelver Shia Imam), Abbas ibn Abd al-Muttalib (the Prophet's uncle and companion), Safiyya bint Abd al-Muttalib (the Prophet's aunt and companion), Aatika bint Abd al-Muttalib (the Prophet's aunt), Umm al-Baneen (Ali ibn Abi Talib's second wife), Ismail ibn Sadiq (an Ismaili Shia Imam), Abdullah ibn Jafar al-Tayyaar (the Prophet's grandson-in-law), Halimah al-Sa'diyya (the Prophet's nurse during his early childhood), and 7,000 other people with supposed ties to the Prophet.²²

Hasan al-Mujtaba, Ali Ibnul Hussain, Mohammed Baqir, and Ja'afar Sadiq – whose tombs were destroyed by Ibn Saud – are among the twelve imams worshipped in Imamiyyah (or Twelver) Shiism, the predominant branch of Shia Islam. Ismail ibn Sadiq, whose tomb was also destroyed, is the Imam for whom the Ismaili Shia sect was named.²³ To commemorate these losses, some Shia Muslims annually



remember Ibn Saud's destruction of the al-Baqi tombs with a memorial event known as the 'Day of Sorrow'.²⁴

B. Contemporary Destruction

As the modern Saudi state developed, the heirs of Ibn Saud built on these original efforts - sometimes literally. In 1978, for example, the government decided to level the al-Basha Mosque in Harat al-Sham, Jeddah. According to the Jeddah Municipal government, the 18th Century Ottoman structure had "remained unchanged until [that year] when it was demolished and another mosque was built in its place."²⁵

In 1989, Saudi authorities removed the body of Abd Allah, the Prophet Muhammad's father, from his burial place at the Prophet's childhood home. Information derived from ADHRB's sources in Saudi Arabia indicates that Abd Allah's remains are now interned at the remnants of the al-Baqi Cemetery. The Prophet's house, however, was destroyed; the authorities reportedly had it bulldozed to accommodate an expansion of the marble plaza outside the Grand Mosque. The government also demolished the home of the Prophet's first wife, Khadija bint Khuwaylid, in 1989, replacing it with a library and a row of toilets for visitors to the Grand Mosque.²⁶ Almost a decade later, in 1998, the authorities bulldozed and burned the grave of Aminah bint Wahb, the Prophet's mother.

By 2012, the government had begun destroying sites where the Prophet was said to have worshipped or preached. That year, ADHRB's sources report that authorities tore down the Ottoman and Abbasi columns of Dar al-Arqam, supposedly the same location where the Prophet first taught Islam. A year later, the government used concrete to fill in the gap at Mount Uhud, north of Medina, where the Prophet Muhammad was nursed after being wounded in battle.²⁷ Carla Power of *TIME Magazine* writes that when the authorities finished cementing the crevice, they proceeded to fence off "the base [of Mount Uhud], warning would-be visitors that it was just a mountain, like any other."²⁸

More recent reports suggest that the government has accelerated the pace of destruction. In just November of 2014, for example, the authorities destroyed seven separate mosques in the city of Medina. One of these, the mosque belonging to Islam's first caliph, Abu Bakr al-Siddiq, was bulldozed to make room for an ATM.²⁹ According to *The New Yorker*, his house had been "buried under a Hilton hotel" the previous year.³⁰ Dr. Muhammad Al-Amin Al-Khatri, the director general of the MOIA's Medina office, openly stated in October 2014 that a total of 95 properties and 126 mosques will be destroyed before renovations and expansions of the city's Prophet's Mosque facilities are completed (for a map of the project, see Appendix A).³¹ Ibrahim al-Assaf, the Saudi Minister of Finance, provided a far higher estimate of the necessary destruction in January 2015, identifying upwards of 10,000 properties for demolition.³² Paraphrased in *Al Arabiya*, the MOIA's al-Khatri conceded that only "several of these buildings have been vacated while work is ongoing to vacate the others."³³ Finance Minister al-Assaf, for his part, claims that 2,500 of the 10,000 property owners have been reimbursed.³⁴ ADHRB's sources indicate that the Masjid al-Ghamama Mosque, where the Prophet reportedly prayed during the last years of his life,³⁵ will be among the sites slated for demolition. Elsewhere during this same period,



ADHRB's sources report that Saudi authorities destroyed the house of Ali ibn Ali Talib, the cousin and son-in-law of the Prophet, and the first Shia Imam.

