“Not the Mecca We Know”: Analyzing the Spiritual and Cultural Ramifications of Contemporary Commercialism in Saudi Arabia

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“Not the Mecca We Know”: Analyzing the Spiritual and Cultural Ramifications of Contemporary Commercialism in Saudi Arabia

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ABSTRACT

The Islamic Hajj, one of the world's most prominent religious pilgrimages, has in recent decades faced increasing scrutiny due to its rapid and persistent commercialization under the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia’s government. To make way for this commercialization, researchers estimate that over 95% of Islamic heritage sites have been destroyed, the justification for which often lies in Wahhabi attempts to avoid idolatry. The few remaining sites have been renovated beyond the point of recognition. Amid the drastic transformation of both Islam’s holiest city and holiest ritual, this thesis finds that the Kingdom’s fundamentalist Islamic interpretations and extreme commercial developments have two goals. The first is to create a “Hajj commodity” that commodifies the pilgrimage’s religious value, and the second is to promote a “new state mythology” that seeks to essentialize the “Saudi Arabian” character of both Hajj and Islam itself.
INTRODUCTION

The Hajj, one of the world's most prominent religious pilgrimages, has in recent decades faced increasing scrutiny due to its rapid and persistent commercialization under the Saudi Arabian government. One of the five pillars of Islam, the pilgrimage was mandated to every Muslim by the Prophet Muhammad in 628 CE, and has continually drawn believers to Mecca for the better part of the last 1,500 years. In recent decades the Hajj rituals have faced increasing scrutiny due to their rapid and persistent commercialization under the current Saudi Arabian government. A religious pilgrimage first begun and subsequently mandated to every (physically and financially) capable Muslim by the Prophet Muhammad in 628 CE, the Hajj has continually drawn Muslims to Mecca for the better part of the last 1,500 years. While the holy cities of Mecca and Medina have undergone countless changes in leadership and culture, for the vast majority of Islam’s history, their attendance has remained consistent, completed by a relatively small percentage of the world’s Muslims. This is understandable given that myriad inhibiting factors lie between each willing believer and the Kaaba, the spiritual focal point of Muslim faith and prayer: financial feasibility, travel safety, navigation, health, cultural integration, and, more recently, issues of political association and border crossings. While some or all of these issues are impediments to contemporary aspiring hajjis, improvements in technology, transportation, medicine, and global geopolitical stability have increased the viability of Hajj for many Muslims around the world.

For Muslims living in present-day Saudi Arabia, near the birthplace of Islam, Hajj has always been an easier endeavor than it has for those in Europe or the Americas. Yet on average, it is easier for international pilgrims to perform the journey today than ever before. The last century has led to an almost exponential increase in the number of annual overseas Hajj-goers
— from roughly 100,000 in 1945 to 3.16 million in 2012. However, problems regarding hotel capacity and inter-site transportation have increased dramatically. To cope with the massive influx of pilgrims each year, the Saudi Arabian government has sponsored the building of several massive hotels and malls around Mecca, including new developments being constructed mere meters from Masjid al-Haram, the mosque complex surrounding the Kaaba with a worshiper capacity of 2.5 million. The very-real issue of overcrowding during Hajj season has also led to manifold problems for Meccan officials over the past decade alone — most notably, the 2015 Mina stampede, which resulted in the deaths of over 2,000 hajjis — and has encouraged the use of crowd-control oriented pedestrian pathways and yearly caps on the number of overseas pilgrims.

Mecca is undergoing a massive commercial, cultural, and, in some pilgrims’ eyes, spiritual transformation. Bearing in mind that the Saudi Arabian government implements and funds most of the development projects, the transformation of the Hajj experience seems to have motivations that are farther-reaching than simply expanding accommodations. Exploring the last two decades of Hajj commercialization within the context of Saudi Arabia’s fundamentalist religious history and concentrated economic goals unearths the nation’s desires to solidify a very particular interpretation of Islam, and a very specific justification for its own existence.

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METHODOLOGY

Personal Connections

As a Muslim international studies major on the Middle East and North Africa track, Islam has been at the forefront of my academic learning throughout my college years. Of the many MENA courses I’ve taken, the majority have had to do with religion — from Islamic Political Thought to Religion and Society to Sacred Texts of the Middle East. Much of my focus outside of political theology is on the anthropology of our environment — “environment” in this case referring to both natural and man-made features. How we perceive religious rituals is deeply informed by the qualities of our environments, and I have long suspected that the externalities of commercialization and modernization in religious structures has the potential to negatively affect the religiosity of the believer. Having studied the modern political Iran, one of the two major extant Islamic theocracies, delving into the tangible products of Saudi Arabia’s religious interpretations was a fascinating opportunity. Though this thesis is not a comparison between Iran and Saudi Arabia, I would place it within the context of a broader struggle between the two countries for the primacy of their respective religious traditions, and for the role of an exemplary Islamic theocracy in the international sphere.

Hajj is, to me, an experience that feels both abstract and incredibly tangible. I have always planned to complete it one day, and yet it remains a distant and somewhat unimaginable experience. I have spent my life hearing about Hajj from peers whose families perform the pilgrimage, or teachers who lecture about its significance. I have built up my own social imaginaries concerning my potential role as a Muslim within the Hajj ritual, and inversely, the role of Hajj within my life. Hajj has occupied various spaces within my spiritual psyche — something to look forward to, something that inspires me, something that confuses and at
times intimidates me. It is an obligation that has always challenged my faith, in the sense that it seems to be a pinnacle of belief and strong faith for those who complete it. Who is worthy enough to make the journey? If and when I visit, will the strength of my faith correlate to the spiritual significance of the event? The piety of *hajjis*, and the sanctity of Mecca itself has remained overwhelming to me.

And yet, as I’ve learned more about the Hajj’s socio-political and economic context, my conceptualization of the experience has changed. Underneath the cut and dry religious rituals I’ve learned about for decades, there is an undercurrent of cultural capitalism, heavy industrialization, and the erasure of Islamic history. In the wake of Saudi’s realization that crude oil production won’t last forever, the creation of an alternative religious tourism economy has resulted in a commercialized version of the pilgrimage — which at best brings business and attention to Mecca, and at worst, commodifies and makes exclusive a historically egalitarian pilgrimage. This is the change I have investigated, and the results of the investigation have had rippling effects across my understanding of my own faith and religious obligations.

**Research Goals**

In general, compensating for rapidly-increasing pilgrim counts has been at the forefront of Saudi economic policy regarding Hajj; considering the pilgrimage’s significance to the country’s economy and national identity as the Islam’s heartland, facilitating the growth of Hajj is a primary objective for government officials. Striking, however, is the extent to which the Saudi government has been willing to essentially erase foundational Islamic structures and, some might argue, contradict Islamic tenets in the name of new commercial development. Take, for example, the estimation that over 95% of Mecca’s original historical buildings have been torn
down since 1800.4,5 Or, that the construction of the sixth-tallest building in the world, the 1,972-foot-tall Abraj al-Bait hotel complex now towering over Masjid al-Haram, seemed to justify the destruction of the 220-year old Ottoman-era Ajyad Fortress.6 In place of these historic structures, futuristic hotel lobbies, opulent shopping malls, and luxurious dining options beckon elite "hajjis" in after their daily Hajj rites are completed.7 The Saudi Arabian government is meeting challenges of capacity with urgency, and a wide array of commercial investments; by 2030, the number of hotel rooms in Mecca will have increased from a relatively paltry 18,000 to nearly 125,000.8

Yet, even as these expansions answer the logistical questions, more are raised. Exactly what combination of motivations — historical, economic, and religious — have led to the rampant commercialization of the Hajj experience? What are the semiotic impacts of such a whirlwind and absolute change in the religious and economic culture of the holy city? And, are these changes impactful enough to fundamentally change the way Muslims perform and perceive Hajj, transitioning the pilgrimage from a transformational spiritual journey into a religio-cultural product?

To pursue the aforementioned questions, I will delve into the individual political, religious, and economic factors influencing contemporary Muslim discourses on Hajj later in my discussion. The differing religious interpretations of Hajj, the magnitude of commercial and

8 Proctor, Rebecca Anne. “Unpacking the Hajj Dividend for Saudi Arabia’s Travel and Hospitality Industries.” Arab News, 1 July 2023.
hospitality-based development, the internal convolutions of ‘religious tourism’, and the economic motivations that have and continue to influence the pilgrimage are each complex and multifaceted topics of importance. These too I will discuss. My central goal, however, is to uncover the way in which the motivations for commercialization, and the accompanying destruction of historical religious sites, have changed over time.
CONCEPTUALIZING HAJJ

Most Westerners view pilgrimages as cultural artifacts of a bygone day...Indeed to comprehend its essentiality and purpose, the Hajj must be considered not simply as pilgrimage but as the fifth pillar of Islam that inexorably interrelates with the four other pillars, foundations of the faith, to view the essential and overall unity of Islam in it's spacial embrace.


The ritual journey to Mecca — the holiest city in Islam and the home of the religion’s spiritual focal point, the Kaaba — draws millions of hajjis (Muslim pilgrims) from around the world annually, during the twelfth month (Dhul Hijjah) of the Islamic calendar. During the off-season, Muslims from around the world still visit the city to perform the umrah ritual, a lesser pilgrimage that, unlike Hajj, may be undertaken at any point in the year. The rules about who can and should embark on Hajj are subject to some interpretation, but the obligation to perform the pilgrimage generally falls on any able-bodied Muslim in good health, for whom the Hajj is financially and socio-culturally feasible. One of the five ‘pillars of Islam,’ Hajj is mandatory for all practicing Muslims; they are called to perform Hajj at least once in their lifetimes if possible, though believers experiencing financial hardships, issues with health and wellness (including, for example, pregnancy), or political interference are considered exempt as long as conditions decreasing practicability last.

One of the central tenets of Hajj is the egalitarian nature of the pilgrimage. The ‘oneness’ of the Muslim population, of the Hajj-goers, permeates the psychological, spiritual, and visual structures of the event. Legal director and Independent columnist Qari Asim describes how “Men – irrespective of background, skin color, social class and age – cover themselves in the

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prescribed two unstitched pieces of white cloth which they are required to don for the event in a symbol of uniformity and equality.”

Extra ornamentation is traditionally discouraged, and adorning one’s clothing with unnecessary status markers verges on being antithetical to the necessary unity of Hajj. “Every one of the thousands at the airport, about to leave for Jeddah, was dressed this way,” Malcolm X said of his fellow pilgrims when he went on Hajj in April of 1964. “You could be a king or a peasant and no one would know.”

