

# Tearing the Historic Fabric: The Destruction of Yemen's Cultural Heritage

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THE GREAT DAM OF MARIB was one of the first archaeological sites in Yemen that Saudi Arabia destroyed. In May 2015, barely two months after the Saudi-led intervention in Yemen began, the dam — considered the oldest in the world and an engineering wonder of antiquity built in the eighth century BCE by the ancient Sabaeans — was badly damaged in nighttime airstrikes. It is one of the most important archaeological sites in the entire Arabian Peninsula.

While the Islamic State's cultural vandalism in Syria and Iraq has made headlines, damage to the rich cultural patrimony in Yemen, one of the Arab world's poorest country, receives far less attention. Saudi jets have bombed the Old City of Sanaa several times, most recently last fall, destroying several mud-brick tower houses, which date back a thousand years. The city has been inhabited for even longer, going back some 2,500 years; UNESCO designated it a World Heritage site in 1986.

For nearly two years, Saudi Arabia and its Arab coalition partners have been bombing Yemen to oust the Houthis, a Zaydi Shiite militia movement based in the highlands of northern Yemen. The Houthis took power in Sanaa in 2014 when they forced Yemen's president, Abd-Rabbu Mansour Hadi, out of the country. The target of last fall's airstrikes in Sanaa was reportedly a Houthi security headquarters.

The Saudis maintain that the Houthis are heavily backed by Iran, creating another Hezbollah on their border. Tehran's actual support to the Houthis, though, is more indirect, and they are not Iranian proxies. Such distinctions mattered little to the Obama administration, which backed Riyadh's war from the start in March 2015 and continued to resupply Saudi forces with US-made munitions. The new Trump administration is unlikely to change course and will probably ramp up US support.

The destruction in Yemen, the vast majority of it by Saudi forces, fits a pattern of culture being targeted throughout the Middle East. A report last year by the Antiquities Coalition, the Asia Society, and the Middle East Institute recognized that "culture has become a weapon of war," and the Islamic State "is not alone." The report further noted that, across the region, "cultural crimes have proliferated in the vacuum of political instability and breakdown of security following the 2011 Arab Spring."

"More than 95 percent of [the destroyed] sites have been destroyed by the Saudi-led coalition," said Abdulhakim al-Sayaghi, an architect and senior consultant with the Cultural Heritage Unit of the Social Fund for Development, a Yemeni NGO. The rest of the damage has been caused by the Houthis, who have shelled areas, including a museum housing ancient manuscripts in Taiz, and al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula, which is active in southern Yemen and has destroyed Sufi shrines and mausoleums.

Weaponizing culture might conjure images of looting and the black market trade of antiquities — one of the Islamic State's various funding streams. But as Yemen shows, it also means the apparently deliberate decimation of a country's past. "The same obscurantist ideology by which the Islamic State justifies its destruction of cultural heritage sites appears to be driving the Saudis' air war against the precious physical evidence of Yemen's ancient civilizations," archaeologist Lamya Khalidi argued in *The New York Times* in 2015.

The scale of destruction in Yemen since the Saudi-led intervention began can be captured in both broad strokes and terrible specifics. The civilian suffering is appalling. If they aren't killed or wounded in airstrikes, many Yemenis are starving as a result of a punishing blockade from the sea. With no route to escape by land, like many Syrian refugees, Yemenis are internally displaced, either living amid bombed-out infrastructure or in makeshift refugee camps.

As the fighting continues, with brief cease-fires brokered and soon broken, the cultural costs keep rising in a country with perhaps the best preserved traditional urban fabric and vernacular architecture in the Middle East. It isn't just cities like Sanaa or archaeological ruins like the dam in Marib, but places like Shibam, a walled city of 16th-century high-rises on an old caravan route, and [many towns and villages, some predating the birth of Islam, built of stone and perched on remote hilltops and mountains.](#)

More than 80 historical sites and monuments have been destroyed in airstrikes and other attacks, according to Nabil Monassar, the vice director of the General Organization for the Preservation of the Historic Cities of Yemen, a government agency. But, Monassar explains, that number counts Sanaa's entire Old City as "one site wholesale," as well as the Old City of Saada, which is also recognized by UNESCO and has endured heavy Saudi bombing. "If we instead considered individual historic buildings in both Sanaa and Saada, which is still being bombed now, the number of destroyed historic sites are in the hundreds," he said.

Yemen is revered by many as a birthplace of Arab civilization, home to the Biblical Queen of Sheba — thought to be a reference to the ancient Sabaeans. It has always been the most fertile part of the Arabian Peninsula, separated from its desert neighbors by a range of volcanic mountains. "The crime is that the Arabs themselves are destroying their roots. It's not only the Saudis," said Marco Livadiotti, a cultural heritage expert who lived in Sanaa for the past 30 years and worked with several Yemeni government agencies. "It's the Egyptians, the Sudanese, and the other Arab countries behind them."

The growing list of damaged and destroyed sites now includes the historic centers of Saada, Marib, al-Jawf, and the early medieval city of Zabid — another UNESCO World Heritage site — as well as monuments like al-Muqah temple in the ancient Sabaean city of Sirwah and the 12th-century al-Qahira citadel in Taiz, which was recently restored by UNESCO. The Saudis have steadily shelled Saada, the capital of the northern province on the Saudi border that Riyadh declared a military zone.

"Yemen is an incredibly poor country, but it is one of the richest, and certainly the richest in the Arabian Gulf region, in terms of just historic fabric that's been preserved," said Michele Lamprakos, an architectural historian at the University of Maryland who spent several years as a researcher in the country. "Cultural heritage is unique in Yemen in the sense that it's still a living heritage. It's not antiquities or ancient history. It's about everyday environments that still have meaning."

When she was researching her book on preservation in Sanaa, *Building a World Heritage City*, in the mid-2000s, she said that "there was a lot of buy-in for cultural heritage among Yemenis in part because it wasn't really part of the past."

Yemen's unrivaled patrimony in the Gulf region, if not the wider Middle East, is in stark contrast to Saudi Arabia, where the Saudi state and Wahhabi authorities have tried to erase much of the past. That living history gives Yemenis a sense of cultural confidence difficult for outside observers to understand. "When you hit the heritage of a place like that," Lamprakos explained, "you're really hitting at their identity."

There are also economic costs to this destruction of history. Cultural preservation and restoration projects, from prominent UNESCO initiatives to the many others at smaller historic settlements in rural areas that aren't World Heritage sites, employ teams of builders, craftsmen, and laborers. With donor funding halted, Lamprakos noted, "a critical source of employment and rebuilding in cities and towns has dried up."

Even the bombs that aren't direct hits are damaging. The Saudis have often hit other parts of Sanaa, and experts worry about the impact of airstrikes on thousands of mud-brick tower houses nearby in the city's ancient center. According to Livadiotti, the organic materials used in Yemeni architecture — clay, mud, stone, bricks, gypsum — are particularly vulnerable to the vibrations cause by massive explosions. Huge cracks now run up the walls of his house in Sanaa's Old City.

"There's nothing left to destroy," he said. "All of Yemen's infrastructure has been destroyed. So why keep bombing? Bombing what? Who?"

"Yemen's main asset was really its cultural heritage," he added. "The loss is for Yemenis and for the world."