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THE DESTRUCTION OF ISLAMIC HERITAGE IN SAUDI ARABIA

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“Culture and heritage are not about stones and buildings – they are about identities and belongings. They carry values from the past that are important for the societies today and tomorrow. [...] We must safeguard the heritage because it is what brings us together as a community; it is what binds us within a shared destiny”- Irina Bokova¹

INTRODUCTION

Saudi Arabia is the home to Islam’s two holiest sites in Mecca and Medina. The religion was founded by Prophet Muhammad in the city of Mecca where he was born and where the Kaaba (the House of God that was rebuilt by Prophet Abraham) is located. The Prophet then migrated to the city of Medina, where he established the first Muslim community. He spent the last few years of his life in Medina, where he was then buried along with his closest family members and companions. These two cities are crucially important in understanding the early days of Islamic history, establishing the political and religious scenes to the movement and growth of the religion of Islam. The cities of Mecca and Medina are also continuously visited by millions of Muslims around the world either to perform the annual Hajj pilgrimage, which is obligatory for able Muslims once in a lifetime or carry out the recommended minor pilgrimage also known as Umrah.

Although the holy cities have been recently accommodating more and more visitors annually, space has been created at the cost of obliterating Islamic historical sites. Most of these sites which include the houses of the Prophet’s closest family members and companions, mosques and historical sites date back to earliest days of the religion. Many of the important sites where Islamic history unfolds itself have been removed. The culture of destroying historical sites in Saudi Arabia indeed dates back to the 18th century through the doctrine of Mohammed ibn Abd al-Wahab, which is approved and adopted by the Saudi authorities. Although the justification given today for legitimizing the destructions differ to that of ibn Abd al-Wahab’s, the ideology is rooted within the existing mentality, where thereby, the sanctity of these sacred sites are not upheld. This has resulted in great offense to much of the wider Muslim world, specifically the Shi’ites and Sufi Sunnis who revere these sites as holy places and not merely history.

MOHAMMED IBN ABD AL-WAHAB AND HIS MOVEMENT

The destruction of places of worship in Saudi Arabia is systematic and an ongoing operation that is rooted within the ideology of religious and political authorities in the region. This ideology, also termed as Wahhabism, was introduced by Mohammed ibn Abd al-Wahab [1703-92],² who stood out for his strong view on monotheism by rejecting and criticizing all forms of mediation between God and the believer. His beliefs stressed on the obligation of paying the *zakat*, an annual Islamic charity, and the compulsory response to his call for holy war, *jihad*, against non-Muslims, Muslims, movements or governments who did not support his principles.³ Amongst his extreme views was

¹ Address by Irina Bokova on the occasion of the ICOMOS Gala to commemorate the 40th Anniversary of the World Heritage Convention, 2 December 2012.

² Al-Rasheed, M. (2010). *A history of Saudi Arabia*. Cambridge University Press. p.16

³ Goss, R., & Klass, D. (2005). *Dead but not lost: Grief narratives in religious traditions*. Rowman Altamira. p.207

the strict prohibition of visiting holy shrines and tombs, which he considered as blasphemy, polytheistic⁴ and a *bid'a*⁵

The call for jihad against those who differed with his ideology led to the conquest of lands of Arabia, enforcing Muslims from the conquered areas to accept the Wahhabi movement including their interpretation of shar'ia and Islam.⁶ This included the territory of Hejaz, which includes Mecca and Medina in modern Saudi Arabia. As part of their movement and mission, they destroyed almost all the tombs in Hejaz. They believed that graves should be unmarked to avoid visits by Muslims.⁷ For those who stood firm with their own Islamic principles, they were either killed or had their properties confiscated.⁸

The survival of Abd al-Wahab's ideology has been gradually threatening Islamic culture and heritage in Saudi Arabia and also other parts of the world where it is implemented. The deliberate targeting of the Shrines of Prophet Jonas and Prophet Daniel in Mosul, Iraq in 2014 by the extremist group who call themselves 'Islamic State' is a fine example of ibn Wahab's teachings and cultural cleansing. Another well-known instance would be in February 2006, when one of Shi'ite Islam's holiest sites, Al-Askari Shrine in Samarra, Iraq, was bombed by terrorists, reducing it to rubble. Since, sectarian violence heightened across the country taking thousands of innocent lives away and weakening the trust between the religious sects in Iraq.⁹ Such intolerant teaching and behaviour can be seen as the direct cause to the rising sectarianism and violence in the Middle Eastern region.