Considering the transnational Muslim community currently numbers around 1.8 billion people, according to Pew Research Center, there is a significant diversity of both the practices and discursive traditions of hajjis in Mecca. The global Muslim population, called the ummah, is


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10 Asim. “Reclaim the Hajj.”
understood by both academics and religious scholars as a community-in-flux, stretched over wide swaths of human nature and religious understandings. “The ummah is larger than the doctrinal elements that supposedly demarcate the outlines of Islam according to any particular group,”\textsuperscript{14} and one of the Hajj’s main roles within Islam is to act as a kind of compass, orienting the collective Muslim body towards the core of the religion. When pilgrims wear the all-white \textit{ihram}, they strip away large signifiers of wealth and status. Pilgrims of differing nationalities, cultures, and races traditionally sleep in the same tents, and circle the \textit{Kaaba} in the same counterclockwise movement. Malcolm X described this phenomenon as well: “There were tens of thousands of pilgrims, from all over the world. They were of all colors, from blue-eyed blondes to black-skinned Africans. But we were all participating in the same ritual, displaying a spirit of unity and brotherhood.”\textsuperscript{15} Even images of Muslims on Hajj often evoke a sense of unity; Hajj-goers form concentric white circles around the Kaaba, moving in the same direction, reciting the same prayer, wearing the same white sheets of the ihram.

\textsuperscript{15} X. \textit{Autobiography}. 391.
BACKGROUND

Cities are always in the making; they are never fully made or remade.


Scholarly sources exploring the connections between religious identity and economic incentives for new development in Mecca are relatively scarce. Much work exists regarding the individual factors at play — the religious and economic histories of Hajj, religious justifications for the destruction of ancient Islamic sites, and commercial development trends in modern day Saudi Arabia — and yet few works delve into their interrelation. The current level of commercialism in the region lies at a nexus between historic attempts to propagate a Wahhabi interpretation of Islam (a subsect of the Saudi Arabia-based Islamic revival *Salafi* movement), and far more recent efforts to manufacture Hajj into yet another one of the country’s non-oil economic engines.\(^\text{16}\) According to my research, a knowledge gap exists regarding the process of that change, and the effects of Saudi Arabia’s clerical history on its contemporary industrialization. Saudi religious scholars from the early 1900s may have found the current government’s profiting from the Hajj to be antithetical to the pilgrimage itself. And yet, the same branch of Wahhabi clerics (*ulama*) in Saudi Arabia today justify and uphold the state’s largely financially-motivated development decisions.\(^\text{17,18}\) This thesis will track the history of this transformation of the Hajj from a largely pious enterprise into an engine for religious tourism, following the role of Hajj-as-business as it has expanded over the past century and a half and colored the development of modern Saudi Arabia. To ground this synthesis, I provide below a


\(\text{17}\) Ibid. 19. Al-Rasheed explains Wahhabi *ulama* “not only legitimize power but also condemn attempts to challenge this power.”

review of several key contemporary works that provide insight into the causal connections between Wahhabi motives for altering Saudi Arabia’s national-historical narrative and its resulting changed socioeconomic imaginaries.

The Effects of Wahhabism in Modern Mecca

Wahhabi Islam speaks to the fusion of both the state and religious clergy into a single institution, half religious interpretation, half political ideology; in this fusion the Saudi state is clearly presented as a theocracy whose economic projects and culture must be aligned with a specific interpretation of Islam. Two centuries of Wahhabism in Saudi Arabia have led to a certain religio-cultural cleansing. The vehement, often-violent methods through which Wahhabi purists have 1) diminished evidence of religious and cultural diversity, and 2) subsequently attempted to construct from the remaining artifacts a sense of national history, have been conducted through the aforementioned unique bond between the Saudi state and Wahhabi mosque. Madawi al-Rasheed investigates this link in *Contesting the Saudi State: Islamic Voices from a New Generation*, and provides some explanation for why Wahhabi interpretations of Islam can strive for an ascetic purity while paradoxically supporting heavy commercialization. “Wahhabi demonisation of Arabian society in both past and present stems from the movement’s desire to control and gain legitimacy,” al-Rasheed writes.19 Wahhabi legitimacy rests on the myth that Arabian Muslims have been led astray, primarily by heterodoxy, Western liberalism, and non-Sunni sects (Shi’ism, Sufism, Zaydis, Ismailis and folk interpretations20). As al-Rasheed

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The vast majority (roughly 90%) of all practicing Muslims are Sunni. Differences between Sunni and Shi’a interpretations of Islam rest on competing interpretations of Muhammad’s succession. Shi’ism, the next largest sect after Sunnism, is followed by increasingly small fractions of highly localized and culture-specific followers. As Rowley writes, these differences “in no way distort the overall unity of Islam nor diminish the importance of Hajj in reinforcing that unity.”
explains, “Such ‘corrupted’ Islam is centered on excessive ritual and festivity, punctuated by tomb visiting, intercession and mediation.”21 This guiding belief has been the through-line of the past two centuries of Wahhabi religious rule; rites, rituals, practices and sites that did not directly cohere with its stringent, literalist interpretation of Islam were seen not only as extraneous or distracting, but explicitly threatening to the purity of Saudi Muslims.

However, in the context of modern-day Saudi Arabia, the puritanical ideologies historically promoted by Wahhabi ulama and implemented by the government, while ideologically in line with the destruction of historic religious sites, feels significantly at odds with the rampant commercial projects in Mecca and Medina. The ways in which the country as a whole has been made more accessible for Western travelers, has opened up to Western music and festivity, and has prioritized the economic growth and technological advancement of a sacred pilgrimage, appear paradoxical22 — could the situation in Mecca possibly be the result of an agreement between asceticism and commercialism? Wahhabism decries change in religio-cultural practices as impious innovation, and alleges itself as a return-to-form for Muslims. Al-Rasheed, however, emphasizes that “describing the Wahhabi movement as a puritan tradition does not necessarily imply austerity.”23 Rather, advocates of Wahhabism “were partly driven by a desire to amass wealth and treasures from the conquered territories, to compensate for the poverty of their homeland.”24 As she goes on to explain, Wahhabi criticism of both ignorant Muslims and disbelievers was partly directed at those who “‘worship God through prohibiting the permissible’”,25 the accumulation of wealth, if supposedly for the betterment of the ummah, is therefore considered a relatively important tenet of this ideology. This unlikely

21 Al-Rasheed. Contesting the Saudi State, 23.
24 Ibid.
25 Ibid.
marriage of capital accumulation and theological stringency accounts for the unique conditions in Mecca, where religion is both a motivation for profiting off of certain religious sites (i.e. Masjid al-Haram) and a justification for razing others (i.e. the Ajyad Fortress).26

Al-Rasheed's work proposes that Wahhabism, while born out of a relatively singular and traditional interpretation of Islam, has undergone remarkable transformations over the last two centuries. The influx of tourists from both Muslim and non-Muslim countries has certainly increased the diversity of religious interpretations in the country, but adjustments in Saudi Arabia’s fundamental religious leadership, al-Rasheed argues, are not necessarily due to that diversification.27 Rather, she suggests, Wahhabism has itself been modernized (in its own way). Wahhabism has to some degree legitimised the religious contours of the Saudi rulership, and that modern rulership has conditionally bolstered the legitimacy of the ulama. Thus the government and mosque work in tandem: the state derives religious justification for its commercial exploitation and economic projects from specific Wahhabi clerics, and in exchange carries out certain theologically-motivated operations prompted or directly prescribed by the ulama.

Decontextualizing Mecca

The Saudi government has used its wealth to dramatically build and rebuild its cities. The country’s urban centers have seen massive growth over the past decade alone, and previously-neglected parts of the country, like the south-eastern deserts of Rub al-Khali (“The Empty Quarter”), have been peppered with oasis resorts, energy plants, and ecotourism reserves. One glance at the government’s website for “Vision 2030” shows highly ambitious plans to essentially make the parts of the country not associated with Hajj more marketable.28 It is a

26 Brooks & Young. “Heritage in the Middle East.” 27.
transformation of epic proportions, focused on “diversifying and streamlining the Saudi economy” for a post-oil boom, post-Gulf War era. Images from the website show mock-up images of futuristic cities (i.e. “The Line” city at Neom), floating neighborhoods (“Oxagon”), and the proposed largest urban park in the world (“King Salman Park,” offering “arts and culture experiences to sports, innovation, and entertainment features”). Ads for the Hejaz region, in particular, boast an up-and-coming “pilgrim experience,” with unmatched boutiques, hotels, and apartments.

The Abraj al-Bait (or “Makkah Royal Clock Tower”) and the numerous towers surrounding the Kaaba are mainly high end. But the opulent boutiques frequented by hajjis still wearing the ihram tell a very different story than the ancient streets over which they were built. Atef Alshehri, an architect with a focus on urbanism in the Middle East and North Africa, writes in his Middle East Quarterly article, “Mecca and Medina, Sacred Sites of Development Engines” about the state of urban development and its effects on perceptions of heritage. As Alshehri explains, “In the past, the area developed over the centuries to serve charitable, educational, and scholarly purposes. With extensive recent demolition activities, the identity of the core shifted from a historically accessible space for a wide spectrum of community groups to an exclusive destination primarily for seasonal visiting clientele.”

The nature of the city has changed rapidly. Alshehri asserts that the state has demolished the cultural ‘core’ of Mecca; the Kaaba, Masjid al-Haram, and the Hajj itself have been glaringly decontextualized, lifted out of their historical frames of reference and set down again amid historically-sterile surroundings. Middle East historian Rosie Bsheer explains in Archive Wars how “official Saudi narratives portray Mecca as a timeless sacred space, a city not only sheltered from worldly corruption but also devoid of

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29 Bsheer. Archive Wars. 4, 218.
politics or culture, waiting for the ruling family to carry it into modernity even as they protected its holy places.” The intentional destruction of specific sites seeks to prevent chances for pilgrims to discover the cultural and religious diversity of Mecca’s past — instead directing them to carefully curated experiences and shopping centers. Bsheer notably points out that “historical scholarship to date also limits discussions of Mecca either to matters of the annual pilgrimage or to the city’s importance under Al Saud,” which supplies additional evidence for this mitigation of historical discoveries.\(^\text{31}\) This is a major factor contributing to the limited research on the topic of commercialization’s effects on the Hajj’s religious character.

Abraj al-Bait’s five-story shopping mall houses 4,000 stores.\(^\text{32}\)


\(^{32}\) “Abraj al-Bait’s five-story shopping mall houses 4,000 stores.” Accor Makkah Blog.  
This demolition of historical sites is, as seen in al-Rasheed’s writing, both spurred on and justified by Saudi Arabia’s commercialization ideology. Where the clerical body once justified the destruction of religious shrines for the sake of spiritual purification, it now justifies the destruction of any historic monument for the sake of commercialism. It is rarely the 60s and 70s-era semi-urban concrete residential buildings that are remade into twinkling glass highrises; instead it is the schools, souks (historic bazaars), the ancient homes of Islamic leaders, and the mountains themselves that are razed. “Most historic centers of major Saudi cities whether in Riyadh, Jeddah, or Dammam were not treated as loci of preservation,” Alshehri writes. “The pressures of rapid development coupled with the availability of vast financial resources made it possible to simply raze the old cities and recreate them.”

Alshehri’s description of the modernization of Saudi urban spaces implies a forced recontextualization of those spaces, aligns with Bsheer’s assertion that “battles to erase and remake history through archives and the built environment, and the commodification of historical artifacts and space, were part of the same state project to erase and remake the country’s discursive and material history.” This modernization-through-destruction is the “history-making” echoed in Alshehri and al-Rasheed’s work — blatant state formation that “necessitates the erasure of some pasts at the expense of others.”

