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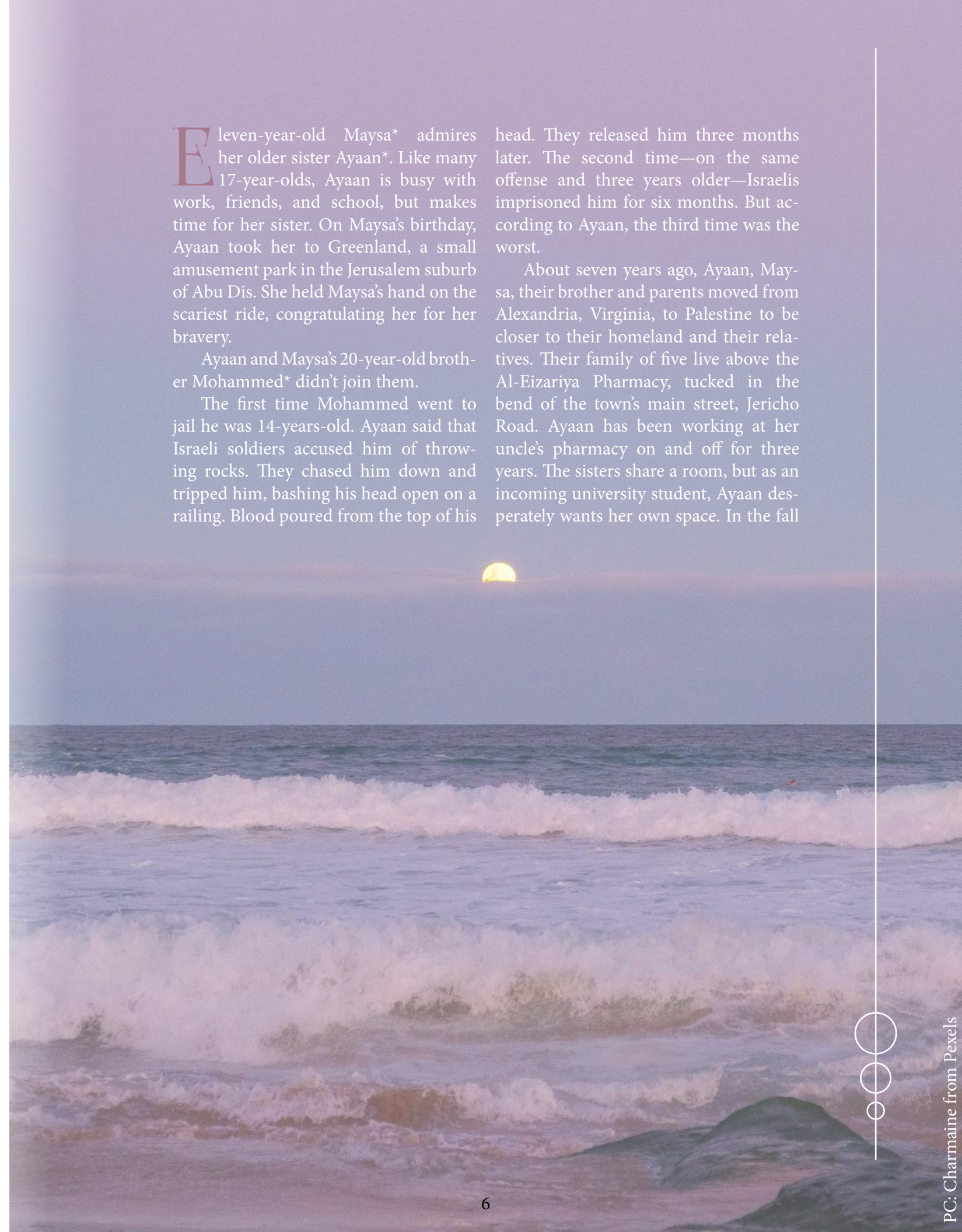
PC: Laila Shadid, Banksy's Walled Off Hotel

THREE TIMES TOO MANY

Laila Shadid

Since 1967, Palestinians in East Jerusalem and the West Bank have lived under Israeli military occupation, a discriminatory dual legal and political system that restricts economic opportunity, freedom of movement, livelihood, and other basic human rights. The effects of occupation have resulted in limited resources for youth and high exposure to violence.

The narrative of Israeli occupation too often excludes the perspective of children, arguably one of the most vulnerable demographics of this injustice. Through the Pulitzer Center on Crisis Reporting, Laila Shadid spent eight weeks living and reporting in the suburbs of East Jerusalem, conducting interviews with children in the towns of Al-Eizariya and Abu Dis, and the Dheisheh refugee camp in Bethlehem.



Eleven-year-old Maysa* admires her older sister Ayaan*. Like many 17-year-olds, Ayaan is busy with work, friends, and school, but makes time for her sister. On Maysa's birthday, Ayaan took her to Greenland, a small amusement park in the Jerusalem suburb of Abu Dis. She held Maysa's hand on the scariest ride, congratulating her for her bravery.

Ayaan and Maysa's 20-year-old brother Mohammed* didn't join them.

The first time Mohammed went to jail he was 14-years-old. Ayaan said that Israeli soldiers accused him of throwing rocks. They chased him down and tripped him, bashing his head open on a railing. Blood poured from the top of his

head. They released him three months later. The second time—on the same offense and three years older—Israelis imprisoned him for six months. But according to Ayaan, the third time was the worst.

About seven years ago, Ayaan, Maysa, their brother and parents moved from Alexandria, Virginia, to Palestine to be closer to their homeland and their relatives. Their family of five live above the Al-Eizariya Pharmacy, tucked in the bend of the town's main street, Jericho Road. Ayaan has been working at her uncle's pharmacy on and off for three years. The sisters share a room, but as an incoming university student, Ayaan desperately wants her own space. In the fall

of 2022, she began her college-career at the local Al-Quds University with hopes of becoming a doctor.

The morning after her brother was arrested by Israeli soldiers, Ayaan had a pop quiz in English class. Her younger sister stayed home, but Ayaan could not skip a day of 11th grade and jeopardize her attendance record. It was May 2021, and the school year was coming to an end. Ayaan was focused on maintaining a high grade point average to maximize her options for college admissions.

Mohammed was one of five to 700 Palestinian children prosecuted in Israeli military courts each year, according to Defense for Children International–Palestine (DCIP).

“Kids as young as 12 can easily be taken by the army and thrown in jail,” Ayaan said, citing a statistic confirmed by DCIP. “Boys have to be more careful with their lives here...Even if they’re just walking past and a soldier sees them and thinks that they were throwing rocks, they can be taken.”

Since the fall of 2020, the Israel Prison Service (IPS) has stopped supplying B’Tselem, a non-governmental organization and information center for statistics on Palestinian human rights, with numbers of minors in Israeli custody. However, at the end of September of that year,

there were a total of 157 minors being held as “security detainees and prisoners” and considered “criminal offenders” by the IPS. DCIP estimates that 13,000 Palestinian children have been “detained, interrogated, prosecuted, and imprisoned” since 2000.

Ayaan shook her head. “They literally don’t care who you are.”

On that fateful night, Ayaan’s mother went to answer the loud knocks at the front door, but she could not make out the figures’ faces without the porch light that they turn off at night. Her mother thought that something must have happened to her grandmother, why else would men be standing on her doorstep at 2 a.m.?

“So [my mother] opened it,” Ayaan said, “and they swarmed in.”

Maysa heard her mother scream—she was nine years old at the time. She remembered that her mother did not have time to put on her hijab. She also recalls the two female soldiers who entered her and her sister’s room. They woke the girls up, instructed them to move to their mother’s room, and waited with guns pointed at their door—guns Ayaan described as “huge.” Another 10 to 15 soldiers searched the home, flipping mattresses, tearing pillows open, and throwing clothes out of dressers. They

wore bulky padding and bullet proof vests, leading police dogs in and out of the rooms.

While Ayaan remembers her younger sister being scared of the soldiers, or *jeish* in Arabic, Maysa tells a different story.

“When they came to my house I was kind of panicking at first,” Maysa said, “but at the end...I was just walking around them like it’s nothing. They were just looking at me, and my mom was really screaming—she was scared [for] me. I was like, I don’t care, they can do anything.”

Maysa sighed. “[The Israelis] ruin my childhood.”

They stayed in their mother’s room until the soldiers left, and when they finally did, Ayaan and her mother stood on the balcony to watch them walk away with Mohammed.

Ayaan couldn’t even step foot in her room—it was torn apart. Instead, she sat on the couch and waited for the sun to rise.

Ayaan’s mother wished she realized who was standing at their front door. She wished she had taken her son’s phone before the soldiers did. But Mohammed was talking on the phone that night, planning a visit to his father’s in America. His mother was the only one who said goodbye—the girls didn’t know he was

being arrested.

Whenever Mohammed was arrested it was at the end of the school year, so Ayaan’s teachers and classmates were not surprised when they heard the news. By the third arrest, Ayaan was more angry that she could not find her school clothes in the morning amid the mess.