The destruction of Islamic sites around the world and its implications is academically under studied and needs to be examined to understand, from a new standpoint, the reasons for the rise of extremism and escalating tension in the Middle Eastern region. This report will be looking at the Islamic sites destroyed in the past and recent years in the holy cities of Mecca and Medina in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, and includes an analysis on the implications of such behaviour on the recent rise of sectarianism and extremism in the Middle East.

⁴ Al-Rasheed, M. (2010). *A history of Saudi Arabia*. Cambridge University Press. p.17

⁵ Bid'a is a term, indicating a new practise that was not initiated by the Prophet Mohammad and is seen as undermining the authenticity of the religion.

⁶ Al-Rasheed, M. (2010). *A history of Saudi Arabia*. Cambridge University Press. p.19

⁷ Ibid p. 21

⁸ Al-Islam. (2015). Wahhabism *Al-Islam* [Online]. Available at: <http://www.al-islam.org/wahhabism-ayatullah-jafar-subhani> [Accessed on: 25th August 2015]

⁹ BBC News (2006). 'Iraqi Blast Damages Shia Shrine', *BBC News* [Online], Available at: http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/middle_east/4738472.stm [Accessed on: 22nd August 2015]

THE DESTRUCTION OF AL-BAQI AND AL-MUALLAH CEMENTRY

The gradual targeting of Islamic sites began with the destruction of the cemetery of Baqi, which is also known as the Garden of Baqi, in the early 1800s. The Baqi cemetery is located southeast to Masjed Al Nabawi; the mosque and the house of the Prophet and also his burial place. Muslims highly revere the cemetery and according to historians, it is said that the Prophet personally allocated this plot of land as a cemetery for his close relatives and companions. Some of the noblest figures buried there include the Prophet's grandson, the 2nd Shi'ite Imam, Hassan ibn Ali, and the 4th, 5th and 6th Imams, also from the lineage of the Prophet, Ali ibn Hussain, Mohammed ibn Ali and Jaffar ibn Mohammad.

The Baqi cemetery was raided once again in 1925 by the Ikhwan, (the Brothers) who were supported by the Saudi ruling family at the time,¹⁰ destroying the tombs and shrines that were rebuilt by the Ottomans (refer to timeline pg 6). Today, only men are allowed to visit the Baqi cemetery during early sunrise hours. The cemetery is guarded by security and mutawa, religious police, as shown in Figure 1, who debate their extreme views with visitors and do not tolerate "unIslamic" acts that are contrary to the Wahhabi principle. Shi'ites have marked the 8th of Shawal,¹¹ as the Day of Sorrow, which is commemorated annually as protest against the destruction of the shrines of their revered Imams.¹²



Figure 1- Picture on the left is a recent photo of the Baqi cemetery¹³. The red circle indicates the graves of the four Shi'ite Imams and one of the uncles of the Prophet. Picture on the right is the Baqi cemetery before its destruction¹⁴

¹⁰ Goss, R., & Klass, D. (2005). *Dead but not lost: Grief narratives in religious traditions*. Rowman Altamira. p.208