The effects of these changes on pilgrims is profound, and reshapes what information scientist Nadia Caidi considers the “social imaginaries” of Hajj. In “Pilgrimage to Hajj: An Informational Journey” — her study of the changing social imaginaries of hajj-goers, during which she interviewed 12 pilgrims (labeled “P1-P12”) about their experiences in Mecca — she

33 Brooks & Young. “Heritage in the Middle East.” 27.
34 Alshehri. “Development Engines,”
35 Bsheer. Archive Wars. 4.
36 Ibid. 34, 96.
encountered perceptions of the ritual that ranged from thoughts of unity to longing for a more traditional pilgrimage. The commercialization of Mecca often spurred a significant, active, and necessary recontextualization of pilgrims’ social imaginaries. Take one pilgrim’s reflection on his initial reactions to the city:

Looking at [Mecca] a bit critically, it is also a place where so much buying and selling is taking place. The mix of the consumer culture with the spiritual experience was disturbing. Also, the professional beggars were a reality too. You can go in and be oblivious to it. Or you see it for what it is. It reflects the inequities and hypocrisy of the times.

Other hajjis remarked that the inequality bolstered by the commercialized pilgrimage was “very visible,” even within the enforced visual uniformity that the ihram offers.

The experiences of the pilgrims Caidi interviewed, along with the contradictions highlighted by Alshehri, contributes to a “visceral and embodied experience of disruption and confusion created by information encounters within the receiving context”—something Caidi refers to as “information dissonance.” “Although disorienting,” she explains, “these moments of surprise…reveal to participants the limits of their understanding and apprehension of particular issues and thus create the opportunity for further information-seeking and meaning-making to clarify or recontextualize their knowledge.” Two “re-imaginings” take place through Saudi

38 Caidi. “Pilgrimage to Hajj.” 50. “What stood out for P5 as Hajj memories were ‘pictures of people wearing the same piece of clothing. They all looked the same.’”
39 Ibid. ‘P9’ says, “I wanted to hear the experience of others who had gone before me…They had known the Kaaba the way it used to be. Without all the materialism that we see now.”
40 Ibid. 58.
41 Ibid. 59.
42 Ibid. 53.
Arabia’s history-making urban developments. In the first, pilgrims are forced by the overwhelming nature of the city to conflate their religious and cultural identities with the Saudi nation. In the second, entirely opposite re-imagining, the obviously distorted and decontextualized Mecca creates confusion, anxiety, and frustration among pilgrims.43

While the author’s broader point focuses on the need to incorporate “lived-religion” (i.e. personal experiences of believers undertaking religious rituals and pilgrimages) into information sciences, the study also highlights the dynamism of Hajj in the 21st century. Individuated meaning-making and the transformation of previously-held conceptions of Hajj have always been central to the pilgrimage, and the author positions modern, history-making commercialization as yet another catalyst for re-imagining religious spaces. However, the dissonant experiences of the hajjis she interviews are absorbed and eventually incorporated into their social imaginaries. Despite clear friction between pre and post-Hajj expectations, they do not see the pilgrimage as commodified, nor is commercialization extensive enough to fundamentally alter the transcendent nature of the journey.

**Commodifying Culture**

The few remaining historic religious sites around Mecca have been rather suddenly renovated in the past five years. And, most importantly, the last sacred sites in the region have been monetized past the point of recognition. One of the development projects in the region is the “Mohammed bin Salman Project for Developing Historical Mosques,” launched in 2018 to restore 30 historic mosques in the hopes of creating new cultural experiences.44 The Saudi tourism website advertises the “Hira Cultural District,” a shopping and entertainment neighborhood located under *Jabal al-Nour*, the mountain on which Muslims believe the Prophet

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Muhammad received the first revelation of the *Quran*.\(^{45}\) Pilgrims can purchase tickets to experience “The Revelation Gallery,” a set of small movie theaters along a cave path, and can book rooms at the Hira Cabins hotel and the Saudi Coffee Museum. The experiences are pleasant, easily accessible, and comfortable. They also represent a deep monetization of the last remaining sacred sites in the region.

The “Revelation Gallery” in the Hira Cultural District, beneath Jabal al-Nour. 2019.\(^{46}\)

What is notable now is the way attitudes toward religious heritage sites have shifted so dramatically in the past two decades. The restoration of non-Saudi mosques, the capitalization of the holy mountain, the Hajj-themed restaurants and shopping malls crowded around the valley suggest a conscious effort to expand market values into the corners of the cultural, religious, and


political state — a pattern of economic rationality that political theorist Wendy Brown explains “involves extending and disseminating market values to all institutions and social action.”

Naturally, one could make the argument that sites of religious pilgrimages like the Hajj have always been centers of commerce, and that this culture of commercialism is simply the latest incarnation of a longstanding relationship between business and religion. The mass convergence of believers from myriad national and ethnic backgrounds lends itself to the creation of a market, and spaces for consumers and sellers to trade. The Hajj market provides numerous opportunities to exchange goods and services, such as lodging for weary pilgrims, food and clothing, transportation, protection, and payment for those who maintain the sanctity of the religious site and facilitate the sacred rites. But even if one were to consider pre-20th century Hajj as being run like a business with the state employing laissez-faire economic policies, or classic “truck and barter” liberalism, the marketization in modern Mecca is far more specifically directed than in eras past. It is propped up and fed by both legal and political methods, forced into existence by the state’s mercenary nature. The citizens and visitors in Mecca are financial variables, gauged entirely by their potential to spend as much as possible. In a nation where the need to categorize culture and heritage sites into either marketable or non-marketable financial assets has gone beyond simple profitability, commercialism has become a defining aspect of Saudi state identity — an identity that is itself “enfolded and animated by market rationality.”

Similarly enfolded and animated by market rationality are the identities and spiritual dimensions of both the pilgrimage and pilgrim.

50 Ibid. Para. 13.
It may be argued that this analysis, which is predicated on a disproportionate focus on capital accumulation, shouldn’t be applied to a country that has already amassed so much wealth. Given Saudi Arabia’s status as one of the world’s largest economies, the transformation of the Hajj event is possibly more an attempt to control the pilgrimage experience than an attempt to make money. However, a significant amount of literature on this topic analyzes the Hajj’s transformation through the lens of the latter profit-oriented attempt. Critical scholars often assert that the Saudi government has aimed to commercialize the experience of the Hajj, rather than craft a Hajj experience with economized components.\footnote{Green. “The Hajj as its Own Undoing.” 225.} I believe that analyzing the commercialization of Mecca as an attempt to create a simplified and entertaining event might be more appropriate. Therefore, I will discuss this framework in my analysis.

As the Hejaz region evolves into a stage of competing religious and economic pursuits, the ongoing interactions between tradition and modernity continue to shape the physical and spiritual aspects of the Hajj pilgrimage. The major shift in the Hajj has been from its being a primarily religious undertaking to one driven by economic considerations, a shift that highlights the relationships between religious history, economic interests, and tourism. The paradoxical coexistence of ascetic practices and commercial ventures also continues to challenge traditional principles of Wahhabism, which are being molded to justify the pursuits of the Saudi government. Additionally, the decontextualization of historical and religious sites in Mecca, as well as the monetization of sacred spaces, reflects a deliberate effort to alter the Hajj experience to support the political and economic goals of the state. The next section will examine the roots of this new paradigm: iconoclasm, and the progress of business in the Hejaz.
THE HISTORIC CONTOURS OF HAJJ

Foundations of Iconoclasm in Saudi Arabia

The role of iconoclasm — the religiously-motivated destruction of religious structures and monuments — in Wahhabi interpretations of Islam varies situationally. Current instructions by the Saudi ulama to preserve certain religious sites and destroy others imply that not all heritage structures are seen as equally threatening or valuable to Saudi culture or the Hajj’s spiritual sanctity. Even historical accounts of the rise of Wahhabism in Saudi Arabia show a change in the level of iconoclastic action. The original perspectives of Wahhabi Muslims on the role of religious shrines, both Sunni and other, provide grounds for understanding current Saudi interpretations of Islamic heritage sites. Historians have traced the beginnings of iconoclasm in Saudi Arabia, following the growing fundamentalist sentiment to destroy sites that potentiate idolatry.

Historian and Middle East analyst Helen Chapin Metz highlights the effects of Wahhabi ideas on the Al-Saud clan in her book Saudi Arabia: A Country Study. Muhammad Ibn Abd al-Wahhab (1703-92), an Islamic theologian and imam from the Banu Tamim clan of central Arabia, paved the way for what would later become the Wahhabi reformist movement. While studying Hanbali Islam, one of the strictest schools of Sunni jurisprudence, he observed various forms of shrine, tomb, and grave veneration during his travels to Medina and Iraq. These practices, which he perceived as directly contrary to Islamic principles, left a profound impact on him. In Ibn Abd al-Wahhab’s eyes, the preservation of material religious sites other than


53 Özev, Muharrem H. 2017. “Saudi Society and the State: Ideational and Material Basis.” Arab Studies Quarterly 39 (4): 996–1017. 997. Differences between the Sunni and Shia sects of Islam are significant; while Salafism, and therefore Wahhabism, considers itself a Sunni revivalist movement, some scholars claim that the fundamental beliefs of both Wahhabism and broader Sunnism diverge to such an extent that the former should not be assessed under the umbrella of the latter. Özev asserts that “the distinction between Wahhabism and the other Muslims is too deep to be compared with the Catholic-Protestant dissociation.”
modern Saudi Arabia’s two holy mosques were gateways to idolatry. As his religious influence grew, so did his concomitant belief that the pluralistic rituals he saw across the Arabian peninsula were almost entirely heretical.

Simultaneously, Ibn Abd al-Wahhab strengthened his political ties with Muhammad ibn Saud (1710-65), the contemporaneous leader of the Saud clan in central Arabia (near present-day Riyadh). The two became contemporaries, determined to unify Arabia through common religious and political doctrines. Metz writes that, in 1744, Ibn Saud and Ibn Abd al-Wahhab “swore a traditional Muslim oath in which they promised to work together to establish a state run according to Islamic principles.” These principles, of ascetic, purist, and pious theocratic governance, have been actively preserved over the past two centuries (even though this thesis argues that the manifestations of these principles have changed dramatically). Despite this pact having been made well over a century before the founding of the modern Saudi Arabian nation, the connection between Wahhabi ideals and the ruling family remains a prominent ideological cornerstone of the country.