“I had a test that day and I had to tell my teacher, ‘I can’t take the test, I’m only on two hours of sleep. They came and took my brother.’”

“I was...really mad.”

Ayaan recognized that occupation forces children to mature quickly, especially young boys like her brother. When they were young, Ayaan said, they were protective of each other.

“We were best friends—you wouldn’t believe we were siblings.”

Once they arrived in Palestine, they drifted apart. By the time Mohammed was in 8th grade, they stopped talking all together.

“He got sucked into the environment here,” Ayaan said.

Since his last arrest, Mohammed has been released from jail, but he remains distant from his sisters.

Ayaan wishes that they could “go back to being best friends.”

**All names have been changed.*



VEGANISM IN THE MIDDLE EAST

Zaid Tabaza

Middle Eastern food is often perceived as heavily dependent on meat and dairy, with lamb, chicken, and yogurt featured in many of the cuisine's most popular dishes. Growing up in Amman, Jordan, I felt a deep connection to the dishes I regularly shared with my family and friends, which I came to understand as a defining element of my cultural identity. Despite not being particularly fond of meat, I enjoyed eating most dishes, almost feeling an obligation to cherish every facet of Levantine cuisine. Turning down offers of a meal never felt like an option, especially in a culture where sharing food is considered a token of hospitality. Thus, when I decided to become vegan, I struggled to redefine my relationship with my food and its role in shaping my cultural identity.

The story behind my decision to go vegan started two years ago when my family adopted a kitten. Previously, I feared most animals and saw them as distant creatures who only happened to inhabit the same planet as us. Living with a kitten quickly transformed my fear into affection and dismantled the barriers between me and non-human animals. Simultaneously, and perhaps coincidentally, one of my class assignments during my freshman year in college involved not eating any foods that contained animal products for a week. Completing the assignment challenged my views on food and eating, which led me to consider veganism as a lifestyle.

As I gradually became vegan, I faced a mixed reception, starting from close friends and family all the way to distant strangers, and ranging from curiosity and confusion to overt disapproval. Although I defended my choices, in many cases, these reactions led to thought-provoking discussions that exposed me to a diversity of valuable perspectives. All the while, however, I was still mourning the loss of many of the foods I grew up eating and subconsciously feared that I had rejected a significant component of my identity. My vulnerability was particularly amplified by the fallacious assertions that veganism is an imported Western ideology

that is irreconcilable with Middle Eastern cuisine and identity. As annoyed as I felt by these claims, I am grateful to have heard them, as they led me on a journey of ambitious research to understand how my Middle Eastern heritage intersects with my newfound vegan identity.

The idea that veganism is somehow incongruous with Middle Eastern culture can be easily refuted by examining the region's rich history of plant-based diets. Not only does Middle Eastern cuisine boast a variety of foods seen as essential to the modern vegan diet, but the region of Southwest Asia is also considered by many scholars to be the birthplace of agriculture¹ Furthermore, some of the earliest manifestations of veganism as a philosophy in the region can be traced to the words of the 10th century poet Al-Ma'arri from Al-Ma'arra, a city in today's northwestern Syria. Al-Ma'arri was a vegan who argued against human exploitation of non-human animals. In a poem entitled "I no longer Steal from Nature," Al-Ma'arri advocates for some of the core values behind the philosophy of veganism, writing "do not desire as food the flesh of slaughtered animals, Or the white milk of mothers who intended its pure draught for their young."² Al-Ma'arri's poetry thus stands as proof that veganism has existed within Arab societies for millennia, refuting the misconception of its novelty.

As I continued my quest to discover the history of plant-based diets in the Middle East, I took comfort in learning about the role of veganism in the region across different periods of time. Still, I remained in search of one essential piece: a guide to reinventing the Levantine dishes from my childhood as vegan. To my surprise, I found a guide within a cookbook in the Food and Lifestyle section of a bookstore in Nuremberg, Germany, where I was doing an internship last summer. The cookbook, which offers a vegan reinterpretation of Syrian cuisine, is written in German and entitled *Syrisch in Vegan*. As I riffled through the book's pages, I realized it was much more than a mere guide to plant-

based alternatives for many of my cravings.

The cookbook was authored by the Doudieh family who moved to Nuremberg from Damascus in 2002. In 2018, they decided to go vegan, and in the process, they conceived of a way to veganize traditional Syrian recipes, which they share in their cookbook. Following the success of their first book, the family wrote a second volume, in which they covered 45 additional recipes. Beyond documenting recipes, the second volume serves as a culinary and cultural journey through Damascus, incorporating paintings of different sites within the city and weaving recipes with the family's memories of their life in Damascus. As such, the authors share several personal anecdotes, including the story behind what led them to adopt a vegan lifestyle and their recent experiences volunteering at a *Lebenshof*, a home for rescued animals.³ Finding and exploring these cookbooks felt like an affirmation of my vegan lifestyle, allowing me to enjoy all the aspects of my native cuisine. It also led me to another realization that further challenges the idea of Middle Eastern cuisine as being meat-dependent: although meat and dairy are found in many dishes, they are non-essential—the dishes often taste the same when these ingredients are omitted.

The *Syrisch in Vegan* cookbooks are one initiative among many that are currently being led by Middle Eastern communities—both within the region and abroad—with the goal of rediscovering and advancing Middle Eastern, plant-based food culture. For example, within Amman alone, multiple vegan restaurants have opened in recent years. Additionally, Hayek Hospital, located in Beirut, Lebanon, is the first hospital in the world to serve exclusively vegan food to its patients—a decision that stems from a belief in the curative potential of plant-based foods.⁴ These vegan institutions and initiatives, when considered alongside the region's history of veganism, attest to the deep-rooted and dynamically evolving significance of plant-based diets in the Middle East.

ARAB DIASPORA IN LATIN AMERICA

Ahmed Abdelhamid Ahmed

On December 22, 2022, Chilean president Gabriel Boric announced plans for the country's capital of Santiago to open an embassy in Palestine. Motivated by a desire to ensure that "international law" is upheld, this move would make Chile the fourth Latin American country to establish full diplomatic representation in the occupied territories.¹ This strengthening of relations between Chile and Palestine was received positively by the country's sizable Palestinian community.

Chile has the largest community of Palestinians living outside of the Arab World—estimates place the number of Chileans of Palestinian descent to be between 300,000 and 500,000.² This may be surprising to some given the geographic distance between Latin America and the Middle East, but in reality, the prevalence of Arabs in Latin America transcends Chile. Indeed, there are sizable Arab communities in many Latin American countries, ranging from Brazil to El Salvador. This trans-national history begs the questions: how did so many Arabs end up in Latin America, and in what ways has this Arab migration influenced contemporary Latin American societies, cultures, and politics?

Some people may be familiar with the Arab origins of celebrities like Shakira or Salma Hayek, but the trans-national and deeply connected histories of the Middle East and Latin America are often not adequately represented in mainstream media. To fully appreciate how cross-cultural connections and interactions manifest today, it is nec-

essary to explore the history that predates them. Arab migration to Latin America mainly began during the 20th century. It consisted primarily of Arab Christians, but also included Muslims and Jews, many of whom fled the Levant during the Ottoman Empire's rule.³ As a result, these newly arrived Arab immigrants were prematurely classified as "Turks" or "Turcos." Other waves of Arab migration into countries in the Southern American continent followed due to the colonial dispossession of Palestinians in 1948, the Lebanese Civil War in the 70s, and more recently, the Syrian Civil War.⁴

Today, estimates suggest that there are between 14 and 30 million people of Arab descent in Latin America.⁵ The influences of these Arab communities are reflected through elements of the region's food that embody a fusion of cuisines. For example, the popular dish *los tacos árabes* are Shawarma-like tacos whose innovation was inspired by Middle Eastern immigrants in the Mexican metropolis of Puebla.⁶ Additionally, the regional prevalence of multi-religious Arab social clubs, "Centros Arabes," is yet another manifestation of the influences of these communities within Latin American societies.⁷ Beyond food and culture, Arab communities in Latin America have also left indelible marks on politics. There are a plethora of countries with former Latin American presidents of Arab origins, including Argentina (Carlos Menem, 1989–99), Ecuador (Abdalá Bucaram, 1996–97, and Jamil Mahuad, 1998–2000), El Salvador (Elías Antonio Saca, 2004–9), Honduras

(Carlos Flores Facussé, 1998–2002), and Colombia (Julio César Turbay, 1978–82).⁸ Moreover in Brazil—which is home to the largest Arab population outside of the Arab world—over 10 percent of the parliament consists of politicians of Arab descent.⁹

While it is tempting to assume that these histories of migration constitute the only ties between Latin America and the Middle East, this is not the case. Well before the wide-scale migration of Arabs to majority Spanish-speaking countries in Latin America, the Arab world had already shared an intertwined history with Spain; and the influences derived from this intertwined history were transported to Latin America through Spanish colonization. From the start of the Islamic Golden Age in the 8th century to the late 15th century, varying Islamic empires ruled over the Iberian Peninsula. Al-Andalus, a region comprising both modern day Spain and Portugal, was at the heart of one of the greatest Muslim civilizations until the Spanish Reconquista in 1492.¹⁰ These 800 years of Muslim

rule over Spain are evident not only in the architecture, design, food, and philosophy of Spain, but also in the Spanish Language itself.¹¹ For example, we see the linguistic connections between the two languages in words like sugar, which translates to *azúcar* in Spanish and *al-sukkar* in Arabic, as well as *ojalá* which translates to *inshAllah* in Arabic. Former director of the Spanish Royal Academy estimates that about 4,000 words of modern Spanish come from Arabic.¹²

Ultimately, Latin America is one of the most ethnically diverse regions in the world. Arab migrants to the region have formed and sustained lively communities and have contributed to the politics, culture, and societies of Latin America. After examining this history of transcontinental ties, one can't help but wonder what the future holds for Arab communities in Latin America and how these communities will continue influencing Latin American-Arab relations.