¹¹ 10th month of the lunar Islamic calendar

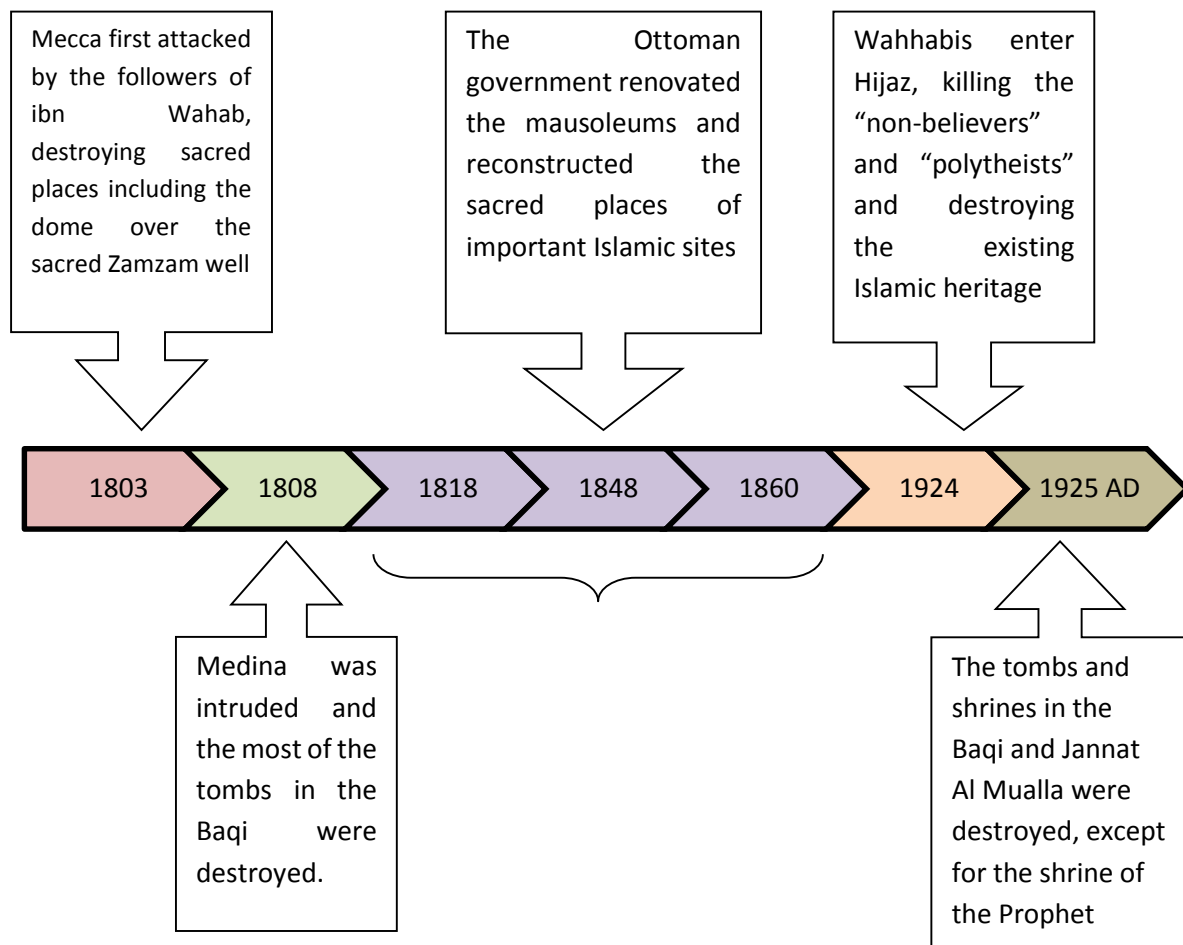
¹² Majlis Ulama-e-Shia (Europe). 8 Shawwal: Demolition of Jannatal Baqi. Majlis [Online] Available at: <http://majlis.org.uk/8-shawwal-demolition-of-jannatul-baqi/> [Accessed on: 23rd August 2015]

¹³ Picture taken by a pilgrim in January 2015

¹⁴ <http://www.shahroudi.com/Portal/Cultcure/Persian/CaseID/150383/71243.aspx>

The cemetery of Al-Muallah is another site that contributes great significance to Islamic history and heritage. It is located in Mecca; southeast of the Masjed Al-Haram. Some of the greatest personalities are buried there including the first wife of the Prophet, Khadija, as well as the uncle, grand and great grandfathers of the Prophet and a number of highly respected Sunni scholars such as Imam Malik ibn Anas,¹⁵ the founder of the Maliki school of thought in Sunni Islam. The cemetery was invaded in 1925, destroying the shrines that were built over the graves of these figures by the Ottoman Empire. Similar to the Baqi cemetery, visitors are not allowed at all times, with religious police on guard to ensure that no one goes close to the graves.