As Ibn Abd al-Wahhab’s connection with Ibn Saud deepened, so did his disgust with the shrine-divine association — an association largely made by the Shia Muslims. Particularly invested in sacred iconography, “Twelver” Shi’ism — a branch of Shia Islam that propounds belief in a line of twelve divinely-appointed imams — was considered the most threatening symbol of religious deviancy by Ibn Abd al-Wahhab’s followers. In his book Saudi Arabia Enters the 21st Century, international security analyst Anthony Cordesman highlights how this rift was “especially intense because Saudi ‘Wahhabis’ actively reject all veneration of man, even

54 Metz. Saudi Arabia. 15
the prophet. At one point, they attempted to destroy Muhammad's tomb in Medina. In contrast, the Saudi Shi'ites...venerate each of the past imams, and make pilgrimages to their tombs."55

Ibn Abd al-Wahhab's strong opposition to practices he deemed as idolatrous led him to recommend the use of Ibn Saud's soldiers to violently suppress Shia rituals. Wahhabis — followers of al-Wahhab’s severe reformism — carried out the destruction of Shia tombs and religious sites as early as the mid-1700s. Raids of Shia villages followed. Metz details the most intense destruction, which happened after the death of ibn Saud in 1765, in the following passage:

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In 1801 the Al Saud-Wahhabi armies attacked and sacked Karbala, the Shia shrine in eastern Iraq that commemorates the death of Husayn. In 1803 they moved to take control of Sunni towns in the Hijaz. Although the Wahhabis spared Mecca and Medina the destruction they visited upon Karbala, they destroyed monuments and grave markers that were being used for prayer to Muslim saints and for votive rituals, which the Wahhabis consider acts of polytheism. In destroying the objects that were the focus of these rituals, the Wahhabis sought to imitate Muhammad's destruction of pagan idols when he reentered Mecca in 628.\textsuperscript{57}

The “reformist” elements of al-Wahhab’s ideology are clear here: the actions of his followers attempted to emulate the Prophet Muhammad’s demolition of idols (such as his alleged destruction of a statue of Hubal in 630 C.E.) through the incessant razing of objects with religious associations.\textsuperscript{58,59}

\textsuperscript{57} Cordesman. \textit{Saudi Arabia Enters the Twenty-First Century}. 15.
\textsuperscript{58} Cevik, Nilgün & Yildiz, Şenay Özugür. 2022. “Contemplation about the Kaaba’s history, architecture, and decorations in the first three centuries of Islam.” \textit{Duzce University Journal of Social Sciences} 12, no 2. 717-735. 728.
The Imam Husayn Shrine in modern day Iraq; the second holiest site for Shi’a Muslims, this was the site of the Wahhabi attack on Karbala.60

Whereas these raids were initially confined to the western part of the Arabian peninsula, they quickly moved eastward. The definition of “monuments and grave markers” has expanded over the past two centuries to include sites in Mecca and Medina, most of which have been held sacred by Muslims for over a millennium. Ibn Abd al-Wahhab’s aim to return to the “purity and simplicity of the early Islamic community” has resulted in countless re-evaluations of religious sites, as well as demolitions of non-religious historic sites like schools, graves and military forts.61 Bahraini political activist and journalist Saeed al-Shehabi chronicles several of these events for The American Muslim web journal:

In 1924, ‘Abd al-Aziz ibn Saud and his troops occupied Makkah in the region of Hejaz. Among their first actions was the destruction of al Mu’alla graveyard, which contained

61 Metz. Saudi Arabia. 47.
the grave of Khadijah, Prophet Muhammad’s wife, and that of his uncle, Abu Talib. Two years later, in 1926, Ibn Saud occupied Madinah and demolished the tombed mausoleum over the graves of several of Prophet Muhammad’s descendants, including those of his daughter, Fatimah, and his grandson, Hassan ibn ‘Ali. Since no tangible resistance to their heinous actions was mounted by Muslims, they went even further and demolished the famous Seven Mosques of Salman al Farisi, Abu Bakr, ‘Umar, Fatimah, ‘Ali, al-Qiblatayn and al-Fath.62

Both religious and non-religious sites have been designated as targets of destruction since the 18th century, either because they threaten to distract from the oneness of God, or, in the case of Mecca, because they detract from the importance of Hajj.

Although the Wahhabi-cum-Saudi religious mythology centers the Prophet’s cleansing the Kaaba of idolatrous elements, and while the extent of polytheistic belief systems in the Hejaz region did diminish significantly with the rise of Islam, it is important to note that unorthodox interpretations of Islam — as well as other religious beliefs altogether — have always been practiced during the Hajj. Even as a specifically Muslim place, Mecca has always served as a nexus for myriad religious beliefs, a place responsible for introducing hajjis to “more than merely Muslim ideas.”63 In fact, currencies, goods, cultural beliefs and ethnicities from across the world have commingled during the Hajj season for the entirety of Islam’s history. Even 19th and 20th century attempts to reduce the multi-religious historic architecture to Sunni and Saudi-specific sites, while effective, have at times been countered by the sheer diversity of race

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and creed necessitated by the globalized business enterprises that bring *hajjis* to Saudi Arabia in the first place; historian Nile Green goes so far as to claim that, “under the impact of industrial travel, by 1900 the hajj had been transformed in its geographic, demographic and semantic dimensions into a journey among unbelievers.”

Despite the content of this section, the ascetic sensibilities of pre-national Saudi-Wahhabi clerics appear to be incongruent with the contemporary commercialization in Mecca. This history raises questions about consistency: how are the glittering towers, expensive shopping malls, and luxury cultural districts surrounding the Holy Cities justified by the same strict principles that destroyed perceived “distractions” in the first place? Could it be that one manifestation of religious idolatry has simply been replaced by another, this time under the guise of monetary pursuits? Locating the connection between the two eras — one of destruction, one of excess — is an essential part of understanding the tensions at the heart of Mecca’s changing appearances.

**The Business of Hajj: A Brief History**

Although this thesis critiques the *extent* to which commercial development has superseded the primacy of religious rituals in the Hajj, this pilgrimage has always been contoured by trade and commerce. Referring specifically to commercial activity during the pilgrimage, verse 2:198 of the Quran says, “There is no blame on you for seeking the bounty of your Lord during this journey.” While I focus on the religious, economic, and political justifications for current commercialization in Mecca, my analysis is in no way meant to imply that capitalizing off of the annual influx of religious tourists is itself a novel or inherently

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66 [https://quran.com/2/198](https://quran.com/2/198)
unethical phenomenon. Indeed, as Melanie Smith and Clare Hindley point out in *Tourism in the Arab World*, “Islamic tourism (including European travel) is not new but can be traced back to the early days of the Islamic civilisation.”67 This section follows the origins of Hajj-related business and religious tourism, and the shifting economic importance of pilgrimage within the Saudi economy over time.

If commerce during the Hajj isn’t new, what is new is where pilgrims are coming from, the number of those pilgrims, and, most significantly, the sheer volume of commercialization in modern Mecca. The Hajj is a religious obligation for those who possess the financial means and physical capability to undertake the traditionally demanding journey. With advancements in transportation making the pilgrimage more accessible, the number of pilgrims has surged, leading to an expansion of its commercial aspect. Even before the advent of modern transportation, when the journey to Mecca was considerably more challenging, the Hajj was viewed as an opportunity for trade (albeit a peripheral one). Today, commerce often seems to take center stage, and traces of this shift can be found throughout the history of the Hejaz.

The pool of eligible Muslims was once limited to those in the Hejaz, and perhaps merchants divagating off the Silk Road or other trade arteries running through modern day Arabia. During the Golden Age of Islam the pool increased to include those on the entire Arab peninsula, and then those in East Africa and India. Much of this expansion was due to the extension of trade routes: Sulistyo Utomo, Noel Scott, and Xin Jin, also writing for *Tourism in the Arab World*, explain how “the early modern Hajj was important to Gujarati trade in the Arabian Sea, when pilgrims from the Indian coast carried textiles for sale in Red Sea markets.”68

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During the height of the Ottoman Empire, Muslims in the broader Mediterranean Basin would travel via caravan to Mecca and Medina until the invention of the steam engine allowed for quick sea voyages. The “unique Muslim space that till the 1900s lay virtually untouched by mechanization,” as Green puts it, was rapidly modernized by Ottoman developmentalism in the late 19th century. The empire subsequently introduced telegraphs and railway lines to Mecca, marking further connections (both transportational and informational) to the non-Muslim and non-Arab world. Mecca was, initially, being rapidly integrated into this “industrial world order” — but following the discovery of oil in Saudi Arabia in 1938, the Hajj would be rapidly subsumed by it.

Until the Second World War, the Hajj was in fact the Hejaz region’s main source of revenue, as well as the economic engine of the nascent Saudi Arabian nation. The discovery of oil in the country altered the trajectory of Saudi Arabia’s foreign policy decisions, reshaped the priorities of its domestic affairs, and overwhelmingly overshadowed the economic significance of the Hajj. Utomo, Scott, and Jin explain that “the oil discovery in Saudi Arabia also made tourism businesses beyond Hajj less attractive to develop...” Oil production quickly became the highest priority for the royal family. The resulting enormous influx of money during the mid-20th century paved the way for technological upgrades, and the continuing redevelopment of historic urban areas into new, Western-style neighborhoods. Oil revenue has had a huge hand in the urbanization and modernization of the state, and has funded nearly a century of development in Mecca, all while simultaneously reducing the importance of the Hajj within the state economy.

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70 Ibid.
71 Ibid. 209.
72 Metz. Saudi Arabia. 28.
74 Metz. Saudi Arabia. 47.
However, these massive oil revenues led to far-reaching infrastructure developments, including those that directly correlated to increased accessibility to Mecca for Hajj-goers. Ironically, managing the Hajj became increasingly important even as its economic value had diminished within the new petroleum-based economy. To cope with the ever-mounting numbers of pilgrims, the Saudi government created the Ministry of Hajj in 1945 to systematize the pilgrimage experience.\(^75\) The corridors between the holy mountains of Safa and Marwa were paved in 1926, the Masjid al-Haram underwent the first of many large renovations in 1955, and designated walkways between the sites of pilgrimage were installed.\(^76\) Although the oil industry became Saudi Arabia’s main source of revenue over the course of the 20th century, the sheer influx of pilgrims ferried to Mecca through modern transportation developments has kept the Hajj in a steady second place. Even as of 2021, the services and tourism sector makes up Saudi Arabia’s second largest economic engine, accounting for 38% of its GDP; the Hajj’s role in facilitating commerce has been replaced with the business of religious tourism.\(^77\)

Thus, a new problem has emerged over the last few decades: with so many new hajjis arriving for Hajj each year, the Saudi government has to create space within the confines of the small city just to keep up with visitorship. Concomitantly, as the threat of dwindling oil reserves lingers on the horizon, the kingdom has reason to actively attract more pilgrims to Mecca each year, and to create an increasingly accessible, hospitable, and commercial space for visitors. These two goals have conflicting elements; to the Saudi government, both seem to necessitate significant alterations to Mecca’s architectural, historical, and cultural character.

\(^76\) Al-Kinani, Mohammed. 2020. “The history of Makkah Grand Mosque’s expansion.” Arab News. All of these renovations seemingly necessitated the destruction of Ottoman-era pillars, gateways, and prayer rooms in al-Haram.
“NOT THE MECCA WE KNOW”

We are witnessing now the last few moments of the history of Mecca. Its layers of history are being bulldozed for a parking lot.

– Sami Angawi (as quoted by Laith Abou-Ragheb), “Angawi on Wahhabi Desecration.”

Thrusting itself into the 21st century, Saudi Arabia began tearing down historic neighborhoods in earnest in the 1970s and 80s. The government-led redevelopment initiatives in Saudi cities are often accompanied by sudden mass demolitions, as is the case with Jeddah’s “old town” as recently as 2022.78 Saudi cities often fall victim to broad, overarching demolitions of entire neighborhoods or districts at once, and the destruction has been particularly deep in Mecca. As Alshehri describes: “Not only has most of the built heritage disappeared, but the surrounding natural landscape has been drastically altered. Entire mountains were crushed to build high-end commercial and residential towers, offering ‘rooms with a view’ towards the Kaaba.”79 Development is extensive, and urban growth now encompasses nearly the entirety of the valley floor in which Mecca is situated. Understanding just how much history has been buried, demolished, or made unrecognizable for the sake of “modernization” is essential for grasping the scope of commercialization.