To further illustrate the growing intersection between state-sponsored religious destruction, Wahhabism, and commercialism in contemporary Saudi Arabia, it will be useful to examine the largest of these ongoing development projects in detail.

The Mecca Grand Mosque Expansion

The government's destruction of heritage sites began to receive widespread international attention – and became most clearly identified with the processes of commercial urban development – after the late King Abdullah announced a \$21 billion budget plan to modify and expand Mecca's Grand Mosque in 2011.³⁶ Hailed by the state-run Saudi Press Agency as “the largest of all previous expansions combined,”³⁷ the project is expected to extend the mosque's area by at least 400,000 square meters,³⁸ increasing its capacity “from around seven hundred and fifty thousand worshippers to more than two million.”³⁹ As of 2014, the expansion has also reportedly exceeded its original budget by roughly 200%.⁴⁰

To accommodate such a massive construction project, the MOIA and the wider Saudi government have authorized an equally massive demolition effort. In November 2014 – the same month in which authorities destroyed 7 mosques in Medina – the government demolished a priceless set of porticos and columns that surround the *Kaaba*, one of holiest sites in Islam and the focal point of the Grand Mosque.⁴¹ The porticos and columns, which date to the 17th and 8th centuries respectively, were ostensibly removed to enlarge the circumambulation space within the courtyard.⁴² Earlier in 2014, the government razed the house of Hamza, the Prophet Muhammad's uncle, to clear space for a nearby hotel.⁴³ Before the end of the year, officials even announced plans to destroy the Prophet Muhammad's birthplace, replacing it with either a palace for then-King Abdullah or the imam of the Grand Mosque.⁴⁴ Like at Mount Uhud and other purportedly “idolatrous” locations, the authorities have already posted warning signs around the site that say “there is no proof that the Prophet Muhammad was born there, ‘so it is forbidden to make this place specific for praying, supplicating or get [sic] blessing.’”⁴⁵

Despite King Abdullah's death in January 2015, these development projects have proceeded apace under his successor, King Salman. In July of that year, the king launched five new sub-projects set to “include the King Abdullah Expansion Structure, courtyards, tunnels, buildings for service facilities and the first ring road.”⁴⁶

Moreover, a number of massive state-funded development programs have extended beyond the immediate proximity of the Grand Mosque and into the city at large, prompting some critics to deride the rapidly growing metropolis as ‘Mecca-Hattan’ (for time-lapsed satellite imagery of the Grand Mosque and its surroundings, see Appendix B).⁴⁷ *The Huffington Post* reports that by 2017, for example, Mecca will become “home to the world's largest hotel by room count,” at the complete expense of the Saudi Ministry of Finance.⁴⁸ The Abraj Kudai hotel complex, which will contain 11,200 rooms distributed across 12 towers, as well as a shopping mall, a convention center, and multiple, restaurants, lounges,



and helipads, is set to cost more than \$3.5 billion and will cover 1.4 million square meters a mile from the Grand Mosque.⁴⁹

Though the hotel will undoubtedly attract affluent visitors with its 1,200 45-square-meter luxury suites,⁵⁰ architect Sami Angawi, quoted in *Business Insider*, argues that these projects will just as certainly spell devastation for historical neighborhoods and cultural sites. Referring to the \$15 billion Makkah Royal Clock Tower Hotel project, he states, “This tower and the lights in it are like Vegas. The truth of the history of Mecca is wiped out...with bulldozers and dynamite. Is this development?”⁵¹ Dr. Fayeze Jamal echoes this sentiment in *Al Jazeera*, asserting that “what is going on in Mecca, is bulldozing of the history and the geography...whole mountains have been blown up in order to achieve investment projects and private interests under the title of expansion for the Muslims.”⁵²

