

Saudi government demolishes historic Ottoman castle

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A diplomatic dispute has emerged between Saudi Arabia and Turkey regarding the Saudi authorities' destruction of an 18th century Ottoman castle that overlooked the holy city of Mecca. The two nations normally enjoy less vexed relations as military allies of the US.

The 220-year-old fortress of al-Ajyad was demolished at the turn of 2002 to make way for a \$533 million construction project. Days before the demolition, King Faud of Saudi Arabia gave the go ahead to a huge project that will cover the former site of the al-Ajyad castle. The building scheme entails flattening the hill on which the castle stood and constructing 11 high-rise towers, consisting of apartments, a twin-tower five-star hotel, restaurants and a shopping centre. The *Wall Street Journal* reports that the BinLaden Group, the construction firm founded by the father of Islamic terrorist Osama bin Laden, will be one of the two main businesses contracted to build the luxury project.

Many castles and other buildings still remain throughout the former Ottoman Empire, especially in the Middle East. The Ottoman Empire dates from the late 13th century until 1922. The centre was in present day Turkey and the Balkans, but intermittent periods of expansion extended its reach to what is now Hungary and the Ukraine, much of the Arabian Peninsula and North Africa. It was created by Turkish tribes from the North-Western Anatolian principality.

Mecca was part of the Ottoman Empire until 1916, when Hejaz, a large western coastal region of the Arabian Peninsula, declared independence. The Sultanate of Nejd, formed in 1921 and ruled by the Saud dynasty, occupied Mecca in 1924, eventually uniting Hejaz to form the kingdom of Saudi Arabia.

The Saudi government's obliteration of al-Ajyad is

only the latest in a deplorable history of destroying architectural treasures from Ottoman period. Numerous Ottoman houses, cemeteries, castles and fortresses have been sacrificed to the building of new developments in Mecca and Medina.

This latest demolition has brought protests and cries of wanton cultural vandalism from historic conservationists in Turkey. Ankara has compared the demolition of al-Ajyad to the Taliban's destruction of the Bamiyan Buddhas in Afghanistan. The Saudi authorities' protracted programme of demolishing all remnants of the Ottoman Empire made the bulldozing of al-Ajyad castle all the more criminal. Al-Ajyad was one of a diminishing number of significant historical buildings on the periphery of the Great Mosque in Mecca.

The Turkish parliamentary speaker Murat Sokmenoglu appealed to religious and nationalist sensibilities, calling the Saudi's actions "un-Islamic". On the *BBC Middle East* website Sokmenoglu explained "A Muslim country's destruction of another country's historic heritage on holy soil is a sinful behaviour in breach of the moral values of Islam, religious brotherhood and common sense".

Turkish Cultural Minister Istemihan Talay upped the nationalist ante stating "This is not just a show of disrespect of history but also the reflection of a complex, an approach that aims to erase the Turkish period from [Saudi Arabian] history and the world".

The Saudi Islamic affairs Minister Saleh al-Shaikh was quoted by the French news agency *AFP*, saying, "No-one has the right to interfere in what comes under the state's authority". Defending the planned housing element of the new scheme, al-Sheikh said that it was intended to house pilgrims to Mecca and that "this is in the interest of Muslims all over the world".

The Ottomans had constructed al-Ajyad castle itself to provide housing and protection to Muslim pilgrims to Mecca. Moreover, the luxury nature of the apartments and hotel complex, to be built on the grounds of the former castle, clearly shows this accommodation is not meant for ordinary Muslim pilgrims, as al-Sheikh boasts, but the wealthy. Access to these facilities will only be open to a thin layer of the richest visitors.

Al-Shaikh also sought to defend the demolition by calling it an “act of preservation” claiming somewhat disingenuously that a reconstruction of the fort would be included as part of the site redevelopment. Said Zulifcar, head of *Patrimoine Sans Frontières*, the Paris-based monument protection non-governmental organisation, rubbished this claim. “Well, what’s the point of demolishing it if they are going to rebuild it? And if you rebuild something which was already historical, you don’t rebuild the authentic structure”, he said.

The al-Ajyad castle stood on a hill overlooking the grand Mosque and was built in 1780 by the ruling Ottomans to keep the Wahhabi Islamic sect out of Mecca. Carel Bertram, a historian of Ottoman art at the University of Texas described the demolition as a “very sectarian move”. Denouncing Saudi plans as an “erasure of the past” she said the demolition was part of a wider effort by Saudi Arabia’s dominant Wahhabi elite to expunge the Islamic world of any remaining element of cultural and religious diversity. “It is a way for the Wahhabi sect to show that there is no form of Islam—on the ground, in the past, or in people’s memories—other than their own”.

Motivated by religious zealotry the Saudi authorities carried out enormous demolition campaigns in Mecca and the nearby port city of Medina after coming to power in the 1920s, and again in the 1970s. In 1924, they demolished the majority of historical mosques and monuments in Mecca and Medina. Despite protests from other Muslim countries and UNESCO they even destroyed the Prophet Mohammed’s house in Mecca and hundreds of mausoleums belonging to his companions. The al-Ajyad castle survived those decades of mass demolition, until now.

This latest act of cultural vandalism by Riyadh follows a similar pattern of destruction by Saudi-funded charities and aid agencies in the Balkans, not to

mention the bombing of the Bamiyan Buddhas by the Saudi-backed Taliban. In Bosnia and Kosovo “humanitarian” agencies funded and financed by the Saudi royal family are demolishing Ottoman-era mosques and other monuments to promote their Wahhabi vision of Islam.



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