A photograph of the Kaaba in the center of Masjid al-Haram, in Mecca, circa 1887.  

An aerial view of the Kaaba in the center of Masjid al-Haram in 2015.  

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Moroccan anthropologist and ethnographer Abdellah Hammoudi paints a particularly rich portrait of the modern Hajj experience, showcasing the degree to which historic cultural areas have been erased by new commercial projects. Published in 2005, Hammoudi’s *A Season in Mecca* scans the breadth of the entire pilgrimage ecosystem while observing the minutiae of daily interactions to describe the spiritual, cultural, and intellectual state of affairs in Mecca. His detailed description recounts the good, the bad, and the ethically dubious in the contemporary Hajj scene. As he chronicles the entirety of his experience visiting Saudi Arabia during the pilgrimage season, no stranger’s remark, foreboding signpost, or decorative mural goes unnoticed; the details Hammoudi collects coalesce into a series of hyper-commercialized and culturally-barren pilgrimage checkpoints. He and his fellow pilgrims go through the motions of a commodified ritual. In the chapter “Praying and Shopping,” Hammoudi presents a firsthand account of his arrival into Medina in 1999 (notably written a decade or so before the most major developments in the city). Upon setting foot in Medina, he immediately begins his search for “the old town” amidst the endless new malls surrounding Masjid al Nabawi, the largest mosque in Medina.\(^{82}\) As he asks local taxi drivers for directions to the “old buildings, old mosques; traces, monuments left by the ancients,” he is continually redirected to either the inescapable, labyrinthian business district, or the concrete suburban homes across the highway.

As Hammoudi spends time in the holy cities, he gradually recognizes a distinct and restrictive bifurcation of the pilgrim's role at Hajj: that of “worshiper or customer.”\(^{83}\) He implies that most of the *hajjis* alongside him have chosen to assume the latter role, whether by conscious choice or by a subconscious acquiescence to their ultra-commercial environment. This realization is confirmed as he ventures among the crowds in the business districts.


\(^{83}\) Ibid. 84.
most interesting observations is that this contemporary duality is no more than an extrapolation of the long-established and deep-rooted tension between business and religion during Hajj. He writes, “after the initial surprise, it was clear that for centuries pilgrims had divided their time between mosque and commerce, that long practice had forged these techniques and rituals of contact, almost as formalized as those of ‘visiting the sanctuary.’” The sanctuaries mentioned here — the packed Masjids Al-Nabawi and Al-Haram in Medina and Mecca, respectively — are each one of two primary loci in their cities. The business districts are the complementary loci, the ever-present supplement to holy spaces. Where there is a mosque, there are shops selling fabrics, spices, souvenirs, designer dresses, and perfumes located just outside the prayer halls. Based on Hammoudi’s descriptions and the historic relationship between pilgrimage and commerce, it seems this occurrence is an inevitable (if poignant) progression for the Hajj — the subsumption of the spiritual into the commercial.

Designer clothes and ihrams at the Abraj al-Bait mall, 2023.85

84 Hammoudi. A Season in Mecca. 83.
That being said, the ‘goal’ for pilgrims undergoing Hajj has traditionally been the ritual of pilgrimage itself. Even hardy connections between the religious rituals and the business of Hajj upheld a clear hierarchy: the six day process of meditation and prayer is oriented around material structures (i.e. the Kaaba, Safa and Marwa, etc) but focused on the divinely-immaterial. The material enjoyment provided by one’s accommodation is not part of the ritual, nor is it even adjacent to the ritual — it is theologially inconsequential. The current situation in Mecca illustrates a fracturing, a dissolution of the hierarchy between the material and immaterial. The ritual of Hajj now includes and even prioritizes accommodation and entertainment. There are equal hours spent circling the Kaaba and shopping. Consumption is socioculturally enforced as a necessary and consequential component of the pilgrimage, and it is enforced through modern iconoclasm, which is itself positioned as a necessary byproduct of urban development.

**Modern Iconoclasm in Saudi Arabia**

Though iconoclasm has taken on a new names — urbanization, commercial development, renovation, and accommodation — it is still a driving force behind Mecca’s changing face. In the confluence of historical preservation, religious sentiment, and economic development, Saudi Arabia's systematic dismantling of early Islamic heritage sites presents a formidable challenge to the preservation of cultural legacies. Even more challenging is that the documentation of demolished cultural sites is relegated to online news sites and Wikipedia pages (several of which are dedicated entirely to recording the early Islamic heritage sites destroyed by the Saudi Arabian government). The intentional secrecy behind the vast majority of government-funded demolitions, a product of what Rosie Bsheer calls “archive wars,” makes it difficult to record and verify the amount of structures that have been destroyed in the last century, let alone those

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destroyed by Wahhabi armies in the centuries prior to the founding of the Saudi state. Yet, though official government documents pertaining to the planned demolition of historic sites are not made widely available to the public, the digital age has poked holes in some of this enforced opacity. It is easier than ever to share photographs of historic structures before their inevitable demolition, and independent online news sources based in the Middle East often provide the most immediate coverage of these sudden demolitions.

Illustrative of this coverage is the case of the Ajyad Fortress. For those who have seen recent images of the Hajj, the epitome of commercial development in the region is the hulking Abraj al-Bait, which has loomed over Mecca and boasted “rooms with a view” towards the Kaaba since 2011. The fourth-tallest building in the world, it dwarfs both the surrounding mountains and Masjid al-Haram, which lies a mere 300 meters away. However, long before the construction of the massive clock tower and its seven high-rise hotels, the plot of land directly south of the Kaaba was occupied by the 18th-century Ajyad Fortress. Built in 1780 to protect the pilgrimage site from invaders, the once-formidable remnant of Ottoman rule was demolished in 2002; the hill upon which it sat was also leveled to make room for the hotel complex. The fortress was removed in just eight days, to much media criticism from international historians. Turkey’s former Minister of Culture likened it to the destruction of the Bamiyan Buddha statues by the Taliban. Despite the outcry, the 120-story Abraj al-Bait was completed nine years later.

90 Johnson, Andrew. 2014. “Mecca under threat: Outrage at plan to destroy the ‘birthplace’ of the Prophet Mohamed and replace it with a new palace and luxury malls.” *The Independent.* 12 Nov.
The Kaaba and surrounding Masjid al-Haram, with the Ottoman-era Ajyad Fortress seen on the hill (top left) behind it, circa 1889. The fortress was demolished to make room for the Abraj al-Bait clock tower in 2002.91

Hundreds of significant heritage sites share fates similar to the Ajyad Fortress. For example, the multibillion-dollar commercial districts currently in construction around Masjid al-Haram have led to the destruction of the House of Mawalid, where Prophet Muhammad was said to have been born.92 The house of the Prophet’s first wife Khadijah, as well as mosques built for his grandson and to commemorate the Battle of the Trench in 627 AD, have been torn down in the last two decades alone.93 The Washington-based Saudi Institute estimates that the vast majority of Islamic sites — 95% according to certain sources — have been destroyed just since

91 Al Ghaffar, Al Sayyid Abd. 1889. Wikimedia Commons.
92 Johnson. “Mecca under threat.”
Saudi Arabia’s founding in 1932. “Ancient markets and coffee houses, Ottoman-era forts, Shi‘i and Sufi shrines, houses said to have belonged to descendants of the Prophet Muhammad,” Bsheer lists, “crumble beneath the bulldozers’ blades. Historic Mecca would become a thing of the past.”

The destruction of and subsequent development over multitudes of structures has been recorded primarily through non-governmental media and grassroots organizations. Still, the reverberations of these demolitions have resonated globally, prompting a collective reckoning with their multifaceted repercussions. To historians, journalists, and pilgrims alike, the narrative of Mecca, once a crucible of history and sacred spaces, confronts an uncertain path. Compounded by the overshadowing presence of imposing structures emblematic of the government’s economic ambition, this modern iconoclasm underscores the critical importance of interrogating the ethical and historiographical dimensions of the Hejaz’s modernizing landscape.

The Necessity of Development

While creating commercial experiences for pilgrims and stripping non-Saudi Islamic history from Mecca may be ulterior motives for the extent of new development, constructing new infrastructure to cope with the ever-rising number of Hajj-goers is an immediate and pressing concern for Saudi Arabia. There is no denying that transportation improvements over the last century have pulled increasingly large waves of Muslims into the relatively small city. In 1932, the year of Saudi Arabia’s founding, roughly 91,000 foreign nationals visited the country to perform Hajj. That figure rose to roughly 100,000 pilgrims in 1952, then increased drastically to around 650,000 by 1973. Foreign pilgrims alone made up 1.64 million of the 2.25 million
*hajjis* in 1986. In 2012, the capacity of Mecca reached a record height of 3.1 million total *hajjis*. Attendance hovered around 2.5 million pilgrims per year until the Covid-19 pandemic began in 2020, and pilgrim numbers are projected to rapidly climb back to pre-Covid numbers now that the pandemic has waned.

According to *The New York Times*, it would take 581 years for all 1.8 billion living Muslims to make the Hajj at a rate of ~3 million pilgrims per year. Though this projection discounts those who cannot make the Hajj for financial or health-related reasons, the staggering discrepancy even between those who are eligible for the pilgrimage and the physical constraints of Mecca is evident. “The infrastructure at the moment cannot cope,” explained the director of one of Saudi Arabia’s leading real estate companies in an interview with Islamic architecture expert Sami Angawi. “New hotels, apartments and services are badly needed.” At the time this interview was conducted in 2005, an estimated $13 billion was being spent on projects in the holy city. That figure has risen to an estimated $120 billion in developments for the coming decades. As pilgrim numbers have increased, the amount of money flowing into a redesign of Mecca has catapulted.

As the costs of development have increased, the Saudi government has sought to raise money by changing the revenue model of the Hajj. As of 2020, Saudi Arabia reportedly earned $10-15 billion per Hajj season, not including the additional ~$4.5 billion earnings throughout the year for *umrah*. As Turab Saleem, head of hospitality for global leisure consultancy Knight Frank, told Arab News, religious tourism will have an even larger part to play in Saudi Arabia’s

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economy going forward. By the end of current development projects, Mecca “will have more rooms than any other city in the Middle East, including Dubai.” In nearby Madinah, capacity is being increased from “18,000 hotel rooms at present to 125,000 by 2030.” With the implementation of the newer revenue model, based on development in Mecca and the creation of a highly accessible and commercialized pilgrimage experience, projected growth paths predict that total yearly revenue from Hajj tourism will reach $350 billion by 2032.104, 105

West side of the Mina Valley outside Mecca, during the Hajj pilgrimage, circa 1887.106

103 Proctor. “Unpacking the Hajj Dividend.”
The financial ramification of these developments for potential pilgrims is that the cost of attending Hajj has skyrocketed in recent years. The rise in costs has only worsened due to a consolidation of the multifarious services needed to visit Mecca. This consolidation has arrived in the form of Nusuk.com — an E-visa, planning, and booking platform integrated into a single website — which was created by the Saudi Arabian government and launched in 2022.\(^\text{108, 109}\) Before the initiative, traveling for Hajj often included arranging the visa and immigration forms for oneself, and then finding a local Hajj group and a sheikh to organize the trip. The sheikh is responsible for finding and booking flights to Mecca, finding hotel rooms in Mecca and Medina, planning bus and train rides and in-country transportation, and scheduling non-Hajj-specific tours. Prior to the creation of Nusuk, Utomo, Scott, & Jin recorded that the average price of “Hajj package” deals from the United States hovered at roughly $6,500 per hajji.\(^\text{110}\) These prices

\(^{107}\) Nureldine, Fayez. “The tent city of Mina.” 2013. AFP.