HISTORICAL TIMELINE OF THE DESTRUCTIONS IN MECCA AND MEDINA¹⁶



¹⁵ CD: Vandalization of the Holy Places By International Committee for the Monuments of the Holy Places, (SOAS), London.

¹⁶Al-Islam. (2015). History of the Cemetery of Jannat Al-Baqi. *Al-Islam* [Online]. Available at: <http://www.al-islam.org/history-shrines/history-cemetery-jannat-al-baqi#origins-al-baqi> [Accessed on: 25th August 2015]

A partial list of the demolished graves and shrines since 1925AD

- The house of Khadija, the wife of the Prophet
- The grave of Hawa (Eve) in Jeddah
- The grave of Abdullah ibn Abdul Muttaleb, the father of the Prophet, in Medina
- The second house of Fatema, the daughter of the Prophet, in Medina
- The Salman al-Farsi mosque in Medina¹⁷
- The Raj'at ash-shams mosque in Medina
- The house of the Prophet in Medina, where he lived after migrating from Mecca
- The house of Jafar Al-Sadiq, 6th Shi'ite Imam, in Medina
- The complex of Banu Hashim in Medina
- The house of Imam Ali, the fourth Caliph in Islam and first Shi'ite Imam
- The house of Prophet's uncle Hamza and the graves of the martyrs of the battle of Uhud (Figure 2)



Figure 2¹⁸ - Picture of Hamza ibn Abdul Muttaleb's grave, the uncle of the Prophet inside the enclosure at Mount Uhud cemetery. Hamza was killed in the Battle of Uhud that took place in the year 625 AD defending the Prophet, along with other martyrs who are buried in unmarked graves around him.

¹⁷ Salman Al-Farsi was one of the most loyal companions of the Prophet

¹⁸ Picture taken by a pilgrim in January 2015

DESTRUCTION OF ISLAMIC HERITAGE IN RECENT YEARS

The remaining historical sites are constantly under the threat of obliteration. According to the Gulf Institute based in Washington, “95 per cent of the 1,000 year old buildings in the two cities have been destroyed in the past 20 years”.¹⁹ While in the past Islamic archaeological heritage was destroyed through the call of jihad against nonbelievers, today it is being discretely dismantled under the pretext of ‘expansion’. The Saudi authorities have signed multibillion deals with contractors to expand the mosques in Mecca and Medina to accommodate the increasing number of visitors. The economic promises from these attractive projects have been covering up the fact that many historical sites have to be abolished for the constructions to take place. Tourism has been used as the main argument to seal these deals.

Masjed Al-Haram, Mecca

The Masjed Al-Haram, which literally means ‘the sacred mosque’, is located in the holy city of Mecca and is Islam’s most holiest and significant mosque. Expansions of the mosque began with the late King Abdullah laying its first stone in 2011²⁰ with plans including widening the area of the mosque by 400,000 sq. meters to allow an increase of 1.2 million worshippers,²¹ as depicted in Figure 3. The development of the eastern side of the mosque, which is the oldest existing section, will however necessitate the removal of the architectural heritage designed by the Abbasids and the Ottomans. This includes eliminating the inscribed Arabic calligraphy of the names of the Prophet’s companions and the important events of his life. The designated expansion of the mosque also includes the destruction of a column that marks the spot where the Prophet began his journey to Jerusalem and then onto heaven, a day known as Me’raj where Muslims mark the anniversary of this event by fasting. It has been reported that the prominent Wahhabi cleric Abdul Rahman Al-Sudais, who is the Imam of the Grand Mosque, has been appointed to oversee this project.²² According to the historian and Executive Director for Islamic Heritage Research Foundation Dr Irfan Al-Alawi, there are also plans to remove the house in which it is believed that the Prophet Muhammad was born.²³ Most recently, in May 2015 news reports have been circulating on Mecca’s latest £2.3bn hotel which is designed to have “four helipads, five floors for Saudi royalty and 10,000 bedrooms”²⁴

¹⁹ Ferrari and Benzo. (2014) *Between Cultural Diversity and Common Heritage*. p.324