THE IMPLICATIONS OF SILENCE:

Team Melli's Powerful Protest Should Not Be Ignored

Lauren Mehrara



PC: Artin Bakhan from Unsplash

On the second day of the FIFA World Cup, the Iranian and English soccer teams lined up on the pitch ahead of their match. The Islamic Republic's national anthem blared through speakers in the stadium, but the Iranian soccer team, nicknamed Team Melli, stood silently in support of the protests raging back home, an act following large-scale criticism of the team after they met with President Ebrahim Raisi.¹ Team Melli's presence at the World Cup became even more political after their matches against Wales and the U.S., when they sang the Islamic Republic's nation anthem instead of remaining silent. Some Iranians

viewed this choice as traitorous to the Woman, Life, Freedom movement—which began when 22-year-old Mahsa Amini died in police custody after being arrested for wearing her hijab “improperly,” sparking a revolutionary movement seeking basic rights for Iranian women—and denounced their support for Team Melli.⁷

Iranians are known for their deep affinity and appreciation for soccer, though the national team's presence in Qatar resulted in deeply divisive reactions from Iranians, both within Iran and throughout the diaspora. The Islamic Republic's attempts to use the national team's World Cup run as a uni-

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Team Melli’s decision to refuse to sing the anthem, especially as the Islamic Republic was using its World Cup presence to re-administer control over its protesting civilians, reflects their courage and should be understood by Americans as an act of rebellion.

”

fier and cause for nationalist sentiments in Iran actually resulted in the alienation of many fans. After Team Melli’s loss to the U.S. ended their World Cup run, celebrations erupted in the streets of Iran; Mehran Samak, an Iranian man celebrating the U.S. victory in Bandar Anzali, was reportedly shot by Iranian security forces after honking his car horn.²

Although Team Melli has become emblematic of the Islamic Republic, their silent protest as a show of support for the people of their country and as an act of rebellion against the regime cannot be denied, especially under the threat of government backlash. Members of the national team were reportedly threatened with acts of torture against their family members back in Iran, forcing them to sing along to the anthem during later matches in the group stage.³

Despite these potential consequences, anti-government protesters expressed their desire for a more public and explicit form of

protest from the national team. The Iranian people wanted Team Melli to skip a match, kneel during the anthem, or mime cutting their hair with their fingers, as Iranian women have bravely chopped off their hair in protest of the regime’s compulsory hijab laws.⁴

Team Melli’s medium of protest mirrors Colin Kaepernick’s kneeling demonstration during a San Francisco 49ers’ game back in 2016. By visibly protesting against the U.S.’ treatment of Black Americans, Kaepernick incited a movement across a variety of sports and demographics of protestors, all while sparking controversy for choosing to protest during the national anthem. Many Americans were outraged by the perceived disrespect to their national anthem, with some claiming it was offensive to active and retired service members.⁵ Americans’ understanding of the significance of such a protest during a national anthem should have allowed them to grant more attention

and respect to Team Melli during the World Cup. Team Melli’s decision to refuse to sing the anthem, especially as the Islamic Republic was using its World Cup presence to re-administer control over its protesting civilians, reflects their courage and should be understood by Americans as an act of rebellion. Americans watched the controversy of Colin Kaepernick’s kneeling protest unfold, developing strong sentiments about whether or not it should be dismissed as unpatriotic performative action or recognized as a promotion of free speech. Reflecting on this shared understanding of the significance of national anthems, Team Melli’s silent protest during the national anthem mirrors a similarly dire situation in Iran that requires greater international attention and response.

The danger that the Iranian National Team risked by participating in a protest should not be taken lightly. The Islamic Republic has brutalized numerous peaceful protestors, with the Human Rights Activists in Iran group estimating that about 450 people have been killed by Islamic Republic’s security forces.⁶ The national team is not excused from these threats of violence, as they too were on the receiving end after their silent protest ahead of their match against Wales.³ Unlike Kaepernick, members of the Iranian National Team were not protected by their own government. They risked their own lives and their families’ safety at the hands of a brutal authoritarian regime, threatened with torture, violence, and imprisonment if they made any kind of statement.³ The least we

can do as witnesses to their protests against the Iranian state is enunciate and emphasize our support for the Woman, Life, Freedom movement.

While there were a few mentions of Team Melli’s protests in American media during the World Cup, headlines highlighting the oppressive acts of the Islamic Republic have since died down. I urge Americans to reflect on the chaos created by Kaepernick’s protest during the national anthem and apply the same understanding to Team Melli’s actions. Whether or not you agree with Colin Kaepernick’s protest, the meaning and sanctity of the United States’ national anthem is clear. Similarly, the Islamic Republic’s national anthem holds great significance to the regime. After the death of Ayatollah Khomeini, the leader of the Iranian Revolution, the Islamic Republic installed “The National Anthem of the Islamic Republic of Iran.”⁸ Amid the current protests, the anthem has been used as propaganda by the regime, with more and more Iranians identifying with the old national anthem from the pre-revolutionary period—the “Imperial Anthem of Iran.”

Team Melli’s protests should not be ignored by international audiences, as any protest against a national anthem, a universally patriotic symbol, speaks to the severity of conditions and urgency of struggles within a country. As the Woman, Life, Freedom movement continues, international attention and support for the movement is crucial to help Iranians gain true freedom.

WHARTON STUDENTS ENGAGE THE ABRAHAM ACCORDS: IS REGIONAL PEACE POSSIBLE THROUGH ECONOMIC PARTNERSHIPS?

Ben Winer



On August 13, 2020, the United States announced that it would broker a normalization agreement between two Middle Eastern countries that never had diplomatic ties and were considered historic adversaries—Israel and the United Arab Emirates.¹ One month later, Bahrain, a gulf country bordering the UAE, announced similar aspirations, and by the end of the year, Morocco was interested too. The Abraham Accords, named after the three Abrahamic faiths (Christianity, Judaism, and Islam), became a set of diplomatic agreements between Israel and Arab countries in the Middle East in hopes of rejuvenating political, economic, and cultural relations. For decades, Israel was considered a pain point in the Middle East for achieving regional peace and stability from the perspective of many Arab countries. As a result of rising regional tensions with Iran, a decrease in global demand for Middle East oil, and an interest in modernizing and diversifying economies for the future, however, more and more Arab countries have turned to Israel to foster a relationship. The reasons for this are vast—Israel offers a strategic benefit to these countries with strong capabilities in technology, innovation, defense, agribusiness, and investment opportunities; even beyond the financial incentive, Israel’s powerful military can extend support to countries like the UAE and Bahrain, both Sunni-majority nations who are fearful of an increasingly more aggressive and hegemonic-aspiring Iran.

This past winter break, I had the opportunity to participate in a trip to Dubai and Israel to explore these complicated dynamics firsthand. Penn Hillel, a Jewish student organization on Penn’s campus, took Wharton undergraduates to meet with leaders across the political, business, and nonprofit landscape working to implement the vision and possibilities afforded by the Abraham Accords.

Our trip began in Dubai where we were guided by Dana Al-Marashi, the Head of Cultural Diplomacy who is based out of the UAE Embassy in Washington. For four days, our group attended meetings with various Emirati leaders from across both public and private sectors. Some of these leaders included Dr. Thani bin Ahmed Al-Zeyoudi, the Minister of State for Foreign Trade, Dr. Ali Al-Nuaimi, leader of Hedayah, a non-profit committed to tolerance, coexistence, and global peace, government officials from the Abu Dhabi Department of Economic Development, and the Israeli Ambassador to the UAE, Amir Hayek.