Other critics point out that the development programs have already imperiled Mecca’s most vulnerable populations. In order to implement the Jabal Sharashif project, for example, which entails the construction of a metro system, a high-speed rail line, a series of hotels, and an upscale residential neighborhood for Saudi nationals, the authorities are planning to raze a slum area that is primarily home to Burmese and African migrants.⁵³

Compounding this problem, Irfan al-Alawi of the Islamic Heritage Research Foundation argues that the eviction of local property owners is aggravating the poor living conditions in Mecca’s slums: “[Displaced residents] are now living in shantytowns on the edge of the city without proper sanitation. Locals, who have lived here for generations, are being forced out to make way for these marble castles in the sky.”⁵⁴ As early as 2011, a square foot around the Grand Mosque reportedly sold “for up to \$18,000...dwarfing the Monaco average of \$4,400”; these surging real estate prices are quickly rendering historical areas of the city unaffordable for their traditional occupants.⁵⁵ According to journalist Aya Batrawy, the government also contributed directly to this housing crisis when it levelled roughly 5,800 homes in advance of the Grand Mosque expansion.⁵⁶ Al-Alawi reports that many of the former occupants were denied compensation and given less than a week’s notice of their impending eviction.⁵⁷ Adding to the city’s collective trauma, the authorities have allegedly conducted a large portion of their demolition projects quickly, and at night.⁵⁸

The Mecca development projects were most recently marred by a high-profile crane collapse that damaged the Grand Mosque and killed at least 107 people.⁵⁹ Though the government was quick to sanction the Saudi Binladin Group – one of the world’s largest construction companies and holder of the Grand Mosque expansion contract – for a failure to “respect the norms of safety,” the incident indicates a broader negligence at work in government’s massive and often-haphazard development programs.⁶⁰ While it is so far the worst construction accident to occur during the Grand Mosque expansion, the crane disaster was precipitated by a variety of similar incidents including, but not limited to, multiple fires,⁶¹ a scaffolding failure,⁶² and a retaining-wall collapse.⁶³ Those injured or killed in these smaller tragedies have been almost entirely pilgrims and migrant workers.⁶⁴ Despite these patterns, as well as alleged warnings from Mecca’s emir in the run-up to the crane collapse,⁶⁵ the Saudi Binladin Group has seemingly done little to reform its safety policies. These concerns have been amplified by commentators who accuse the government and its contractors of exploiting migrant labor and the harsh *kafala* system



to secure even higher profits from the destruction of heritage sites.⁶⁶ At time of writing, in the two weeks since the crane disaster, two fires have broken out in separate Mecca hotels, injuring at least 6 and requiring the evacuation of over 1,000.⁶⁷

The crane accident also highlights what former Saudi diplomat Saeed al-Ghamdi has essentially described as a monopoly on major state-funded projects in Mecca and the kingdom at large. Quoted in *Business Insider*, al-Ghamdi argues that greed had driven the government and its few dominant contractors – epitomized by the enormous Saudi Binladin Group – to deemphasize public goods like safety and historical preservation in favor of rapid, top-down commercial expansion.⁶⁸ He concludes that “Muslims around the world have an ‘intimate bond’ with Mecca...‘It is not a place for one businessman or one company.’”⁶⁹

Although al-Ghamdi voiced this criticism in 2014, the monarchy has partnered with the Saudi Binladin Group for decades, and analysts have described the company as being “deeply embedded” in the kingdom’s economy.⁷⁰ In the aftermath of the crane disaster, the government has taken some rare measures to distance itself from the firm, such as issuing a suspension on new public contracts. But, as the Saudi Binladin Group continues to manage the Grand Mosque expansion, as well as the ongoing \$1.2 billion Kingdom Tower project in Jeddah (which is set to be the “world’s tallest building at more than one kilometer high”), the authorities have shown no signs of disrupting the core dynamics of a ‘development’ campaign they have together maintained.⁷¹