²⁰ *ibid* p. 323

²¹ *ibid*

²² The Independent. (2013) The photos Saudi Arabia doesn’t want seen and proof Islam’s most holy relics are being demolished in Mecca, *The Independent* [Online] Available at: <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/middle-east/the-photos-saudi-arabia-doesnt-want-seen--and-proof-islams-most-holy-relics-are-being-demolished-in-mecca-8536968.html> [Accessed on: 27th July 2015]

²³ *ibid*

²⁴ The Guardian.(2015) City in the Sky: world’s biggest hotel to open in Mecca, *The Guardian* [Online] Available at: <http://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/architecture-design-blog/2015/may/22/worlds-biggest-hotel-to-open-in-mecca> [Accessed on: 1st August 2015]

The multibillion expansions and renovation project included the demolition of the following:

- The house of Khadija, the wife of the Prophet, and transforming it into public toilet facilities,²⁵
- The house of the companion of the Prophet and the first Islamic caliph Abu Bakr, replacing it with Mecca Hilton Hotel,²⁶
- The house of the grandson of the Prophet Ali-Oraid, and the Mosque of Abu-Qubais have been replaced with the King's palace in Mecca,²⁷
- An ancient mosque which belonged to the first caliph Abu Bakr has been levelled down and is the currently the location of an ATM machine,²⁸
- The sites of the main battles in Islamic history, Uhud and Bader, which were lead by Prophet Mohammad have been paved for a parking lot.²⁹

The holy city of Mecca has been transformed into a profit generating sector for the government and multinational firms. Ivor McBurney, the spokesman of Hilton Hotel stated the following with regards to construction of the hotel in Mecca: “We saw the tremendous opportunities to tap into Saudi Arabia religion tourism segment”.³⁰ The effects of these expansions have left fewer than 20 structures in Mecca that date back to the Prophet’s time some 1,400 years ago.

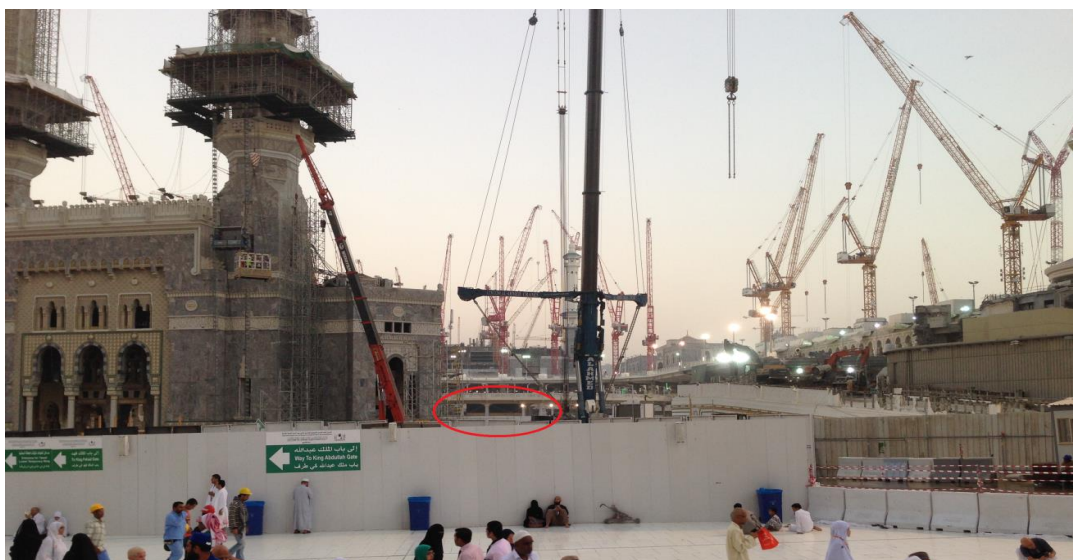


Figure 3³¹ - Picture of the constructions of Masjed Al-Haram and the surrounding areas of the Kaaba. The red circle indicates the Kaaba.

²⁵ CD: Vandalization of the Holy Places By International Committee for the Monuments of the Holy Places, (SOAS), London.