The UAE, a country of 10 million people that gained independence from British rule in 1972, has recently moved to diversify its economy away from oil to other industries such as tourism, infrastructure, real estate, and professional services.² The country boasts a 3.4% unemployment rate and an annual GDP of \$519 billion, ranked fifth only to Iran, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, and Israel in the Middle East; in 1990, their GDP was roughly \$50 billion.^{3,4} Economic

“Free Trade Zones” in the country create ideal conditions for foreign investors who are granted 100% ownership of their investments and are permitted to pay zero taxes on these investments or their profits.^{5,6} Additionally, a 0% personal income tax further promotes a culture of prosperity and wealth in order to attract businesses looking for ripe opportunities.⁷ Emirates are the minority, where the majority of its inhabitants—a staggering 90%—are made up of expatriates from Pakistan, India, Bangladesh, and Egypt.⁸

Our group also had the opportunity to meet with students and young professionals from Zayed University in Abu Dhabi and tour cultural sites like the Louvre Abu Dhabi, the Museum of the Future, and the Etihad Museum. It was clear from our many interactions with Emiratis that they were proud of their country’s robust economic development and newfound place on the world stage. Dubai is an eight-hour flight away from 80% of the world’s population, making it an ideal location for business and a regional hub for trade, much like Singapore. The culture of prosperity, innovation, and growth contributes to a willingness to create new ties, take risks, and look for future partnership. With total trade between Israel and the UAE reaching over \$2 billion in 2022 and plans to reach over \$10 billion within five years, this economic partnership has already become one of the largest in the region.⁹ While 500,000 Israeli tourists have visited the UAE since the signing of the Accords, however,

only 1,600 Emirati citizens have visited the Jewish state.¹⁰

When we arrived in Israel, we similarly met with Israeli political and business leaders at the intersection of the Abraham Accords. Some of these people included Asher Fredman, the Director of the Israel-Abraham Accords Peace Institute, Gilad Carni, the founder and CEO of the UAE-Israel Joint Innovation Office, Fleur Hassan Nachum, deputy mayor of Jerusalem and founder of the UAE Israel Business Council, and Aryeh Lightstone, former Senior Advisor to the U.S. Ambassador to Israel who was instrumental in creating the Accords. It became clear throughout our meetings with these various officials that the prospect of Israel joining the rest of the Arab world as a business partner would not only reap economic benefits but could pave the path for future cultural and political peace.

Many of the representatives were pleased with

the progress of the Abraham Accords, particularly the increase in trade between the UAE and Israel and the growing tourist rates of Israelis to the UAE, but questions remained about future partnerships with countries like Saudi Arabia and what the Accords would mean for Palestinians. Recently, the Negev Forum was established, consisting of countries like the U.S., Israel, and all Arab countries with diplomatic ties to Israel besides Jordan; in addition to the economic, diplomatic, and regional benefits of the Abraham Accords, a main goal of the initiative was “to create momentum in Israeli-Palestinian relations..., a negotiated resolution of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, and...achieve a just, lasting and comprehensive peace.” Whether Palestinian leadership will foster conditions to allow for these benefits of economic activity to materialize remains an important question. The move to create the Negev Forum shows a willingness and interest to share some of the benefits felt

by new interregional relations with Palestinians, however.

Throughout the trip, the Abraham Accords were compared to the treaties signed between Israel and its closer neighbors, Jordan and Egypt, in 1994 and 1979 respectively. Many on the Israeli and Emirati sides emphasized that while those treaties were “government to government,” the Abraham Accords are intended to go beyond political and economic pursuits in order to bridge ties from “people to people.” With the UAE and Israel on opposite sides of the Arabian Peninsula, it seems that the greatest potential for cultural and social bridging could come through travel to each other’s countries. The stigma of Arabs traveling to Israel remains a challenge, but with diplomatic avenues open for travel, time will tell how these relationships can grow. Additionally, because countries like the UAE, Bahrain, and Morocco are far

removed from the heat of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, these subtle diplomatic changes are potentially more palatable for their citizens. Whether these sentiments can be bolstered in Egypt, Jordan, or even the Palestinian territories is a core consideration.

Some argue that the Abraham Accords distract from the real problem of solving the Israeli-Palestinian conflict; others say that it is the first step in making this reality more feasible. Regardless, this monumental event concretized a sentiment that has been brewing for years to create an inclusive, dynamic, and efficient region built on political alliance and economic opportunity. The Accords will hopefully bring a new era of peace to the region. Ultimately, a spirit of openness, curiosity, and risk-taking could create the conditions for solving problems that were once considered hopeless but are perhaps soluble.



THE SWIMMERS:

A MUST-WATCH TALE OF STRENGTH AND REFUGEE REALITIES

Ece Yildirim

One of Netflix's most-discussed productions this past year was writer-director Sally El Hosaini's *The Swimmers*—and for good reason. *The Swimmers* (2022) covers the high-profile story of the Mardini sisters, Yusra and Sarah, as they travel from their hometown of Damascus, Syria, across the Aegean Sea to Germany, and finally to the Rio Olympics. At the center of the movie is the sisters' famous sacrifice as they volunteer to swim and steer their overcrowded migrant ship after it began sinking mid-journey from Turkey to Greece. The enormity of the story and its larger subject, the Syrian refugee crisis, pairs well with the humanistic dynamic of the sisters, further complemented by the fact that the actresses who portray the Mardini sisters are the real-life sister-actress duo Nathalie and Manal Issa. Overall, the product is a movie that is sure to leave you feeling every emotion on the spectrum.

The film begins with a birthday celebration for Yusra, the younger of the sisters. We see her looking at videos de-

picting political unrest from the Arab Spring, worried that something similar might happen in her own hometown. Her mother assures her that it won't.

"Nothing like that can happen in Syria."

With this introductory scene, El Hosaini effectively humanizes a story that is often left conceptually removed from the collective consciousness. It messages that you, the audience, cannot and should not cast this off as an isolated incident happening to people unlike you, in a land unlike yours.

Jumping through time, we see the sisters out at a nightclub with their cousin Nizar. In one of the film's most powerful visuals, we see the girls dancing on the rooftop as a Sia song belts "I am bullet-proof, nothing to lose. Fire away, fire away..." to the backdrop of missiles falling onto Damascus.

The next few scenes showcase the brutality of everyday life during the Syrian conflict. We follow the sisters along the streets of Damascus: in hookah bars

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It messages that you, the audience, cannot and should not cast this off as an isolated incident happening to people unlike you, in a land unlike yours.

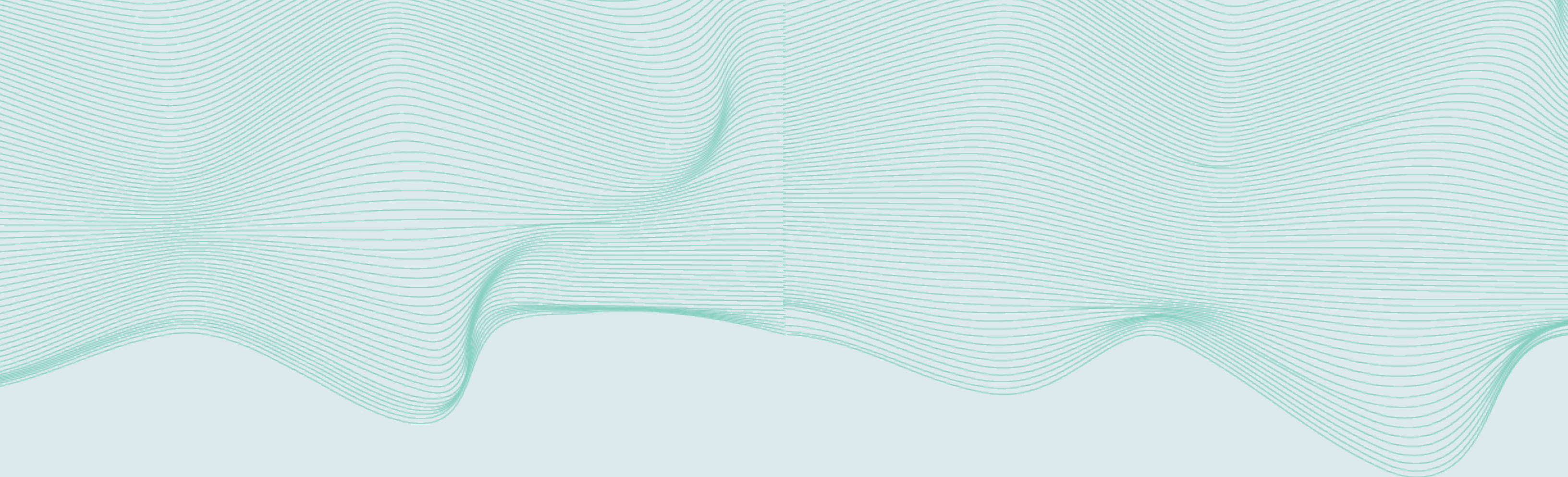
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talking about friends lost as casualties, traversing through military checks, and being caught in crossfire while riding public transportation. These anecdotes build up to a scene in which Yusra comes face to face with a defunct missile while swimming after a nearby football field gets bombed. Throughout this first act, El Hosaini illustrates the extent to which violence and fear became mundane and common in Syrian society, before she starts narrating the story of the girls' escape.

After convincing their cousin Nizar to come with them, the girls make their way to Istanbul via Lebanon. From there, instead of taking them to the Bulgarian border, a smuggler convinces them to

take a boat to the Greek island of Lesbos. When they get there, however, the refugees discover that the boat is too small for the number of people the smugglers are trying to transport, and despite their objections, the boat still sets sail.