\(^{108}\) [https://www.nusuk.sa/](https://www.nusuk.sa/)


were corroborated by my interview with Attia Omara, an Egyptian-born *sheikh* well acquainted with taking members of his Austin, Texas-based mosque to Mecca.\textsuperscript{111} The new Nusuk platform limits what third-party agencies non-Saudi, non-governmental Hajj groups can plan their pilgrimage through, forcing all Hajj-goers to use the Saudi governmental platform instead;\textsuperscript{112} this recent change, aside from putting non-governmental Hajj package providers out of business, has led to a swift rise in the cost of performing the Hajj — this despite the fact that more rooms, transportation services, and hospitality services are built in Mecca and Madinah each year. After years of taking Texan Muslims for the pilgrimage, Omara felt that third-party travel services not directly connected to the Saudi government and not booked solely through Nusuk have become obsolete:

There are no more agencies from the US. They’re canceled. You must register and pay through Nusuk, and they will direct you to the packages, if they’re available. Which they’re not, because there's a monopoly on Hajj spots and people will pay whatever they have to. The price ranges for my community went from $6,000 - $11,000, to $13,000 - $26,000. Next year they will be higher. The government knows people will be desperate.\textsuperscript{113}

Routing all prospective pilgrims through the Nusuk platform, the Ministry of Hajj curates the selection of business available for Hajj services (hotels, transportation companies, etc), and imposes a value-added tax on the total price of the Hajj package. Efforts to cap the number of

\textsuperscript{111} Omara, Attia, M.A. in Education and Middle Eastern Studies, is an Al-Azhar trained *sheikh* at the Islamic Center of Lake Travis. Cited in discussion with the author, Austin, Texas, October 2023.

\textsuperscript{112} Bianchi, Robert R. 2017. “Reimagining the Hajj.” *Social Sciences* 6, no. 2: 36. 10. Note that, according to Bianchi, most successful extant private travel companies have significant political connections.

\textsuperscript{113} Omara, Attia. In discussion with the author, Austin, Texas, October 2023.
pilgrims arriving from each country each year, done so as not to overload the Holy Cities’ infrastructure, further limits the amount of pilgrims who can perform the Hajj. Prices per Hajj package increase dramatically when supply is limited, and have become increasingly unaffordable to lower and middle class pilgrims. Hotel prices alone had already risen significantly in the decade leading up to 2022, with rooms walking distance from al-Haram rising from an average of ~$700 a night to well over $3,200 between 2011 and 2019. Those prices have continued to jump with the artificial scarcity imposed by the new platform. That Hajj is not obligated for those who cannot afford it is used as justification for Nusuk by Ministry officials. “There is so much demand and the prices will continue to increase,” Attia explains. “It’s a religious thing, and they are exploiting the fact that people will pay whatever they have to pay to come.”

To the Saudi government, Hajj presents yet another economic engine waiting to be fully exploited. Coincidentally, the increased accessibility and rising pilgrim count are motivations for quick and decisive action, and are variables that more or less force officials to either excessively develop the Hejaz region or risk losing potential profits to contractors, merchants, and business owners. With such a consistently high volume of visitors in Mecca — visitors religiously obligated to spend their time and resources — every meter of land represents potential revenue. Adding scores of over-priced hotel rooms, malls, and restaurants more than covers the building costs — and yet, covering that cost is not the only reason for such heavy handed development.

The revenue generated by religious tourism must also make up for potential revenue loss in the oil sector. Waheed, Sarwar, and Dignah's 2020 study of Saudi Arabia’s quarterly economic data spanning from 1980 to 2017 determined that petroleum products accounted for “87 percent

115 Omara, Attia. In discussion with the author, Austin, Texas, October 2023.
116 Ibid.
of budget revenue, 42 percent of total GDP, and 90 percent of total exports.” Recent expansion of not just religious but general tourism may be seen as an attempt to diversify what is, as of 2020, an almost 80% oil-dependent economy.\textsuperscript{117, 118} The country has opened itself up to Western tourists (save for the Holy cities), and has increased its ecological and heritage preservation efforts by participating with UNESCO (though what heritage is preserved is highly selective). There is a consolidated effort to attract interest from outside of the Middle East, most overtly seen in the Vision 2030 initiative. The efforts seem to be working — according to the ambitious business-tech strategy, “Saudi Arabia's position in the world economy should increase from 20th to 15th due to an increase in the share of the non-oil sector in the economy from 15% to 50%.”\textsuperscript{119}

In light of the ambitious projections and the ongoing development initiatives, it is evident that the economic landscape of Hajj is poised for a significant transformation. The surge in revenue, coupled with the extensive infrastructure projects in Mecca and Madinah, underscores the pivotal role of religious tourism in shaping the economic future of the region. As the pilgrimage continues to evolve into a high-occupancy and heavily-commercialized enterprise, the financial stakes are higher than ever. The trajectory of economic growth propelled by religious tourism has positioned the Hajj as a cornerstone of Saudi Arabia’s economic strategy, heralding an era where the pilgrimage is not only a spiritual journey, but a formidable economic force.


\textsuperscript{118} Bsheer. \textit{Archive Wars}. 218.

Journalistic Critique

Critical voices have for decades used the media to analyze the mounting destruction of historic sites in Saudi Arabia. The intense scrutiny and critique from both scholarly and journalistic perspectives sheds light on the array of challenges posed by the transformation of Mecca, Medina, and the Hajj experience. Even as scholarly research has delved into the motives surrounding the demolition-development process, news outlets provide real time snapshots of vigorous debates about the spiritual and historical security of Mecca and Medina. British scholar Ziauddin Sardar’s scathing article for the New York Times in 2014, entitled “The Destruction of Mecca,” went as far as to claim that “the ‘guardians’ of the Holy City, the rulers of Saudi Arabia and the clerics, have a deep hatred of history. They want everything to look brand-new.”\cite{Sardar2014} While recognizing that Mecca was never a “great cultural and intellectual center” in the same vein as Damascus or Cairo, Sardar asserts that it has always been a pluralistic city — one whose radical transformation amounts to a devastating cultural destruction.” Atef Alshehri points out what is possibly the most significant religious ramification of the intense commercialization, explaining the means by which over-development decontextualizes Mecca (as reflected on earlier in this thesis):

The inner character of the core area around the Prophet's Mosque diminished along with the opportunity for rich, sensory experience for walkers or onlookers who, instead, simply experience the Prophet's Mosque standing monumentally, totally detached from the city's urban fabric that used to be integral to it.\cite{Alshehri2014}

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\cite{Alshehri2014} Alshehri. “Development Engines.”
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The surgical isolation of the Kaaba from the cultural and architectural environs with which it stood for centuries emphasizes major discordance between the real and created visions of Islam in Saudi Arabia. The former carries with it centuries of religious experience; the culture and environment of Mecca has always informed the way Hajj is completed, coloring the pilgrimage with everything from the weather to the prayer halls to the ancient souks.

The city of Mecca and surrounding environs, circa 1887.122

Sources from the region speak out through international media as well, as citizens of Mecca find themselves residing in a city made solely for visitors. Sami Angawi explains in Laith Abou-Ragheb's article for The Center for Islamic Pluralism: “We are witnessing now the last few moments of the history of Mecca. Its layers of history are being bulldozed for a parking lot.”

In conversation with AP News reporters, former Mecca resident Fajr Abdullah Abdul-Halim echoes Angawi's dismay in even bleaker terms. “Before,” she writes, “there were neighborhoods near the Grand Mosque, but now it is mostly towers and overpasses.” Now limited to sporadic visits to the ancient city, Abdul-Halim laments that both of her childhood homes are gone; as she bluntly states, “it is not the Mecca that we know.”

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As Mecca undergoes significant changes, the Hajj has turned into a “Hajj experience.” Accessibility has increased dramatically, but the reduction of obstacles in a historically spiritually and physically-challenging pilgrimage raises questions about the role of discomfort in the Hajj’s ritual processes. The billions of US dollars spent on high-speed rail lines, high-tech bus systems, air-conditioned walkways and conveniently-located hotels and restaurants have certainly given the pilgrimage a renewed approachability. The sharp rise in hajj-goers directly correlates with how much easier it is to make the journey. In exchange for ease of access, gone are the hardships traditionally associated with Hajj — even though the hardships incurred by a pilgrim have historically corresponded to the degree of spiritual purification he invites. The long treks through blazing heat between the hills Safa and Marwa have been replaced with elegant, air-conditioned hallways that funnel *hajjis* back and forth.\(^{126}\) Many critics believe the line between comfort and lavishness has been crossed. Contemporary editorials are a central outlet for academics to voice concerns about what they consider to be a rapidly-deteriorating sense of authentic religiosity in Mecca. In his 2017 article for *The Independent*, Qari Asim writes:

> The irony is that pilgrims might have left the skyscrapers of London or Shanghai or the hustle and bustle of New York or Jakarta behind them to take a break from materialism and find God in simplicity and minimalism, but the simple spartan rite of passage is being turned into a big-bucks business, with over-loaded malls and overblown hotels.\(^{127}\)

Analyzing Asim’s critique through the historic trends of Wahhabi Islam highlights a paradox. The asceticism historically valued by clerics has evidently given way to a prescribed

\(^{126}\) Asim. “Reclaim the Hajj.”
\(^{127}\) Ibid.
maximalism for the sake of Hajj’s salability to elite parties. It isn’t that the influx of an increased number of hajjis over the past half century has diluted the spiritual significance of Hajj — accommodations for new pilgrims are a necessity. However, the state-sponsored commercialization has pushed accommodation past the realm of necessity and into a highly economized sphere (one of “high rise complexes and luxury hotels”128) that has in many ways diluted the pilgrimage.

British scholar Ziauddin Sardar’s poignant observations, echoed by other critical voices such as Fajr Abdulah Abdul-Halim and Dr. Sami Angawi, underscore a profound sense of loss in the face of unprecedented urbanization. The decontextualization of the Kaaba, once immersed in the vibrant cultural and architectural tapestry of Mecca, signifies not only a physical transformation but a disconnect between the lived history of centuries and a modern Saudi Arabian (and Wahhabi-informed) interpretation Islam. The area where the main rituals of the Hajj are conducted has been separated from its traditional surroundings, which has a profound effect on the psyche of the Hajj-goer, and extends beyond material concerns to the spiritual realm (as encapsulated in Qari Asim's article). As the Hajj experience becomes increasingly decontextualized, the pilgrimage's traditional association with simplicity and spiritual purity gives way to an era marked by opulence and material excess. Critical discourse therefore invites reflection not only on the means by which Mecca's rich history is being “preserved,” but on the ethical dimensions inherent in such wide-scale transformations of the Hajj.