C. Targeted Destruction of Shia Heritage

In addition to its urban development programs and its general destruction of “idolatrous” or inconvenient Islamic sites, the Saudi government has also specifically targeted Shia mosques and places of worship. As previously noted, the early leaders of the Al Saud family began destroying the tombs of prominent Shia historical figures before they even unified the kingdom, and the policies of these original conquerors – down to the militant Wahhabi intolerance for Shia heritage – have subsequently endured in the institutions of the Saudi state.

ADHRB’s sources report that contemporary Saudi authorities have consistently destroyed or shut down Shia mosques as well, forcing many Shia to hold private religious gatherings. In 2008, for example, ADHRB’s sources – as well as leaked diplomatic cables⁷² – indicate that the government shuttered all Shia mosques in the city of al-Khobar, located in the mostly-Shia Eastern Province. After two years of a purportedly temporary closure, the Interior Ministry had the mosques permanently shut down for unspecified security reasons. Since then, members of al-Khobar’s Shia community have risked criminal prosecution to worship together in private residences. *The Daily Star* reported in 2015 that Saudi authorities had arrested Zuhair Busaleh, a 47-year-old Shia resident of al-Khobar, for hosting weekly prayer meetings in his home.⁷³ In July of that year, a court sentenced Busaleh to two months in jail and 60 lashes; when *Agence France Presse* asked why he had hosted the gatherings, Busaleh replied, “There is no Shia mosque in Khobar.”⁷⁴ The government has reportedly jailed Busaleh for holding these prayer meetings at least three other times over the last seven years.⁷⁵ According to him, many other Shia have been forced to hold similar gatherings throughout the city.⁷⁶



The interplay between discriminatory ‘security’ measures and anti-Shia religious destruction crystalized in 2012, when, according to ADHRB’s sources, the government razed the Ein Imam Hussein Mosque in retaliation for anti-government protests in Awamiyah. Though it does not indicate which building was destroyed, the U.S. State Department’s 2012 Report on International Religious Freedom also cites “reports that security forces demolished a Shia mosque in Awamiyah in September during the crackdown on protesters in the town”.⁷⁷ It was during these same demonstrations that security forces shot and arrested Sheikh Nimr Baqir al-Nimr, a prominent Shia cleric and human rights defender. The Specialized Criminal Court (SCC) later convicted Sheikh Nimr and his nephew Ali Mohammed al-Nimr, who was 17 at the time of his arrest, on charges related to their involvement in the protests; they have both been sentenced to death.⁷⁸ As documented in previous chapters of *Mapping the Saudi State*, Awamiyah was also the target of two excessively violent raids led by the Special Security Forces of the Ministry of the Interior in 2014 and 2015.⁷⁹ The MOIA – which employed approximately 75,000 Sunni clergy members in 2013, but not a single Shia preacher⁸⁰ – has done little to address the concerns of these communities.

D. Destruction of Cultural and Secular Historical Sites

While the government has generally reserved the targeted destruction of heritage sites as a securitized response to Shia dissent, it has also demolished a variety of non-Muslim and/or secular historical structures. In 1975, Saudi authorities destroyed the Tomb of Eve in Jeddah by filling it in with concrete. The burial site, which is considered by some to be the resting place of the biblical Eve, had already been partially destroyed in 1928 by then-Prince Faisal bin Abdulaziz Al Saud.⁸¹ As part of the King Abdulaziz Endowment Project – another of the many urban development programs in Mecca – the government authorized the demolition of the the Ottoman Al-Ajyad Fortress in 2002; the fortress, known as Al-Ecyad in Turkish, was standing in the way of the Saudi Binladin Group’s Makkah Royal Clock Tower Hotel project. According to *The Guardian*, the destruction was so extensive that the fortress “wasn’t just swept away – the hill it sat on went, too.”⁸² M. Istemihan Talay, the Turkish minister of culture at the time, reportedly characterized the removal of the fortress as “no different from the pulling down of the Buddha monuments in Afghanistan.”⁸³