Thus begins the climactic second act of the film. We follow the sisters as they volunteer to swim through the Aegean Sea in an appropriately claustrophobic scene, witnessing the dramatic arrival of the refugees at the shores of Lesbos as they cathartically trash the boat that failed them. We watch as they make their way through Europe on foot, being smuggled in buses and encountering plenty of dangerous situations until they finally reach Berlin. While this might be



viewed as a happy ending in many refugee stories, in the brutal reality of *The Swimmers*, that is not the case.

The third act, although notably slower than the other two, serves perhaps an even more important purpose. It could easily have focused solely on Yusra's subsequent success and perseverance as a swimmer, as she joined the Refugee Olympic Team and qualified for the Rio Olympics; however, although the third act does primarily cover Yusra's swimming career, it still manages to incorporate the post-happily-ever-after reality for most refugees.

Yusra's strength and determination in achieving her goal are inspiring. It could have been easy for the director to succumb to the pitfalls of romanticizing trauma, but not only would this have made Yusra's story larger than life, it would have also made it a less realis-

tic account of tragedy and strength. The movie tells the story in an appropriate light: it shows Yusra's strength but also shows Sara's sacrifice as she gives up an easier life in Berlin to go back to Lesbos and help refugees crossing into Europe. It also captures the reality for many refugees through Nizar, who accompanied his cousins through the journey and went through the same struggles; however, because he did not know how to swim, he could not participate in the most easily marketable and televised portion of their story: the tale of exceptionalism in the face of struggle, a trope that most Western audiences expect to hear.

Without an exceptional talent or story that makes him of instant use to the new Western society that has "accepted" him, we see him lost in the frustratingly endless loop of bureaucracy and closed doors that await most refugees when

they arrive in Europe. The journey does not end in the destination for these refugees, with their struggle merely shifting forms but continuing, a point the movie makes sure to acknowledge. In doing so, I believe El Hosaini helps transform *The Swimmers* from just a feel-good account of Yusra Mardini's success into a more accurate portrayal of a greater sociopolitical reality for millions of Syrian refugees. In the end, this accurate context only heightens the triumph and emotional weight of Yusra's later success in the Olympics. As we hear her sister Sara's pep talk right before her Olympic race, Yusra did not just achieve this for herself, but for everyone else who couldn't.

Ultimately, El Hosaini achieves something remarkable with the film, which catapults it to a "must-watch" status. *The Swimmers* is a tale of success in the face of unbelievable hardship, but it

is also a harrowing account of the reality of the times we live in. It is a universal story of family and of sisterhood, but it is also a political statement. We witness the depth of the Mardini sisters' love for each other portrayed exceptionally by the Issa sisters. The film brings our attention to Sarah Mardini in the finale, informing us that she was arrested by Greek authorities after returning to Lesbos to help arriving refugees, with the charges carrying potentially long-term prison sentences. At the time of the movie's release, Mardini was still awaiting trial and the film's popularity brought international attention to her case. While we cannot say for sure if this spike in international interest helped her situation, as of January 13, 2023, the Greek court officially dropped some of the charges, with weakened felony charges still standing and awaiting a future court date.¹

DIVIDED WE FALL: HUSAYNI-NASHASHIBI FACTIONALISM IN PALESTINE

Ramsey Alsheikh
Dartmouth College

In East Jerusalem's Sheikh Jarrah neighborhood, there is a house. As part of its long history, it has been many different things: the Jerusalem headquarters for the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO), a base for the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees (UNRWA), and even a luxury hotel.¹ Now, it is empty—Israel forcibly closed this “Orient House” in 2001. Before all of this, before two wars and two intifadas, however, the Orient House was a home, for a family. That family was the al-Husayni clan.

In the same neighborhood, facing the Husaynis' former home, stands another house.² Today, it serves as a research library, housing centuries-old manuscripts from pre-Ottoman times. Just like the Orient House, it also used to be a home for a family. That family was the al-Nashashibi clan.

The story of these two families is the story of Palestine and how their tribal interests managed to triumph over those of the nation. It is the story of how a rivalry between two families led to the destruction of thousands of others.

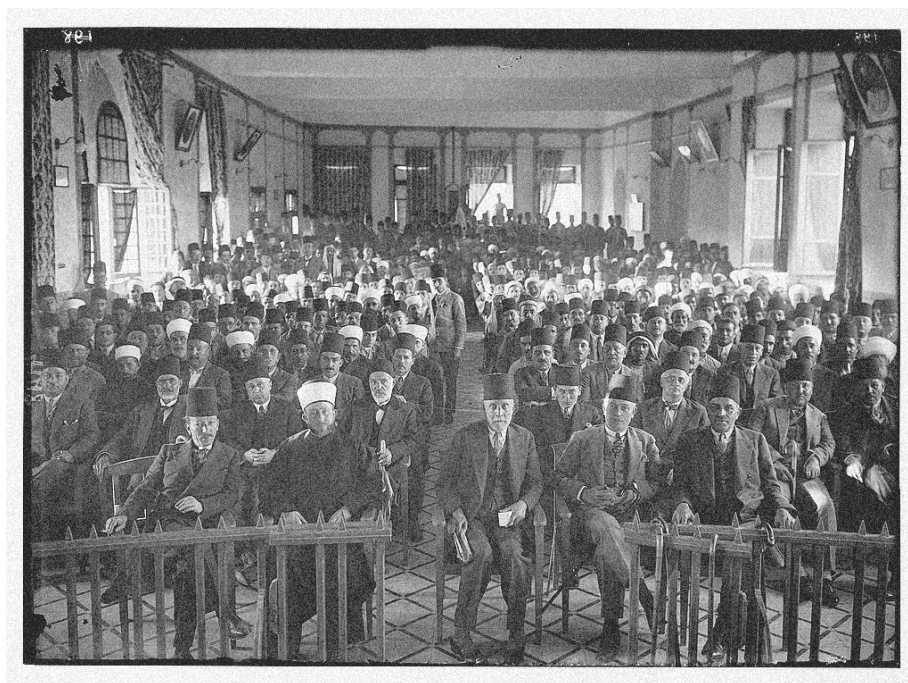
The Husayni family, which claims to be descended from the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH), first came to Jerusalem between the 14th and 16th centuries.³ The Nashashibis, likely of Kurdish or Circassian descent, arrived around the same time in

the 15th century. By the late 19th century, both families had become those of wealthy urban effendis, each with extraordinary foundations of sociopolitical power; the Husaynis owned over 10,000 acres of profitable plantations in the Jericho area, and the Nashashibis in Jerusalem had a history of partnership with the Ottomans.⁴

As a result of these foundations, both families were entitled to many powerful political and religious positions within the empire.⁵ Husayni tribesmen were recognized as the muftis of Jerusalem and the custodians of the Nabi Musa Shrine, while the Nashashibis could boast of the Ottoman parliament deputy Raghib al-Nashashibi and of the literary icon Is'af al-Nashashibi as their scions.⁶ Both families therefore wielded remarkable political influence, with the Husaynis in particular dominating Palestinian affairs. In the Peasants' Revolt of 1834, the Husaynis led a coalition of notable families to unite in solidarity against the Egyptian occupation; after coordinating with influential village sheikhs and encouraging rural areas to rebel, the efforts of the Husaynis and other wealthy families led to the expansion of the campaign against Ibrahim Pasha's army.⁷ Nearly a century later, they would find themselves once again campaigning together against another foreign power: the Young Turks. The most prominent notable who engaged in this anti-Ottoman



Arab protest delegations, featuring Raghib al-Nashashibi and Amin al-Husayni in the front-left.



activity was Hajj Amin al-Husayni, the future Grand Mufti of Jerusalem who cooperated with the British to recruit troops for the Arab Revolt. The Nashashibis also resisted the Young Turks, which led to the execution of Ali Omar Nashashibi, a founder of one of the earliest pan-Arab nationalist societies.⁹ Throughout this period, their combined efforts were perhaps the defining force driving political developments in Palestine.

This cooperative relationship between the Husaynis and Nashashibis fundamentally changed after World War One, however; with the Ottomans out of the picture, the question of who was to rule Palestine after the British quickly arose. Previously, both families had operated in mutual recognition of the Ottoman Empire, albeit with significant personal autonomy. Now,

both families began to actively carve out personal power bases in competition with one another. The British, fearing a united Arab front, actively accelerated this rivalry by appointing Husaynis and Nashashibis to rival positions.⁴

Naturally, this led to intense conflict between the Husaynis and Nashashibis, with the Husaynis initially gaining the upper hand in a string of successive victories. At the Third Palestinian Arab Congress in 1920, the representatives appointed a Husayni as head of the Arab Executive, compelling Raghib al-Nashashibi to lead a boycott against the Congress.¹⁰ The Nashashibis were further enraged when the British appointed Amin al-Husayni as the Grand Mufti of Jerusalem (largely due to his pro-British attitude), despite the fact that their candidate had actually won the

election.¹¹ Yet another Husayni victory came in the form of Amin al-Husayni's appointment to the head of the Supreme Muslim Council, despite a bitter smear campaign launched by the Nashashibi faction. These successes inspired much fear among the other elite families, pushing them to band together in opposition parties such as the 1923 Palestine Arab National Party.¹⁰

Despite their mutual struggle against Zionist settler colonialism, the two families developed a difference in political tactics. The weakened Nashashibi faction began to favor a moderate stance, desiring more cooperation with the British in order to achieve their long-term aims.¹² In contrast, the Husaynis became hard-liners who pushed their agenda without compromise, hoping to capitalize on their initial victories. These strategic differences only served to worsen the factional division that was emerging.

