

Saudi Arabia's New Nationalism: Embracing Jahiliyyah

Ilan Zalayat

For more than two-thousand years, the walled city of al-'Ula has been laying peacefully in a northwestern oasis of the Arabian Peninsula. While in ancient times it was an important oasis on the Spice Route, in the modern era, only the approximately five-thousand inhabitants of this far-flung town on the Saudi periphery know it to be the home of well-preserved stone monuments made by Nabataean sculptors. Its relative anonymity stands in stark contrast to its world-renowned twin city in Petra of the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan. However, ever since the de-facto Saudi ruler, Prince Mohammed bin Salman ("MbS"), became Crown Prince in June 2017, Saudi Arabia has gone to great lengths to publicize forgotten al-'Ula: The government has invested \$15 billion on advertising and developing the site, attracting hundreds of thousands of visitors.¹ The government also used the site to host the Saudi reconciliation with Qatar in 2021. Al-'Ula was also the setting for the first-ever movie that was shot and produced in Saudi Arabia.² The counterintuitive choice to feature pagan monuments as the new symbol of Saudi Arabia,³ a country that has long touted itself as the custodian of Islam, epitomizes the kingdom's effort to reimagine its pre-Islamic history in a nationalist frame.

Saudi Arabia's state indoctrination has embarked on a drive, evinced in educational, cultural, and archaeological initiatives, to elevate its pre-Islamic heritage. This drive

¹ Sultan Althari, "[AlUla is becoming a global cultural hub in Saudi Arabia](#)," *Al-Arabiya*, March 14, 2022.

² Rawan Radwan, "[Saudi Arabia's AlUla, city of ancient cultures, hosts 41st GCC Summit](#)," *Arab News*, January 3, 2021; "[Saudi Arabian movie 'Norah' set to be first homegrown feature film to be shot at AlUla](#)," *Gulf News*, May 12, 2022.

³ The recent Saudi embrace of its ancient monuments is particularly notable since, over history, the Saudi state notably razed several historically-valuable monuments that it considered to have any sort of pagan elements. The most prominent among these were the graves of the Prophet Mohammed's family in Al-Baqi Cemetery in al-Madinah, which were demolished in 1806 and 1925.

has emanated from MbS's wish to replace Islam with nationalism as the source of the Saudi monarchy's political legitimacy. This conceptual reorientation serves the practical purpose of reinforcing the Crown Prince's ongoing social and economic reforms that have eroded Islam's standing in the public sphere. While this is not the monarchy's first or only initiative that sidelines Wahhabism in the kingdom, such as instituting a new Founding Day that reattributes the country's establishment to the rise of the Al Sa'ud dynasty rather than its alignment with the Wahhabi movement,⁴ the emphasis on al-'Ula goes further in that it harkens back to the pre-Islamic era of the Arabian Peninsula, known as "*jahiliyyah*." Loosely translated as "ignorance," the term *jahiliyyah* has been a synonym for backward and immoral conduct during the pre-Islamic era for centuries. The advent of Islam was intended to emancipate believers from *jahaliyyah*.

The reappropriation of pre-modern history and culture in service of nation building is not particularly unique in the Middle East during the modern period. And yet, thus far, territorial nationalism has remained elusive in Saudi Arabia: The Arabian Peninsula does not have a shared history of an ancient centralized polity, and the notion of loyalty to a defined swath of land was alien to the tribal character of most of the Saudi population in the twentieth century, whose perception of solidarity ("*asabiyyah*") stemmed from kinship ties. This historical context led King 'Abd al-Aziz and his successors to emphasize their territory's virtue as the birthplace of Islam and accordingly derive their legitimacy for governing it from religious sources: the duty of the custodianship of the two holy Islamic shrines in Mecca and Medina and the championing of the Wahhabi doctrine.⁵ While Wahhabism has provided the Saudi rulers with the ideological means to ensure the obedience of its subjects, the doctrine has failed to completely supplant a range of indigenous pre-Islamic symbols, customs, values, and collective memories spread throughout the kingdom.⁶

The current venture is not the first attempt to stimulate a national consolidation in Saudi Arabia. Early signs of Saudi nationalism surfaced as early as the 1960s when King Faisal pursued a national identity that would sustain the far-reaching reforms he led to modernize the kingdom and co-opt the various tribes. Therefore, the Saudi official historiography published at the time concealed the social fabric's heterogeneity behind the cultural hegemony of the Najd region – from which the

⁴ Noor Nugali and Johnatan Gornall, "[The inside story of Saudi Arabia's Founding Day, celebrating the year it all began](#)," *Arab News*, February 22, 2022.