²⁶ *ibid*

²⁷ *ibid*

²⁸ *ibid*

²⁹ *ibid*

³⁰ *ibid*

³¹ Picture taken by a pilgrim in January 2015

Al- Agyad Fortress, Mecca

In 2002, the 220-year-old Al-Agyad Fortress that was built by the ruling Ottomans was demolished by the Saudi authorities to make room for the multibillion expansions. The fortress, located on a hill, overlooking the Kaaba and the Grand Mosque, was built in the 18th century to protect Muslims from invaders.³² The fortress and the hill are replaced with Abraj Al Bait, also known as Mecca Royal Clock Tower Hotel, “a development of skyscraper, apartments, hotels and an enormous clock tower”.³³ Despite the protest by the Turkish government, Saudi authorities went ahead with their decision of destroying the fortress. The Turkish Culture Minister Istemihan Talay called it a “crime against humanity... and culture massacre”³⁴

Masjed Al-Nabawi, Medina

Since 1924 Al-Muallah and Al-Baqi cemeteries remain in rubbles and no effort has been made to restore the tombs of the highly revered Islamic personalities. Rather, in 2014, a 61 page document had been circulated to the authorities in charge of the Masjed Al-Nabawi discussing plans to destroy the Mosque in Medina in which the Prophet is buried and move his grave to an anonymous location at the Al-Baqi cemetery.³⁵ These plans were discussed when the custodian of the Mosque was under the late King Abdullah. The current custodian of the Mosque is King Salman ibn Abdulaziz.

The decision to remove important Islamic sites in Mecca and Medina can be only explained through the Wahhabi understanding of opposing anything that, in their interpretation, could possibly lead to worshipping a person or an object other than God. Senior clerics discourage worshippers from visiting places connected to the history of their religion.³⁶

³² Christian Headlines (2005), Mecca Conference Criticized for Hypocrisy on Holy Site Destruction. *Christian Headlines* (Online). Available at: <http://www.christianheadlines.com/news/mecca-conference-criticized-for-hypocrisy-on-holy-site-destruction-1370691.html> [Accessed on 10th August 2015]

³³ Ferrari and Benzo. (2014) *Between Cultural Diversity and Common Heritage*. p.324

³⁴BBC News (2002). ‘Saudis hit back over Mecca castle’, *BBC News* [Online], Available at: http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/middle_east/1748711.stm [Accessed on: 14th August 2015]

³⁵The Independent. (2014) Saudis risk new Muslim division with proposal to move Mohamed’s tomb, *The Independent* [Online] Available at: <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/middle-east/saudis-risk-new-muslim-division-with-proposal-to-move-mohameds-tomb-9705120.html> [Accessed on: 12th August 2015]

³⁶ Ferrari and Benzo. (2014) *Between Cultural Diversity and Common Heritage*. p.324

FATWAS- RULINGS

Although the Saudi authorities and media have been using the justification of expansion for accommodating more worshippers, the Fatwas or rulings given out by the religious authorities clearly state their disapproval of building shrines or mosques over graves and highly encourage their removal. The Standing Committee for Scholarly Research and Issuing Fatwa³⁷ issued over 38 fatwas in relation to the subject of graves and building mosques over them, some of them include the following:

Fatwa on building over graves: Building on graves is an abominable 'bid'ah' (innovation in religion) that involves excessive veneration of those who are buried there. It is also a means that can lead to 'shirk' (associating others with Allah in His Divinity or Worship) It is therefore obligatory for a Muslim ruler or his representative to order the removal of these buildings on graves and that they be levelled to the ground, to end this 'bid'ah' and to block the means to 'shirk'.³⁸

Fatwa on praying in a mosque that has a grave: In case that the land on which the Masjid (mosque) was built is free of graves, performing Salah (prayer) there is permissible otherwise the Masjid should be destroyed.³⁹

Fatwa on removing a corpse if buried in a mosque: With regards to a deceased who was buried in a mosque facing the direction of the Kaaba - This grave should be dug up and the corpse should be carried to any place far from the Masjid such as the town graveyard. Placing a grave inside the Masjid is a means leading to Shirk (associating others with Allah in His Divinity or worship). If the grave lies in the direction of the Qiblah, the prohibition is more serious and the act is closer to Shirk as it may lead to worshipping the occupant of the grave.⁴⁰