Soon, the Husayni-Nashashibi rivalry crippled the Palestinian national movement. In 1922, negotiations with the British over the establishment of a Legislative Council came to a halt due to partisan infighting among the Palestinian delegation.¹⁰ Again in 1924, arguments over the appropriate congressional representation for each family caused the Palestinians to delay the Seventh Palestinian Arab Congress for four years. By 1935, the emergence of countless political parties along

either the Husayni or Nashashibi axes fractured the Palestinian national movement almost entirely—productive cooperation became impossible. The National Defense Party (Nashashibi) and Palestine Arab Party (Husayni) ruthlessly opposed each other's initiatives regardless of their content, destroying any potential of a unified struggle.¹² The establishment of additional parties by other groups, such as the Independence Party, only further polarized Palestinian politics. Meanwhile, Zionist immigration and the political power of Zionist militias increased each year.

This infighting peaked during the Arab Revolt of 1936-1939. Though the Palestinians previously had a brief moment of unity in the form of the Arab Higher Committee (AHC), which comprised the heads of all major clans, the situation soon deteriorated once again into factional conflict. Upon the withdrawal of the Nashashibi's National Defense Party (NDF) from the AHC, Hajj Amin al-Husayni began ordering the assassinations of several prominent Nashashibis.¹⁰ His allies began murdering high-ranking NDF cadres; even Raghib al-Nashashibi barely survived several assassination attempts. In response, the Nashashibis and other opposition parties formed militias in coordination with the British to fight the mufti's forces. Civil war broke out in Palestine, precisely at the time where a united front was most necessary.

As a result, the national movement



PC: Magister from Wiki

was rendered completely ineffective. At the London Conference of 1939—one of the last chances for Palestinian leaders to have any positive impact on the future of their country—the two Palestinian delegations sent were so intransigent that an independent Briton observed that a “feud between the two families” hindered them from any effective political action.¹³ In 1948, on the eve of the *Nakba*, the newly formed Arab League completely removed the Palestinian leadership from negotiations and strategy deliberation. Their impotence had become apparent to all; the Husaynis and Nashashibis had failed the people they claimed to represent.

1948 came and the *Nakba* raged on, until countless Palestinians were ethnically cleansed and permanently displaced from their homeland to make way for the Israeli state. As the dust settled, hundreds of local

homes were either destroyed or stolen by Israeli settlers. The Oriental House and the al-Nashashibi Library, however, remained standing. Today, if one has proper clearance from the Israeli government, these houses can be seen in East Jerusalem as they have stood for centuries.

Though the Husaynis and the Nashashibis were greatly weakened in the wake of the *Nakba*, they still stand today. Albeit to a much more limited extent, both of the families continue to operate in Palestinian politics, with some of their tribesmen holding influential positions in the PLO and PA.¹⁴ Indeed, as the Hamas-Fatah divide deepens, Israeli settlements increasingly erode what is left of Palestine, and the international Arab leadership abandons Palestinians, these two houses still face off in East Jerusalem’s Sheikh Jarrah neighborhood.

PALESTINIAN GRIEF IN ART: A LOOK AT *FARHA*

Mahaa Ayub

Farha (2022) is the story of a 14-year-old girl whose coming-of-age at the onset of Israel's occupation of Palestine in 1948 serves as a microcosm of the experiences of past generations. The main character, Farha, is played by actress Karam Taher and dreams of going to school in the city. She fights with her father to break the stereotypical gender roles that confine her home life. Farha's youthful activities help the viewer empathize with her. However, the lighthearted beginning of the film is juxtaposed with heavy undertones, eventually causing the viewer to mourn Farha's original life as the story delves further into the Palestinian *Nakba*. (*Nakba* is the Arabic word for "catastrophe" and is used to describe the ethnic cleansing of Palestinians when the Israeli state was forcibly established in 1948.) *Farha's* director, Darin J. Sallam, does not explicitly reveal the political background to the viewer, but rather shows it through scenes of violence and anguish that build in a blur to the perspective of the titular character.

The cruelty of the film is hard to watch and the emotions

painted on Farha's face throughout are heartbreaking, yet this is what Sallam intended. Sallam, a Jordanian of Palestinian descent, remembers the *Nakba* through the words of her own family and friends.

In an interview with *Middle East Eye*, she stated, "Farha means joy. And Palestine was the joy that was stolen from the Palestinians. I knew this was the film I wanted to make as a feature."¹ She described how Farha's story is based on a woman her mother knew who had lived in a storage room during the *Nakba*. She later escaped to Syria and lived in anguish and fear. What we see through Farha's eyes, thus, is but a small look into the thousands of people murdered, displaced, and devastated by the *Nakba*. Many viewers relate to the emotional turmoil displayed in the film; hundreds of Palestinians, for example, have voiced how the film resonated with their painful personal stories.

"Farha was my grandma. She was all of our young, hopeful, ambitious grandmas whose life was shattered because of the *Nakba*. Every scene of *Farha* was a visual of the oral histories we've been told for generations,"

said Palestinian-American activist Rifqa Falaneh to the *Middle East Eye*.^{1,2} Falaneh is just one of the many people who have been deeply touched by Farha's profound duty to tell the Palestinian story.

Farha's naivety and loyalty to her father ultimately stop her from almost escaping with another Palestinian family when Israeli soldiers enter her village. Her father still chastises her for her recklessness, locking her in a cellar where she remains for most of the film. He tells her to wait for him, because he will return soon. Farha keeps herself busy by searching through storage in the cellar and catching rainwater in her hands. She does not speak for the majority of the film.

Cinematographically, there is a distinct tonal shift in the film, initially showing Farha and her friends dressed in vivid colors and reading in the sun, then transitioning to the dark and dreary room where Farha is confined. Sallam conveys the world to the audience through the eyes of Farha. As bombs shower down around her house, she is stuck waiting and hoping that one day her father will re-

turn so that she may escape. Yet the most poignant and heartbreaking part of the film comes as the audience adopts Farha's view through a thin crack in the storage wall.

A Palestinian family of two children and their parents enter her courtyard. Soon after, the mother gives birth to a baby boy on the tile. For a second, there is hope that Farha might leave the cellar when she asks the father of the family, Abu Mohammad, to let her out. However, the moment is cut short when an Israeli commander and a Palestinian informant enter the courtyard and search the house for weapons, finding Abu Muhammad's family hiding on the roof of the house. The soldiers shoot and kill the parents and two older children in broad daylight.

This juxtaposition between life—the birth of a beautiful baby—with death is handled with care by Sallam, featuring fast-paced shots that resonate with the viewer. Like Farha, the viewer is a helpless onlooker, breathlessly on edge that the soldiers might come close to the storage room and kill her next.

However, *Farha* still manages to show a picture of humanity even in war, as a young Israeli soldier cannot bring himself to kill the baby boy born in the courtyard. Sallam evokes the powerlessness of the viewer through Farha as she fervently tries to leave the storage

room, wanting to rescue the baby boy left on the floor. We witness her attempts to shoot open the door; her efforts are in vain when she finds the baby dead outside in the courtyard. Farha's despair is conveyed through the pacing of the shots and close-ups of the horror on her face as she and the viewer realize it is too late. In a rush of emotions, we become one with Farha: one with her despair and one with the entire community that aches for their lost family, aches for their pain.

Farha is a painful reminder of the past, but it does more than tell a story. The film acts as a tribute to Palestinian loss of life and land; the grief of the *Nakba* stays with the viewer long after the film ends. The film has faced an uphill battle, with Israeli Culture Minister Chilli Tropper going as far as to claim that the film depicted "false plots against IDF soldiers," as well as anger over the film's eligibility for the Oscars.³ As staunch criticism is thrown at the film, the director remains relentless in her pursuit to tell the truth and amplify Palestinian voices, and by extension, expose the ongoing Israeli occupation of Palestine and perpetuation of an apartheid regime. The movie itself is a wanton cry for peace, one that everyone should pay attention to.

Farha is streaming on Netflix in Arabic and Hebrew with English subtitles.

“ In a rush of emotions, we become one with Farha: one with her despair and one with the entire community that aches for their lost family, aches for their pain. ”

THE EXTENDED ABRAHAM ACCORDS: CUNNING AUTOCRATS AND THE DISORIENTED GREAT POWER

PC: Mudassir Ali from Pexels

Ashley Zhuge
Bryn Mawr College

On February 2, 2023, the United States Department of Homeland Security expanded the Abraham Accords—a series of mutual recognition and normalization agreements between the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain, Morocco, and Israel signed in 2020—to include cybersecurity cooperation.¹ With the Gulf states and Israel notorious for exploiting cyber technology for political repression, American participation in cyber technology exchanges marks yet another indication of US willingness to work with autocrats at the expense of the region's democracy.