128 Asim. “Reclaim the Hajj.”
SELLING HAJJ: AN ANALYSIS

Globalization has therefore transformed religious tourism into a marketing process, mutating it into a form of "market product" which differs from its origins. The pilgrim of the last centuries was exempt from taxes and entrance fees, because the “houses of God” were free.

– Safaa Al Satari-Alhamaydeh, “Religious Tourism: the Case of the Pilgrimage to Mecca.”

As discussed throughout this thesis, economic motives play a huge role in driving development decisions in the Hejaz. They stem in large part from a desire to diversify a heavily specialized economy with strong tourism and services sectors. This desire, for a tourism industry that draws both domestic and international, Muslim and non-Muslim visitors, is evident in the high-tech Vision 2030 spectacles, and the luxury resort rooms lining the streets of Mecca, Medina, and cities throughout the country.129 Non-Muslim Westerners are no longer seen as a threat to the sanctity of the country’s religious tradition, but as a wealthy, untapped client base. Helen Metz provides a primer of the conflicting tasks faced by the Saudi leadership near the turn of the 21st century:

Massive oil revenues had brought undreamed-of wealth to the kingdom.

Affluence, however, proved a two-edged sword. The dilemma that Saudis faced in the 1990s was to preserve their cultural and religious heritage while realizing the advantages that such wealth might bring. The regime sought to acquire Western technology while maintaining those values that were central to Saudi society…

129 Bianchi. “Reimagining the Hajj.” 3. He further explains, “the Hajj crisis creates an opportunity to kill several birds with one stone. Saudi technocrats believe they can not only reduce the pressures of peak season bottlenecks, but also stimulate the rapid rise of a domestic tourism industry.”
The strength of conservative opinion grew even as the pace of economic change increased. Religious conservatives and modernizers disagreed on what kinds of technology might be used appropriately and how best to use the kingdom's vast wealth. The dichotomy between the two was at the heart of much of the country's political affairs.130

In many ways, building off of Wahhabi principles offered convenient solutions to these issues; the processes of urban development both in the Hejaz and in greater Saudi Arabia drew on stringent counseling from the ulama when necessary, selectively utilizing fatwas to simultaneously justify the demolition or commodification of historic sites and the graves of religious leaders.131

However, for a country so wealthy, economic incentives are hardly the only reason for the exponential upscaling. Understanding these non-economic motivations for development requires one to look at the current situation in the Hejaz through historiographical lenses: as alluded to through Bsheer’s concept of “history-making” and Caidi’s “social imaginaries,” development decisions in Mecca stem from a clear attempt to re-forge the religio-political genesis of the Saudi Arabian nation. The current commercial expansions in Mecca are not simply the result of a need for more hotel rooms. Nor is the destruction of religious sites necessitated by the mere need for building space. Rather, current trends in Mecca appear to stem from a deep-rooted aim by the Saudi Arabian government to:

130 Metz, Saudi Arabia, 47.
131 Take for example fatwas issued and recorded by the Permanent Committee for Scholarly Research and Ifta’, established by royal decree from the king of Saudi Arabia in 1971. Fatwas issued for individual question submissions make clear associations between religious sites or graves and committing shirk (sins of idolatry or polytheistic behavior). The hundreds of fatwas listed in the Committee’s online registry alone could provide supposed religious justifications for the destruction of these sites, such as: fatwa 16097, which rules on the impermissibility of one to visit the graves and seek blessings from pious Muslims; and fatwa 21394, which bans both the circumambulation and, notably, formation of a marketplace around a grave.
1) commodify Hajj into a product to be sold, which serves not only the hyper-economized state but the capitalist imperative to valuate religious pilgrimage as an investment-worthy asset, and

2) attempt to fashion a novel mythology of Saudi rulership as being intrinsic to Islam itself — a mythology that is threatened by remnants of pre-Saudi religious sites.

Retaining the spiritual and religious significance of Hajj is, it seems, a tertiary goal at best. Even religious justifications for the destruction of heritage sites, such as those posed by members of the Wahhabi movement, are, I argue, employed by the Saudi government to rationalize further commercial expansion in the region rather than to conserve the area’s spiritual identity. While this thesis does posit that the initial destruction of historic, Prophet-era sites was due in large part to religious fundamentalism, it also asserts that that motivation has metamorphosed over time into a kind of capitalist fundamentalism, either greatly aided or directly justified by the Wahhabi revisionism that has leveled mausoleums and tombs, mosques and schools, and the houses of Muslim leaders of the past 1,400 years.

Thus, the commercial development of Mecca and Medina bifurcates into two distinct yet intertwined goals. The first is the creation of a Hajj commodity through the razing of historic sites, in order to create more densely profitable infrastructure, more accessible accommodations, and more options to capitalize off of religious tourists. The second is the creation of a new state mythology that seeks to essentialize the “Saudi Arabian” character of both Hajj and the Islamic religion, through both the systematic removal of structures that reveal the religious pluralism of
Mecca, and the redevelopment of the few (selectively Saudi) structures left standing into entertainment experiences.

**The Hajj Commodity**

The transformation of historic sites into densely profitable infrastructure reflects a complex interplay of economic and sociopolitical factors that result in a departure from a Hajj concerned with meaningful searches for authenticity — the sine qua non of successful and spiritually-genuine pilgrimages — to one concerned with creating consumer-oriented, hyper-economized “cultural experiences.”

The Hajj has always been interwoven with commerce, but the extravagant luxury observed in contemporary accommodations and commercial enterprises threatens to contradict the simplicity and piety many associate it with. Additionally, the Hajj has historically served as a microcosmic international market wherein trade was a decentralized, personal process through which multinational merchants sold their own wares. The current state of the Hajj is more akin to a state-run monopoly driven for and by a religious oligarchy: there is no room for individual merchants when all revenue must be filtered by the state through selected luxury retailers and high-end business partners (i.e. the Saudi government’s “global feeder network of pre-approved travel agencies”).

This state-run Hajj business is reflected in the way *hajjis* have experienced sudden price changes for standard pilgrimage services over the last decade. Rapid commercialization in the Hejaz has led to exorbitant price increases for rooms, flights, and transportation around the Holy Cities, creating a situation where “pilgrims are divided by the strength of their patrons and the size of their money belts.”

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134 Ibid. 3.
Institute for sociological research, raises (and will continue to raise) financial barriers for pilgrims: since 2022 alone, service fees for pilgrimage transportation services between lodging at Mina and other Hajj locations “have increased by three times,” resulting in a 30% increase in the total cost of Hajj for pilgrims.\(^{135}\) AP News regional news director and religious affairs correspondent for \textit{The Guardian} Riazat Butt described the “level of pampering offered by some of the hotels” in stark terms; despite the high costs associated with a typical 2010s Hajj trip, she claims that the paradoxical coupling of religious rituals and material overindulgence goes unnoticed by “customers snapping up royal suites at $5,880 a night, eating gelato or milling around hangar-like lobbies of polished marble in their Hajj clothing…”\(^{136}\) These descriptions bring to mind Max Weber’s blending of wealth with piety or spiritual rewards — specifically, the idea that one should see one’s wealth as a sign of God’s favor.\(^{137}\) This “protestant ethic,” in which capital should be seen as a gift for the pious, and should be accumulated for the sake of God, is somewhat reflected in Butt’s descriptions. In some ways the endowment of Saudi Arabia with such abundantly prosperous oil reserves may be seen by certain Saudi religious figures as an appropriate blessing for a country that continuously proclaims itself the Protector of the Two Holy Cities. By extension, Hajj-goers fond of the increasing opulence of Meccan religious sites may view the extravagance as a symbol of divine approval. So no — it appears that for many \textit{hajjis}, there is no obvious conflict between spirituality and commercialization, and their increasing coalescence may in fact be seen as a good thing.

On a broader scale, the intense commercialization around the hejaz indicates a country-wide trend whereby market values and a heavy emphasis on state-driven capitalism are

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extended to the sociocultural aspects of Hajj, like prayer, comfort and entertainment, and social hierarchies or lack thereof (as discussed earlier by Brown).\(^{138}\) The descriptions offered by Butt, Hammoudi, and Omara — of a blatant entanglement of commercialism and religious spaces — align with such an analysis. Safaa Al Satari-Alhamaydeh’s article for the *Académie de Géopolitique de Paris*, which mentions transforming “religious tourism into a marketing process,” similarly points to concerted efforts by non-Western developed nations to integrate into an increasingly-globalized world through the bolstering of tourism industries and service-related economic sectors.\(^{139}\) The Hajj commodity can thus be seen as a form of “‘market product’ which differs from its origins”\(^{140}\) — “origins” in this case referring to a journey once focused first and foremost on the divinely-*immaterial* (as discussed earlier). Saudi Arabia’s capitalist framework seemingly operates under an assumption that the political and national legitimacy of a state are increasingly dependent on the density of its commercial enterprises.

However, explaining Mecca’s commercial expansion through its relationship to capitalist ideologies requires considerable nuance. Claiming that capitalist enterprises directly supplant culturally significant sites does not adequately address the complexities of commercialization in Mecca; complexities including the specific ways Nusuk raises travel prices, or which particular heritage sites are left standing. In fact, heritage conservationists Trinidad Rico and Rim Lababidi oppose the capitalism-versus-preservation dichotomy prevalent in contemporary Hajj discourses. For *Future Anterior*, they write that although the “neoliberalist tension that sees a financial profit placed in contrast to the preservation of cultural resources in the expansion of al-Haram is a familiar theme in heritage preservation worldwide,” the argument can “hardly be deployed to

\(^{138}\) Lerch, Bromley, & Meyer. “Global Neoliberalism as a Cultural Order.” 99.


\(^{140}\) Ibid.
demonize heritage approaches for a nation.”141 The authors call into question the perceived dichotomy between commercialization and preservation, noting that governments have myriad factors to consider when considering what sites to keep in highly dense urban areas. Using the ongoing, admittedly-transformative restoration of the Kaaba as a representation for global heritage preservation initiatives, Rico and Lababidi further warn against drawing sharp contrasts between financial profit and cultural conservation:

The maintenance of authenticity and integrity of this sacred monument [the Masjid al-Haram] despite the inevitable decay of its constituent parts and changes to its layout relates to phenomena and practices in a variety of preservation traditions, where integrity and material authenticity may be independently assigned and valued. The ongoing preservation of the Kaaba then displays…the interaction of different forms of historical authenticity, contemporary value, and the management of materiality and performance of belief and sacred values.142

Rico and Lababidi work offer an interesting counterpoint to Bsheer and Hammoudi — the latter of whom assert that the few Saudi existing preservation projects are bereft of cultural authenticity. Ancient sacred sites are constantly in need of preservation, and that preservation can necessitate decisions as to what original material is worth keeping, and what aspects of the structure are worth rebuilding. The idea that a heritage site lacks religious “authenticity” can be withheld from sites whose continued existence demands upkeep and, at times, extensive

142 Ibid. 99.
renovation. Additionally, sites that may not have the same religious value for every pilgrim may need commercialization or re-development in order to be financially-responsible preservation endeavors. In other words, the need for upkeep and renovation might overshadow concerns about preserving the site's original religious authenticity. Meanwhile, economic considerations sometimes necessitate adaptations or changes to ensure the long-term viability of preserving certain sites.