When the Makkah Royal Clock Tower Hotel was finally completed in 2012, the project had cost \$15 billion and required the destruction of approximately 400 significant cultural and historical artifacts.⁸⁴ The Minister of Islamic Affairs, Saleh bin Abdul-Aziz Al ash-Sheikh, rejected widespread international criticism of the project as an attack on the kingdom’s sovereignty. Hinting at the underlying confluence of Wahhabi and commercial interests, the minister argued: “No one has the right to interfere in what comes under the state’s authority. This development is in the interest of all Muslims all over the world.”⁸⁵

III. Conclusion

To serve the combined interests of the financial and religious elites, the Saudi government has undertaken an extensive program of destruction targeting the kingdom’s most important historical and spiritual heritage sites. In their absence, the monarchy has been able to authorize the construction of



massive commercial infrastructures around Islam's holiest places, cementing its ties with both the Wahhabi establishment and the kingdom's economic base. Finally, and simultaneously, the security apparatus has seized a latent opportunity presented by these supposedly modern Islamic development projects: it has been able to preemptively and retributively demolish representations of the minority Shia culture.

Unfortunately, the most recent disaster in Mina – about 2 miles from Mecca's Grand Mosque – has placed in glaring contrast the words and the deeds of the government's so-called expansion agenda. If the stampede that claimed the lives of at least 717 people on 24 September 2015 tragically underscores the kingdom's need to accommodate an ever-growing number of pilgrims, it also stresses the need to do so safely, respectfully, and sustainably.⁸⁶ The government's plan – to rapidly erect a “Mecca-hattan”⁸⁷ – has proven extremely dangerous in its own right, and has done almost nothing to address these underlying concerns. Ultimately, this is unsurprising, as the construction projects were never meant to satisfy the legitimate needs of the people, but rather to reap the financial and political rewards of hasty commercial development. In so doing, the state-sponsored ‘expansion’ program has not served Mecca's visitors or its residents; it has simply built hotels and malls on what was once their heritage and their homes.

Meanwhile, as all these trends have intensified, the MOIA has consistently failed to fulfil its responsibility to protect Islamic historical sites. At best, the MOIA has exhibited severe incompetence in the service of its mandate and, at worst, has acted in direct contravention of its stated obligations. In either case, the MOIA has demonstrated a pressing need for reform if it is to ever effectively monitor, regulate, and restrain the government's systematic destruction of heritage sites. In the words of Saudi poet and photographer Nimah Ismail Nawwab, the alternative is for marginalized activists to continue fighting “a losing battle, despite the fact that what's being lost is not just Muslim history, but human history.”⁸⁸

IV. Recommendations

Ultimately, the Saudi government should immediately halt any ongoing development projects that entail the destruction of religious, cultural, or historical sites and artifacts. To assist the government in achieving these ends, Americans for Human Rights & Democracy in Bahrain provides the following recommendations.

To the **Government of Saudi Arabia**:

- Again, **halt** any ongoing development projects that entail the destruction of any religious, cultural, or historical sites or artifacts;
- **Broaden** the mandate of the MOIA to include protections for minority religious sites and areligious historical sites;
- **Empower** the MOIA to actively regulate and constrain the spending of both the Ministry of Finance and its private contractors when planning development projects in the proximity of these sites;



- **Expand** the capacity of the MOIA to inspect and secure destruction/construction sites and relevant artifacts, including those related to the two holy shrines;
- **Impose** a formal separation between the MOIA and the official Wahhabi establishment;
- **Allow** Shia and other minority communities to establish mosques and other public places of worship;
- **Ensure** the just compensation of those families and individuals dispossessed or otherwise adversely effected by destruction/construction projects;
- **Provide** substitute housing to those evicted by destruction/construction projects;
- **Respect** the wishes of those property owners who decline to sell;
- **Improve** labor and public safety regulations at destruction/construction sites; and
- **Guarantee** the rights of migrant workers employed in the service destruction/construction projects.