⁵ Neil Partrick, "Nationalism in the Gulf states," in D. Held and K. Ulrichsen (eds.) *The Transformation of the Gulf: Politics, Economics and the Global Order* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2011), pp. 81-85.

⁶ Nadav Samin, *Of Sand or Soil: Genealogy and Tribal Belonging in Saudi Arabia* (Princeton University Press, 2019), p. 202.

Sa'ud dynasty and the Wahhabi movement originated – depicting the dynasty's conquests of the rest of the kingdom as a blessed "unification." Nonetheless, the society's deep-seated and distinct tribal and cultural identities held off the dynasty-centric national idea. Eventually, Faisal's assassination in 1975, together with the Islamic fervor radiating from 1979's seizure of the Grand Mosque in Mecca and the Iranian Revolution put a brake on the nationalist course. Instead, the Saudi regime moved to reinforce its legitimacy and indoctrinate the people through rigorous enforcement of the Wahhabi doctrine, which was set as the kingdom's *raison d'être* while tolerating a certain amount of diversity of identities.⁷

MBS' reforms are undoing this process by disempowering Islamic authorities and at the same time, promoting territorial nationalism in the kingdom. What is more, Saudi nationalism mobilizes the kingdom's pre-Islamic history in service of political solidarity. Once neglected by authorities, ancient remnants and any tangible testimonies of this history are being intensively researched and restored throughout the length and breadth of the kingdom by a newly-established Royal Heritage Commission. Six man-made monuments – five of them predating Islam – were recognized as the country's first UNESCO World Heritage Sites and opened to the public, free of charge.⁸ Likewise, archaeological excavations made last year around al-'Ula identified the region with the biblical Lihyanite kingdom, claiming it had been "one of the largest [kingdoms] of its time," extending from the city of Medina to Aqaba, in the contemporary Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan.⁹ At the same time, at the other end of Saudi Arabia, researchers from King Saud University uncovered four-thousand year-old rocks engravings of women playing musical instruments (an anathema to the Wahhabi doctrine), located about 300 kilometers apart, concluding that they had been made by the same civilization, which was no less than one of the world's oldest human settlements.¹⁰ Taken all together, these efforts are trying to construct a coherent narrative on the relatively blank page of Saudi territorial history.

Naturally, the state education system is the primary vehicle to spread this revision of Saudi history. New textbooks reportedly introduced in the kingdom convey a positive image of the Saudi territory's pre-Islamic age with a seamless continuity to its Islamic and modern eras. This stands in contrast to the old books that had portrayed the pre-

⁷ Brandon Friedman, "[National Formation in Saudi Arabia](#)" [Hebrew], *Middle East Crossroads*, The Moshe Dayan Center for Middle East and African Studies (MDC), Tel Aviv University, March 5, 2017; Mai Yamani, "The two faces of Saudi Arabia," *Survival* 50.1 (2008), 144.

⁸ "[Saudi Arabia](#)," *UNESCO*; "[Saudi Arabia opens heritage sites for public](#)," *Saudi Gazette*, May 23, 2022.

⁹ "[Archaeologists in Saudi Arabia excavate 'forgotten kingdoms'](#)," *Al Jazeera*, November 2, 2021.

¹⁰ Tareq Al-Thaqafi, "[Ancient rock drawings across Saudi Arabia gain increasing attention](#)," *Arab News*, January 7, 2022.

Islamic eras negatively and confined Saudi history to the advent of Wahhabism.¹¹ As former Egyptian Antiquities Minister Zahi Hawass, an archaeologist who is an expert on Pharaonic Egypt, put it: "The view of the Saudi citizen, who used to see these antiquities as mere idols and does not pay any attention to them, is changing and he now considers them as a part of his own history."¹²