Balancing economic interests and historic site preservation is a challenge faced by nations all over the world — including others on the Arabian Peninsula, some of which have only recently begun to systematize archeological and structural-heritage related preservation. The “management of materiality” is a particularly complex process, and historical structures may require their own considerable recontextualizations; these recontextualizations may take the form of financial reevaluations, upon which certain material elements of any given historic structure are selectively preserved and commodified based on their potential to bring tourist interest and profit to the site, and the elements deemed too expensive to maintain or repair are reconfigured into modern, commercial spaces.

However, despite Rico and Lababidi’s analysis, that level of discernment does not seem to take place when the Saudi government recreates or destroys heritage sites outright (the Kaaba and the central mosques in Mecca and Medina being the exceptions). So, while preservation does not necessitate commodification, commodification need not entail serious alteration, and material alteration may be separated from religious authenticity, the three primary terms — preservation, commodification, and alteration — seem to be one and the same in the Hejaz.

143 Alshehri. “Development Engines.” “On a regional level, the same trend can be seen in other Arabian Gulf cities, such as Dubai, Doha, or Kuwait.”
In the fundamental Wahhabi perspective, the vast majority of Mecca’s ancient sites were threats to the purity of the Hajj ritual, and Islam itself.\textsuperscript{144} That vast majority has now been destroyed. Yet, the remaining historic buildings and un-leveled mountains surrounding Mecca have been turned into ‘cultural districts’ and ‘cultural experiences,’ with coffee shops, restaurants, and religious museums. The Mohammed bin Salman Project for Developing Historical Mosques, the Hira Cultural District, the Abraj al-Bait — all evidence the state’s newfound desire to capitalize off of surviving heritage sites. This desire is conspicuous, noticeable both in and outside of Mecca. Bsheer corroborates these rapid shifts in valuation, writing how “almost overnight, long-neglected sites in Riyadh were considered worthy of commemoration.”\textsuperscript{145} In Saudi Arabia this commemoration always entails the addition of stores, restaurants, and entrance fees. Centuries-old mosques and houses become businesses, sources for capital accumulation and a significant pull factor for both domestic and international tourists. Bsheer illustrates this, writing that heritage sites are “used as infrastructural and technological spatiotemporal answers to the postwar predicament, thereby enabling capital investment within and surrounding emerging sites of memorialization.”\textsuperscript{146}

Some theorists have gone beyond noting these transformations as simply the outcome of capitalist endeavors, and have instead used them as evidence that Saudi Arabia’s development strategies are neoliberal in nature. Whether this is true is unclear; neoliberalism is an ideology often rooted in Western economic and political thought, and the ways neoliberal models have been adopted in non-Western contexts challenge its main characterization: namely, that accruing capital is most efficient path to bolstering societal well-being and state power. In the case of

\textsuperscript{145} Bsheer. \textit{Archive Wars}. 130.
\textsuperscript{146} Ibid.
Saudi Arabia, hyper-economization may not be either an end in itself or the primary means for solidifying the country’s role in the global political economy. However, to rigorously assess the value of neoliberalism as a construct for analysis of this topic goes beyond the scope of this paper. Rather, it is possible that the creation of a Hajj commodity out of religio-cultural experiences may just be an organic result of modern globalism.

The construction of economic engines within traditionally holy spaces, specifically, evokes comparisons to Jonathan Matusitz and Lauren Palermo’s description of “Disneyfication,” which implies the internationalization of consumption values and “the idea of bigger, faster, and better entertainment with an overarching sense of uniformity worldwide.” This enforced uniformity is considered by Matusitz and Palermo to be a facet of “grobalization,” a theoretical concept that provides a lens through which to view Mecca’s commercial development that is both farther-reaching and more applicable than simple capitalism. Grobalization, (a portmanteau of “growth” and “globalization” coined by sociologist George Ritzer), refers to the commercial expansion of both organizations and nations into the rest of the world and onto ‘the local.’

Grobalistic Disneyfication is precisely what has begun to overtake the local religio-cultural diversity of the Hejaz. Unlike globalization, “the notion of Disneyfication is generally connected with changing an entity into something basic and artificial.”

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149 Ibid. Grobalization mostly concerns businesses, but expands to organizations that utilize commercial developments as a major vessel for the establishment of a homogenized entertainment culture that appeals to local and non-local actors.

does build upon superficial cultural and historical representations — think: a Hajj-themed coffee shop, or a timed-ticket-entry religious movie at the foot of Jabal al-Nour — Disneyfication upholds an economic homogenization in which most local cultural arrangements are specifically, consciously eroded to make way for modern entertainment infrastructure.151 This phenomenon has been seen with countless heritage sites, in several other religious traditions, and in myriad countries.152, 153 The Disneyfication seen in Mecca deeply restructures the social imaginaries of hajj-goers, and feeds religious tourists a curated version of Saudi Arabia’s religious history through the Hajj commodity.

The New State Mythology

The Hajj acts today as a site of mythogenesis. What remnants of the Hejaz’s rich religious and cultural history that have not been destroyed have been subjected to a sudden and almost sanctimonious celebration, and in the process have aided the creation of an entirely new Saudi state mythology — one which prunes diverse cultural and religious elements from the region’s environment and instead embeds the character of the state itself into an archetypal Islam. Through the commercial changes made to heritage sites around the nation, Islam is presented solely through a fundamentally Saudi and Wahhabi interpretation. The bridge between the destruction and then excessive redevelopment of heritage sites is the history-making process itself: the pruning apparently necessitates the destruction of non-Saudi structures or sites deemed vulnerable to sacrilege; the subsequent recontextualization both directly and indirectly asserts Saudi Arabia’s foundational importance not only to Hajj, but to the religion of Islam.

For a country with such vast wealth, driving commercial development projects in Mecca solely to accrue more revenue is not the sole end goal. “Such reordering of urban space” in the Hejaz, Bsheer writes, “reveals practices of history-making and political legitimation as inextricably linked to the production of economic value in the built environment.”154 In this vein, it seems that the commercial projects aim to alter the quality of the Hajj experience (as well as the Saudi tourism experience) to such a degree that national and political legitimacy are gained through perceptual — and not simply financial — means.

What happens when a state destroys the overwhelming majority of its history? A sense of historical connection to Islam’s past is a core element of Hajj’s religious significance. The rituals of Hajj have been repeated and honed by Muslims since 628 AD, and until relatively recently have been conducted amid the same environment. Modern Muslims, and modern Islam, have not emerged ex nihilo, but via a long and complex religious history.

But then, Salafism, and Wahhabism by extension, has always been opposed to the very idea of tradition (especially a pluralistic one). The modern Saudi state portrays its revised self-image — the mythology of its creation and significance to the world — as being a historically-isolated country. The Saudi government and religious authorities mean to epitomize Islam through the way they manage Hajj: unified and monistic in its views of theological interpretation and cultural diversity. The Islam the government wants to be the standard-bearer for is devoid of multi-ethnic or multi-national influences, of a history between its founding in the 7th century and the creation of the modern Saudi Arabian nation in 1932. It is a fabricated, state mythology whose creation began with Ibn Abd al-Wahhab in the 18th century and is nearing completion in the present day.

154 Bsheer. *Archive Wars.* 130.
There is little evidence in the Hejaz that non-Saudis ever controlled, protected, preached at, traded near, worshiped in, lived or died in Mecca. There are hardly any historic mosques, shrines, graves, schools, or houses. In their stead, shops and hotels crowd the Masjid al-Haram. While state-funded commercial enterprises appear on the outside to venerate an all-encompassing history of the country, these economized experiences create new, highly-essentialized versions of statehood and religio-cultural identity that integrate Saudi and Wahhabi interpretations of Islam into the Hajj experience. The government and ulama work in tandem to reify not only their importance to their national economy, but their national identity. This is the new state mythology: Saudi Arabia is high-tech and luxurious, and it exists and has only ever existed as the original gatekeeper of a true Islamic interpretation.155, 156

CONCLUSION

Mecca serves as a microcosm for the immense and whirlwind changes being implemented by the Saudi government in an effort to reassert their significance to both the global economy and the entirety of the Muslim ummah. The redevelopment of heritage sites in the Hejaz region is instrumental in pushing new interpretations of Saudi Arabia’s importance to Islam in the 21st century. The rapid commercialization has concurrently created new revenue engines that draw in elite hajjis, and has purposefully erased diverse religio-cultural structures to present Islam through a Saudi and Wahhabi lens. The latter process has stripped the Hajj of its historical, religious, and environmental context, isolating its rituals from any hint of the society they formed within.

155 Bsheer. Archive Wars. 96. “The regime framed archival operations in civilizational terms that equated history with modernity. At stake, it seemed, was nothing less than the kingdom’s standing as an equal among ‘civilized nations.’”

And yet, that context is — or was — vital to the spiritual value of the Hajj journey. While the Saudi government has effectively transplanted Masjid al-Haram from the ancient tombs, forts, and caravanserais that once surrounded it, those structures had strong spatiotemporal connections to the format of the rituals that take place in the city. Completely reconstructing the environment around al-Haram alters the psychology of the Hajj-goer; an excess of malls and luxury hotels, and the absence of historical buildings, make it increasingly difficult for pilgrims to conceptualize a historical through-line for their pilgrimage. It is a strain for a visiting Muslim to see their Hajj experience as the personal fulfillment of a 1,400-year old communal enterprise when any evidence of a pluralistic, centuries-spanning religious pilgrimage is either removed or turned into a ‘Disneyfied’ entertainment experience. There may be hope for the remaining sites now under renovation in the Hejaz. The loss of historic sites is often what spurs preservation efforts in the first place, as the destruction of New York City’s original Pennsylvania Station did for the National Historic Preservation Act in 1963.\textsuperscript{157} At its best, maybe the commercialization of ancient mosques is a realization that safeguarding religious heritage is instrumental to justifying the existence of the Saudi state. At its worst, however, it is a reminder that for a nation intent on saving only what is profitable, \textit{anything} is subject to demolition.

Perhaps the greatest irony of the ongoing development is that, though the original theological impetus for removing religio-cultural heritage sites was to avoid idolatry, a novel idolatry has replaced the veneration of ancient buildings: the veneration of capital. All of the systems through which the Saudi Arabian government conducts its mythogenesis prioritize generating revenue, and the Hajj has become yet another economic machine. Only time will tell whether pilgrims will be able to glean from this ultra-commercialized experience the spiritual

\textsuperscript{157} [https://www.nps.gov/subjects/historicpreservation/national-historic-preservation-act.htm](https://www.nps.gov/subjects/historicpreservation/national-historic-preservation-act.htm)
gratification and purification the Hajj has promised for nearly a millennium and a half — or whether they will be able to afford to visit the Holy Cities in the first place.
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Image Appendix

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