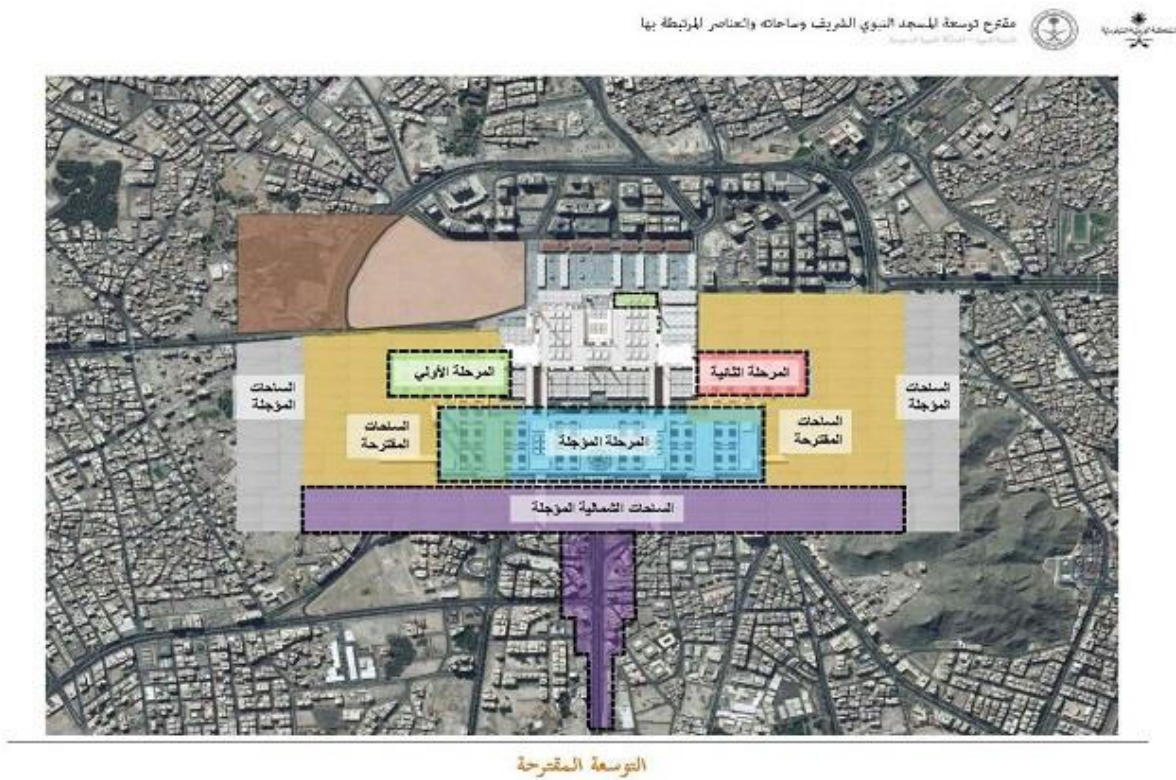
To the **International Community**:

- **Urge** the Government of Saudi Arabia to halt its destruction of domestic heritage sites;
- **Provide** technical assistance to help restructure the MOIA;
- **Call** on the Government of Saudi Arabia to ensure the rights of migrant workers; and
- **Demand** the Government of Saudi Arabia grant amnesty to individuals arrested on charges related to their right to freedom of religion.