There were several catalysts that emerged over the past decade – during which MbS rose to power – that account for the Saudi monarchy's shift away from Islam and towards a nationalist vocabulary and symbols to shore up its legitimacy. First, the regional success of Islamism, from the Muslim Brotherhood through the Islamic State (ISIS), reverberated in the Saudi royal palace. Saudis, the majority of whom were educated by the very Islamic teaching that these movements have evolved from, gravitated towards Islamist messages that attacked the Saudi monarchy, providing Riyadh with another reminder that it cannot fully control Islamists while it heavily relies on Islam for political legitimacy. At the same time, the Islamic State's radical brutality that drew international condemnation was widely ascribed to the Saudi supported Wahhabi doctrine.¹³ The news Saudi nationalism addresses these challenges in two ways. It offers the Saudi people an outlet to channel their aspirations through an alternative to Islamism, reducing the monarchy's need for religious legitimacy; and, secondly, it differentiates the Saudi values from those of the Islamic State. While the Islamic State smashed pre-Islamic monuments, the Saudis respect and preserve them.

The destructive unraveling of several Arab countries in the aftermath of the Arab Spring uprisings have also reinforced the Saudi monarchy's support for territorial nationalism. Saudi elites watched with trepidation as authoritarian control and the top-down hegemonies of ruling elites proved insufficient to hold back the tide against widespread popular protests.¹⁴ Consequently, the new Saudi territorial nationalism was constructed to appeal to all the kingdom's subjects, including groups that had been marginalized by Wahhabi influence. MbS notably attempted to appeal to the cosmopolitan Hijaz Region, and even the Shi'i minority, which is repudiated by the Wahhabi creed, as part of the Saudi nation.¹⁵

¹¹ Eman Alhussein, "[New Saudi Textbooks Put Nation First](#)," The Arab Gulf States Institute in Washington (AGSIW), October 19, 2019.

¹² Zahi Hawass, "[Saudi Arabia: Pre-Islam antiques](#)" [Arabic], *Asharq al-Awsat*, March 21, 2019.

¹³ Brandon Friedman, "[National Formation in Saudi Arabia](#)" [Hebrew], *Middle East Crossroads*, The Moshe Dayan Center for Middle East and African Studies (MDC), Tel Aviv University, March 5, 2017.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Jeffrey Goladberg, "[Saudi Crown Prince: Iran's Supreme Leader 'Makes Hitler Look Good'](#)," *The Atlantic* (April 2, 2018).

MbS' reforms also appear motivated by a conspicuous desire to consolidate his absolute authority; first by securing his accession and second, by centralizing power and forestalling the possibility of opposition to his future kingship. The local narratives of various communities in Saudi Arabia, which revolve around romanticizing the histories of their Bedouin pedigrees, consistently remain one of the only spaces for autonomous discourse.¹⁶ Hence, monopolizing and suppressing these sub-state discourses through invoking political heritage that long preexisted the local pedigrees they relied on is essential to MbS' centralization agenda.

Ultimately, the nascent Saudi territorial nationalism is doubling down on the King Faisal era's dynasty-centric nationalism. In lieu of injecting Najd's hegemony to reinforce its political primacy, the current nation-building drive has sought to carve out an inclusive Saudi nation based on territory rather than exclusively on Islam. In doing so, MbS is mobilizing the kingdom's pre-Islamic symbols and heritage that run through the kingdom, from al-'Ula in the north to prehistoric remnants in the south. By invoking ancient polities and cultures that related to the Saudi peoples through a shared territory rather than their particular lineages, the monarchy is striving to overcome the social divisions of tribal segmentation – an objective that the Saud-Wahhabi union only partially achieved.

On the one hand, the new nationalism is careful not to marginalize Islam completely nor write it out of the Saudi historical account, rendering the Muslim identity a component of the rebranded Saudi identity. On the other hand, elevating the *jahiliyyah* – which Islam casts in a negative light – as a pillar of the Saudi nation is navigating uncharted terrain in the Saudi discourse. Furthermore, the unusually rapid pace at which this nation-building is advancing raises the possibility that it will elicit resentment and backlash.

As the stakes are high, so are the prospective rewards. A successful shift to a widely held Saudi national identity, one that anchors the kingdom's subjects in a sense of common kinship and patriotism rooted to a shared territorial history rather than diffuse segmentary histories, will be a powerful expedient in the hands of MbS, allowing him to rally the populace around his ambitious vision for the future of the kingdom.

Ilan Zalayot is a Junior Researcher at the Moshe Dayan Center for Middle Eastern and African Studies (MDC). He is also a PhD candidate in the Zvi Yavetz School of Historical Studies at Tel Aviv University.

¹⁶ Samin, *Of sand or soil: Genealogy...*, 202.

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