It is important to recognize that even the original Abraham Accords have had a chilling effect on Gulf civil societies, which had successfully pushed for limited democratization by autocrats. Before the signed normalization with Israel, civil society organizations mobilizing on the Palestinian cause served as one of the very few forms of political activism tolerated by regimes in the Middle East.

Organizations campaigning for Palestinian rights were permitted in civil society and on university campuses, exposing people to a sense of political agency and active citizenship in their formative years.² Such organizations have also gone beyond the Palestinian cause into a wider range of political activism, generating spillover effects in building politically minded citizens, and serving effectively as a driver for potential democratization. In Egypt, for example, pro-Palestine protests in 2000 united opposition groups with varying political agendas—the Islamists, leftists, Arab nationalists—thereby creating a network of activists that helped bring about the Arab Spring.³

After normalizing relations with Israel in 2020, however, Gulf countries such as the UAE and Qatar became increasingly willing to suppress pro-Palestinian activism.⁴ According to Dana El-Kurd, a political scientist at University of Richmond, despite the absence of a formal peace, Qatari university officials have

taken it upon themselves to shut down pro-Palestinian student activism, anticipating that an eventual Qatari-Israeli treaty is near. Worse, the expansion of the Abraham Accords would enable Gulf governments to further clamp down on activism through surveillance technology shared with Israel. Tess McEnery, executive director of the Project on Middle East Democracy, notes that, “Saudi Arabia and the UAE, for example, are the leading wielders and exporters of digital authoritarianism in the Middle East, collaborating with China, Russia, and Israel to access surveillance tools such as NSO Group’s Pegasus spyware to target people and governments across the globe.” The Abraham Accords, a seeming move towards greater cooperation and peace among Middle East and North African (MENA) countries, in fact have aggravated political repression by authoritarian states.

On the other side of the Arabian Peninsula, peace with Israel also comes at the cost of democratic retreat in nearby countries, namely Jordan and Egypt. Spe-

cifically, the United States’ willingness to support authoritarian states in exchange for peace with Israel and an enforcement of the status quo contributes to the regimes’ authoritarian endurance by increasing their coercive capacity. Since 1978, Egypt has enjoyed massive US aid packages for military development and economic subsidies after then-president Anwar Sadat made official peace with Israel at Camp David.⁵ Egypt also helped mediate President George Bush’s roadmap peace initiative between Israel and Palestine, culminating in the 2005 Sharm El-Sheikh Summit with Palestinian Authority (PA) president, Mahmoud Abbas, and Israeli prime minister, Ariel Sharon, to mark the end of the Second Intifada.^{6,7}

Most recently, Egypt brokered a ceasefire between Israel and Hamas in August 2022.⁸ Because the United States values the region’s peace with Israel, it is willing to support Egypt due to its importance first in the Arab-Israeli peace process and later in policing Gaza and brokering talks among Hamas, Fatah, and Israel.⁹ Jordan, another Israel-friend-

ly state, also receives preferential treatments from the US, which has doled out aids that sustain patronage networks and fund an expansive coercive apparatus that Jordan’s own economy could not afford. The Israeli-Palestinian conflict directly plays into this authoritarian endurance because it engenders US support for regimes that support peace with Israel and help maintain order in the Palestinian territories.

US support aside, MENA countries benefit from the protracted Israeli-Palestinian conflict in their own ways. The Egypt-brokered natural gas extraction agreement between Israel and the PA in 2022 is a case in point. Since the discovery of Gaza Marine, a gas field, in 1999, Israel has been resisting requests from private Palestinians, the PA, and Gaza’s de facto ruling party, Hamas, to explore it. As the usual negotiator on Israeli-Gaza affairs, Egypt assumed the role. In October 2022, Egypt reached an agreement with Israel and the PA to extract Gaza Marine and allocate 45 percent of the revenue to the Egyptian state-owned Egyptian Natural

Gas Holding Company (ENGC). On the other hand, the PA’s Palestine Investment Fund will get 27.5 percent while the Palestinian-owned Consolidated Contractors Company gets 27.5 percent.¹⁰ By taking advantage of its mediator role, Egypt further undermined Palestinian sovereignty by taking away a significant portion of the gas revenue that could be used to develop the Palestinian government and civil society.

The two recent developments—America’s expansion of the Abraham Accords into cybersecurity and Egypt’s exploitation of Gaza’s gas—reveal the worrying expansion of authoritarian state powers at the expense of citizen livelihoods. The United States will not be immune to democratic retreat, either. McEnery warns of the threats against its national security interests should the United States fail to proactively develop human rights norms and eschew support for the use of repressive technologies by Israel and Gulf countries. To truly defend democracy in the Middle East, a new American foreign policy is long overdue.

“FAITH AND THOUGHT”: CULTURAL HERITAGE IN SAUDI ARABIA

Sean Stebbins
Boston College

In his 1976 essay entitled “A Word for the Sake of Art,” Saudi modernist Mohammed al-Saleem declared that culture “is built on foundations of faith and thought,” foundations that usually manifest “in the customs and traditions of nations.”¹ Al-Saleem’s statement reflects the prevailing vision of many 20th century Saudis, who saw the development of a national art scene rooted in cultural heritage as central to forming a distinct Saudi identity. Endemic poverty and tribal antagonism have rendered early attempts at defining what it meant to be “Saudi Arabian” vis-a-vis the nation’s cultural heritage relatively unsuccessful. But the discovery of oil in 1938 and the enormous wealth it generated over the next few decades revived discussions of Saudi cultural identity as the fledgling nation quickly transformed into a regional power. Indeed, the “customs and traditions of nations,” as al-Saleem described them, continue to inform contemporary debates about Saudi cultural heritage, especially given the conservative Kingdom’s decade-long effort to destroy certain cultural sites within and outside its borders. This paper will explore the political, religious, and economic

motivations behind the Saudi campaign to eradicate specific cultural heritage, as well as the reaction to this campaign both domestically and around the globe.

The sheer scale of Saudi Arabia’s damaging campaign cannot be understated. Scholars indicate that over the last 30 years, the Saudi government has destroyed more than 90% of the old centers of Mecca and Medina alone, leveling historic sites like the Ottoman-era Ajyad Fortress, the house of Khadijah, the Prophet’s first wife, and the tomb of his daughter, Fatima.² Officials have even extended the pernicious campaign beyond the Kingdom’s borders, particularly in Yemen, where, as *Retrospect Journal* describes, the Saudi-led bombing campaign against Houthi rebels has included the destruction of “Sana’a old town,” “the Great Dam of Marib,” “700-year-old Sheikh Omar Ali al-Saqaff mosque,” “the Dhamar Regional Museum,” and perhaps even “some of the oldest surviving fragments of the Koran.”³ The presence of both Islamic and pre-Islamic heritage sites on the list of destructions undercuts the claims by some narrow-minded Western critics who cite the cam-

campaign as yet another aspect of some larger East-West divide. Turkey’s staunch criticism of the campaign (especially regarding the Ajyad Fortress’ demolition) as well as that of several Middle Eastern NGOs confirms that the West does not hold a monopoly on criticism of the Saudi campaign.

Importantly, Saudi Arabia has chosen to preserve and build around certain heritage sites while erasing other remnants. For example, government investment has transformed Diriyah—the historic home of the House of Saud (the ruling family for whom the country is named) and seat of the first Saudi dynasty from 1744 to 1818—into a vibrant cultural hub replete with museums, entertainment venues, and art institutions. The Diriyah Gate Project, a \$20 billion investment initiative, seeks to juxtapose discovery of the nation’s tribal past with a litany of “world-class golf courses, picturesque squares, outdoor plazas, and tracks dedicated to horse riders.”⁴ Cast by the Saudi government-sponsored *Arab News* as “the place where the seeds of the great Kingdom were sown,” Diriyah’s status as a UNESCO World Heritage Site underscores the influence of Saudi

state-building interests over debates about the country’s cultural heritage—especially as the Kingdom looks to attract tourists to its shores with exclusive events.⁵ Ultimately, Diriyah’s elevation to a historic site demonstrates the selective nature of the Saudi campaign, one rooted in three distinct goals.