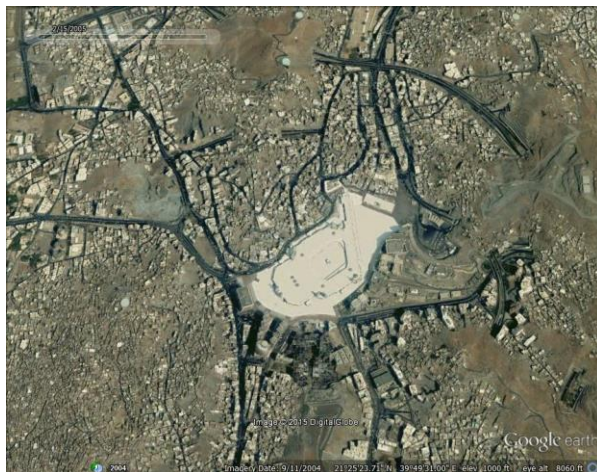


i. Appendix

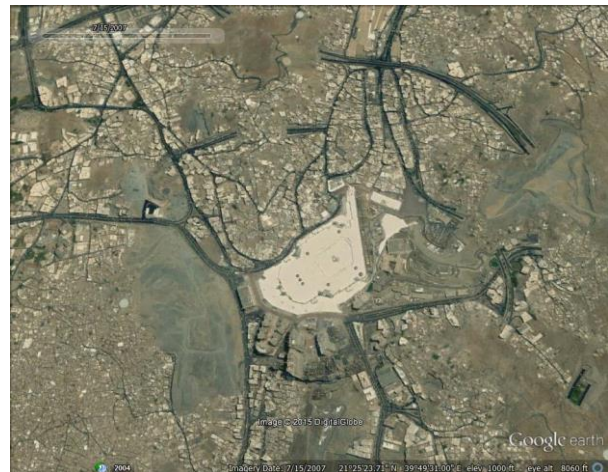
A) Map of Prophet's Mosque Expansion Project in Medina (Saudi Ministry of Finance: 2014)⁸⁹



B) Satellite Imagery of the Grand Mosque in Mecca: Time-lapse 2004–2015 (GoogleEarth)



Mecca – 2004



Mecca - 2007



Mecca – 2011



Mecca - 2013



Mecca – 2014



Mecca – 2015

Notes

¹ ADHRB. "Mapping the Saudi State, Chapter 1: The Commission for the Promotion of Virtue and the Prevention of Vice." (ADHRB: 2015). Retrieved from: <http://adhrb.org/2015/04/mapping-the-saudi-state-ch-1-the-commission-for-the-promotion-of-virtue-and-the-prevention-of-vice/>

² Ministry of Islamic Affairs, Endowments, Da'wah, and Guidance. "About the Ministry." (MOIA: 2009). Retrieved from: <http://www.moia.gov.sa/eng/Menu/Pages/About.aspx>

³ Ibid.

⁴ Carla Power. "Saudi Arabia Bulldozes over its Heritage." (TIME: 2014). Retrieved from: <http://time.com/3584585/saudi-arabia-bulldozes-over-its-heritage/>

⁵ Aya Batrawy. "'MECCA-HATTAN': Islam's Holiest City Is Being Overhauled, And People Are Furious." (Business Insider: 2014). Retrieved from: <http://www.businessinsider.com/mecca-is-being-overhauled-and-people-are-furious-2014-10>.



- ⁶ Carla Power. "Saudi Arabia Bulldozes over its Heritage." (TIME: 2014). Retrieved from: <http://time.com/3584585/saudi-arabia-bulldozes-over-its-heritage/>
- ⁷ Aya Batrawy. "'MECCA-HATTAN': Islam's Holiest City Is Being Overhauled, And People Are Furious." (Business Insider: 2014). Retrieved from: <http://www.businessinsider.com/mecca-is-being-overhauled-and-people-are-furious-2014-10>.
- ⁸ Carla Power. "Saudi Arabia Bulldozes over its Heritage." (TIME: 2014). Retrieved from: <http://time.com/3584585/saudi-arabia-bulldozes-over-its-heritage/>
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