Fatwa on visiting the Prophet's grave and the Baqi, specifically women: Pilgrims whether men or women are not required to visit the grave of the Prophet (peace be upon him) or Al-Baqi`. One should not undertake a journey to visit graves. Moreover, it is forbidden for women to visit graves even without undertaking journeys.⁴¹

³⁷ Alifita. (2015), Fatwas of the Permanent Committee. Available at: www.alifita.com [Accessed on 23rd August 2015]

³⁸ Fatwas of the Permanent Committee, Group 1, Volume 1: Aqidah (1), Creeds, Exaggeration regarding graves and building Masjids (mosques) over them- Ruling on building over graves (fatwa no 7210) <http://www.alifita.com/Fatawa/FatawaChapters.aspx?languagename=en&View=Page&PageID=217&PageNo=1&BookID=7> (Accessed 29th April 2015)

³⁹ Ibid- Praying in a Masjid built over an old cemetery (Fatwa no 10422) <http://www.alifita.com/Fatawa/FatawaChapters.aspx?languagename=en&View=Page&PageID=222&PageNo=1&BookID=7>

⁴⁰ Ibid- Placing a grave in the Masjid (Fatwa no 1448) <http://www.alifita.com/Fatawa/FatawaChapters.aspx?languagename=en&View=Page&PageID=226&PageNo=1&BookID=7>

⁴¹ Ibid- Pilgrims visiting the Prophet's grave and Al-Baqi (Fatwa no 10768) <http://www.alifita.com/Fatawa/FatawaChapters.aspx?languagename=en&View=Page&PageID=234&PageNo=1&BookID=7>

IMPLICATIONS

The destruction of Islamic sites in Saudi Arabia is placing Muslim identity and belonging at risk. With few existing iconic representations of Islam, Muslim scholars, historians and individuals often resort to only texts and scriptures, which are frequently misinterpreted. Such misguidance is a threat to the roots of the religion and for what it stands for. It is historic sites and ancient architecture that speak and depict an accurate account of history. The destruction and restriction of these and other holy sites weakens the spiritual connection of Muslims and other individuals with the essence of the religion. For example, the destruction of cemeteries in Mecca and Medina limits Muslims and non-Muslims in examining and understanding the noble personalities buried there. Such personalities were praised by the Prophet and could be used as examples on how to practise the religion. Rather, the continuous destruction and covering over of Islamic remains deletes evidences of the Prophet's life, converting the religion into merely a myth and leaving large gaps of misunderstanding for the current and future generations.

The poor preservation of Islamic heritage has led to a gradual cultural cleansing in Saudi Arabia. Such unaccountable actions create tensions in the long term between those who adhere to Wahhabi teachings versus those who do not. Not only are those who follow the Wahhabi doctrine empowered by the continuous removal of history but the opposing fraction, which are in most cases the Shi'ite and Sufi Sunni Muslims, are constantly threatened by this move. At best, this detrimental attitude has caused intolerance and discrimination between different Islamic sects in the Kingdom and the countries surrounding it, and at worse extreme hate and violence has been nurtured. The impact of intolerance and extreme hate has revealed itself more recently as sectarianism and extremism in the Middle East and resonate both throughout the region and beyond. For instance, the destruction of heritage and ancient artefacts in Syria and Iraq by extremist groups is a clear reflection of Saudi Arabia's attitude towards holy sites. Even the Bahraini authorities have used the destruction of places of worship as a military tool to suppress the opposition.⁴² Such actions across multiple countries and different groups, which testify to hatred and exclusion, establish the connection between attacks against cultural heritage, human rights and security. In fact, the Rome Statue of the ICC adopted in 1998,⁴³ considers these destructions as an act which falls within war crimes. This is also echoed in the International Criminal Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia that was established in 1993 which considers the destruction of "religious buildings"⁴⁴ equivalent to "cultural genocide".⁴⁵ The little respect towards

⁴² The Centre for Academic Shi'a Studies (2014), *The Destruction of Places of Worship in Bahrain*. [Online] Available at: <http://www.shiaresearch.com/Doc/TheDestructionofPlacesofWorshipinBahrain.pdf> [Accessed on: 22nd August 2015]