The first and foremost objective—one most often cited by Saudi officials themselves—stems from safety and economic concerns. As noted by Saudi curator Maha al-Senan, the executive director at the Saudi Heritage Preservation Society, the Saudi government “faces [increasing numbers] of Muslims who want to perform Hajj every year” in an ancient space that simply “does not allow for that many people to be there,” a reality that necessitates the expansion of existing sites.⁶ The chaotic crowds—often reaching millions—have caused sporadic injury and fatal crowd surges around the Kaaba, prompting a wave of Saudi investment in the renovation and expansion of the holy sites. *Arab News* reported in 2002 that Saudi Arabia has spent upwards of “\$18.7 billion on the expansion of the Grand Mosque and the Prophet’s Mosque” alone, which shows the enormous financial backing behind expansion projects that would inevitably have contributed to the destruction of ancient buildings.⁷ But safety concerns alone do not explain the scale of the Saudi operation in Mecca and Medina. When

considering, as al-Senan does, that “more than thirty or forty Islamic countries that want to send more people [to perform the Hajj] every year”—and the fact that the Saudi economy heavily relies on its huge but finite oil reserve—Saudi’s economic interests become clear. Just outside the plaza of Kaaba now stands a Kentucky Fried Chicken—a testament to the profit-driven destruction of ancient cultural sites that do not generate the kind of revenue that luxury hotel complexes like Abraj al-Bait do.⁸

The development of a uniform political, and thus cultural identity represents another chief concern of Saudi officials. Al-Senan points to Saudi’s disparate tribal past as a motivating factor behind the preservation of specific cultural sites at the expense of others:

“When [people] talk about Egypt, everyone knows that there were the pyramids. When they talk about Iraq or Mesopotamia, they know there were centuries and centuries of civilizations. But really, in Arabia and Saudi Arabia we had the birth of many civilizations. And we were very rich, but we became a poor nation and then we lost how to preserve what we had.”⁹

In this sense, the Saudi government’s decision to promote new artistic sites at Diriyah is an effort to create a kind of Saudi “pyramids,” a national icon behind which its citizens can rally. Scholar Loring Danforth further

argues that the Saudi government’s historic discovery and subsequent coverup of the Jubail church—a monumental archaeological discovery that confirms a significant Christian presence in the past—highlights the politicization of cultural heritage that dominates the thinking of Saudi officialdom.¹⁰ Whereas other nations in Europe and Asia can easily rely on century-old identities that distinguish their citizens from those of other states, the Kingdom’s comparatively recent creation necessitates the development of not only a unique, but also uniform national identity.

The third factor motivating Saudi destruction of cultural heritage relates to the nation’s longstanding ties to Wahhabi Islam, an austere, fundamentalist version of the faith that decries idolatry and polytheism. In 1925, King Abdulaziz leveled both the al-Mala Cemetery in Mecca and the al-Baqi cemetery in Medina, thus destroying what had been enormously sacred sites (containing many of the Prophet’s ancestors) to many Muslims for centuries. Danforth contends that the Saudi government opposes historical interest in the country’s early Islamic past expressly because “early Islamic shrines or tombs could become sites for the worship of figures other than Allah and in that way encourage the practices of idolatry and polytheism,” a possibility that unsettles the country’s influential clerics.¹¹ Indeed,

researchers Alasdair Brooks and Ruth Young believe that Saudi arguments for improving Hajj infrastructure in Mecca and Medina by revitalizing ancient locations often intertwine with religious concerns, with “sites suffering from the taint of idolatry (as defined by Wahhabis)” usually suffering the worst fate.¹² As *Retrospect Journal* explains, the fact that the destruction of early Islamic heritage extends beyond “sites popular with tourists and pilgrims, where the need for modern facilities could be argued to outweigh the preservation of historic buildings” proves the influence of factors beyond economic ones.¹³

The “Roads of Arabia,” an international exhibition sponsored by the Saudi government, encapsulates the irony of Saudi Arabia’s cultural campaign. According to Danforth, the exhibition ironically uses artifacts taken from the al-Mala cemetery, which was destroyed by King Abdulaziz in 1925, to “assert a living continuity between contemporary Saudi culture and both its pre-Islamic and early Islamic pasts.”¹⁴ This reveals the comical hypocrisy of the Saudi regime, which selectively destroys vestiges of the pre-Saudi society that may undermine its Wahhabi identity.¹⁵ Evidently, a portion of the Saudi officialdom believes that the nomadic society that has continually changed hands among rival imperial powers disrupts the narrative of a continuous Saudi nation-state. The clerics’ effort to prevent domestic tourists from visiting

the ancient Nabatean site Madain Saleh “on the grounds that such activities pose a threat to the absolute monotheism they demand” exposes the hypocrisy of a Saudi government that casts itself as an accepting cultural force.¹⁶

The reaction of Saudi artist Abdunasser Gharem to the Kingdom’s restrictive political sphere further contextualizes the campaign targeting much of the country’s early Islamic and non-Islamic cultural heritage. In Gharem’s view, artistic developments amongst other Gulf nations like “the Museum of Islamic Art in Doha, the Sharjah Biennial, Dubai Art Fair, the Guggenheim and the Louvre in Abu Dhabi” have affected individual Saudis on a personal level, moving the cultural heritage debate into a larger conversation about Saudi art.¹⁷

“Lots of Saudis, unfortunately, focus on the future more than they do on the past,” according to al-Senan, which leads to the destruction of ancient sites in favor of the kinds of modern, luxury cultural experiences (like those in Mecca) that characterize other Gulf states.¹⁸ Gharem, for his part, hopes to bridge the Saudi past with the future through his wildly popular artistic critiques. His criticism of conservative clerical traditions—embodied in a recent sculpture of a stamp inscribed with the words “in accordance with Sharia Law”—reflects the opinion of many Saudis who object to Wahhabist intolerance and the cultural destruction it precip-

itates.¹⁹ The imprisonment of fellow artist and friend Ashraf Fayadh for apostasy (accompanied by a one-time punishment of “800 lashes”) illustrates the tenuous space Gharem occupies, with the artist himself intimately aware of the inherent dangers of his creatively repudiating of the Saudi regime.²⁰

Opponents might contend, as Saudi officials often do, that the country’s attitude regarding cultural heritage represents a continuity from past preservation efforts rather than a departure. Historian F. E. Peters, for example, explains that “every Sunni dynasty that rose to prominence in the Fertile Crescent professed a lively and at times aggressive interest in the Arabian holy places,” interest which naturally included monetary investment.²¹ Salah al-Din’s Ayyubid ancestors in Egypt, for example, “invested heavily in their capital in Cairo but were no less devoted to the holiest place in their empire,” which brought not just religious and political power, but also “considerable economic profit.”²² Scholars Trinidad Rico and Rim Lababidi point out that various regimes have altered the Kaaba throughout Islam’s fourteen centuries of history, including a reconstruction before the early Umayyads.²³ Given these historical precedents, are contemporary Saudi attempts to improve the Hajj experience with shopping centers and hotels really such a departure? Is not the idea of “cultural heritage” one that began in the West, requiring, in



anthropologist Lynn Meskell’s words, “an attitude toward material culture that is also distinctly European in origin?”²⁴ Indeed, the comparatively muted Western reaction to the destructive Saudi campaign (thanks to Saudi Arabia’s oil ties to the United States) undermines its criticisms of cultural destruction elsewhere and weakens its oft-touted role as a third party levying all manners of impartial cultural judgements. Perhaps the Western artistic and historical community, in the words of *Retrospect Journal*, only cares “about the ‘star’ attractions, big name archaeological sites that were popularized by western archaeologists from the time of the Enlightenment”—many of which feature prominently in the British Museum.²⁵ Regardless of the accuracy of these criticisms, western apathy certainly plays an important role in justifying the destruction of cultural heritage by Saudi officials.

In actuality, however, the Saudi campaign represents a pattern of cultural erasure unique to the regime and its set of localized economic, political, and religious motivations. Despite recent liberalizations embodied in figures like Gharem, the Kingdom’s conservative elements still exert enormous influence over its artistic and cultural scene. Danforth points out how the planned Museum of Contemporary Islamic Art “has never opened because of clerical opposition, even though the collection has already been assembled and the building to display

it has already been built,” while a display in the National Museum in Riyadh continues to emphasize “the ignorance and darkness that, from a Wahhabi perspective, [characterizes] everything” associated with the Kingdom’s pre-Islamic past.²⁶ Perhaps Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman’s personal interest in the arts will forestall future attempts at cultural destruction. But for now, Saudi Arabia’s stifling attempt to hide its rich pre-Islamic past appears likely to continue.

Saudi Arabia’s desire to diversify the country’s economy, formulate a distinctly Saudi national identity, and placate religious fundamentalists have all advanced a 30-year campaign to selectively destroy cultural heritage sites within and outside its borders. This campaign has not only jeopardized the study of the rich pre-Saudi history but also undermined the Kingdom’s aspiration of becoming a regional cultural arbiter. Rather than emphasizing the local origins of national culture, as Mohammed al-Saleem’s 1976 essay suggests, Saudi officials have chosen to not only disregard, but also eliminate cultural sites that conflict with the Kingdom’s strict interpretation of Wahhabi Islam. Despite recent liberalizations owing to its desire to be seen as a global artistic hub, Saudi Arabia’s targeted destruction of heritage sites nevertheless constitutes an unmistakable assault on the “faith and thought” al-Saleem saw as central to any national culture’s enduring legacy.²⁷

“Of life’s two chief prizes, beauty and truth, I found the first in a loving heart and the second in a laborer’s hand”

KHALIL GIBRAN

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