⁴³ "intentionally directing attacks against buildings dedicated to religion, education, art, science or charitable purposes, historical monuments, hospitals and places where the sick and wounded are collected, provided they are not military objectives;" (Art. 8) – Rome Statue of the International Criminal Court (2002) Article 8. Available at: http://www.icc-cpi.int/nr/rdonlyres/ea9aeff7-5752-4f84-be94-0a655eb30e16/0/rome_statute_english.pdf [Accessed on: 20th August 2015]

⁴⁴ Forrest, C. (2011). *International Law and the protection of Cultural Heritage*. Routledge. p. 403

⁴⁵ *ibid*

ancient Islamic locations has been a crucial factor in fuelling the rise of sectarianism and violence between the two main Islamic sects, Sunni and Shi'ites, across the Middle East.

Preserving heritage and cultural sites can be used as means to facilitate social cohesion and mutual understanding between sects. It is important to recall article 2 of UNESCO Universal Declaration on Cultural Diversity (2001), to “ensure (the) harmonious interaction among people and groups with plural, varied and dynamic cultural identities as well their willingness to live together”, through “policies for the inclusion and participation of all citizens”.⁴⁶ The protection of Islamic sites in Mecca and Medina could be a peaceful tool to defragment the religious communities and revered as exemplary behaviour by the Islamic world. Greater protection is essential to both security and peace strategies in preserving culture and religion and reducing tension in the region.

⁴⁶ UNESCO (2001), UNESCO Universal Declaration on Cultural Diversity. Available at: http://portal.unesco.org/en/ev.php-URL_ID=13179&URL_DO=DO_TOPIC&URL_SECTION=201.html [Accessed on: 21st August 2015]

Conclusion

Despite the protests and disapproval against the removal of sacred sites, the Saudi authorities have carried on with expansions. Critical sites in Islamic history such as Ajjal Fortress, Khadija's house, Caliph Abu Baker's house and many more sites have not only been destroyed but also replaced with a commercial project, removing their marks completely. The Al-Baqi cemetery, for example, continues to be disregarded and left in rubbles, as well as preventing visitors to enter that sacred place. The dearth of up keeping with the sanctity of these places goes beyond the pretext of expansion. The belief of eliminating these sites is indoctrinated within the notion of Wahhabism which has encouraged the Saudi authorities to proceed with economic plans. The decision to accommodate more tourists at the expense of eliminating historical sites is viewed by many Muslims and non Muslim academics as a significant threat and is raising alarm and concern amongst the general masses.

There needs to be a fine balance between economic development in the cities of Mecca and Medina and the protection of religious and historical icons, taking into account sensitivity towards every sect and religion that reveres the monuments in these two cities. By reconstructing the destroyed sites, safeguarding the existing historical monuments and displaying tolerance towards intangible expressions of beliefs that are significant to Sufi Sunnis and Shi'ites, there will be hope for reconciliation between religious sects in the region. Saudi Arabia could display exemplary behaviour towards Muslim tourists which other governments, movements and individuals can follow.

The lack of protection of sacred sites that are revered by various sects in Islam is viewed as an act of intolerance, which has partially led to fuelling sectarianism in the region. The deliberate destruction and restriction of places of worship has fed and nurtured extreme minds and the result, as unveiled in recent times, is distressing. The protection of it is essential to security and peace strategies in preserving culture and religion and reducing tension in the region. The preservation of Islamic sites in these two cities could be upheld as a response to the insecure upheaval in the Middle East, contributing to resolving the issue of sectarianism and extremism.

There is a sense of urgency for international bodies and organisations to respond to the ongoing eviction of Islamic sites, which roots the identities of over a billion Muslims around the world. Organisations such as UNESCO should try to enforce stronger implementation of existing conventions on protection of sacred places. Influential individuals such as the Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Religion or Belief should report on the systematic removal of sacred places in the cities of Mecca and Medina as means to put pressure on the authorities to avoid carrying out economic projects on top of these sites.

Finally, Islamic heritage and culture should be treated as a segment of cultural rights, granting it protection similar to other ethnic and minority cultures. The Special Rapporteur on Cultural Rights could carry out country visits to Saudi Arabia to investigate the continuous destruction of Islamic heritage and the prohibition of practising the Islamic culture by Muslims from non-mainstream sects.

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