

By Lamy Khalidi

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*Nishant Choksi*

For more than 10 years, I was one of a number of American and Yemeni archaeologists surveying and excavating sites dating to the fabled South Arabian kingdoms and beyond, to prehistoric times. We were members of the [Dhamar Survey Project](#), started by the University of Chicago and named for a historic town in highland Yemen.

The team spent decades exploring the magnificent megalithic monuments and walled towns of

a civilization that developed terraced agriculture as early as [the third millennium B.C.](#) , an ancient tradition that has stunningly etched the entire surface area of the region's steep mountains like a topographical map. The project collected thousands of artifacts from more than 400 sites, including tools, pottery, statuary and inscriptions in ancient South Arabian languages.

We ensured that all of these artifacts, evidence of ancient cultures that traded at great distances during the Neolithic period and eventually built roads to link the highland towns to major incense trade routes, were deposited in the Dhamar Regional Museum. There, they were restored and studied by foreign teams and Yemeni archaeologists, and put on display.

This museum has just been [obliterated](#) from the air. In a matter of minutes, the irreplaceable work of ancient artisans, craftsmen and scribes — not to mention the efforts of Yemeni and foreign researchers who have dedicated years of their lives to studying and preserving this legacy — were pulverized. The museum and its 12,500 artifacts were turned to rubble by Saudi bombs.

[Since March](#) , Saudi Arabia has conducted a large-scale campaign of air attacks on its neighbor with the stated purpose of driving back the Houthi rebels who have taken control of the capital Sana and large parts of the country. These aerial bombardments have not managed to reverse the gains of the rebels, but have succeeded in devastating Yemen, one of the poorest countries in the Arab world. Thousands of civilians have been killed or injured, and hundreds of thousands have been displaced, amid severe shortages of food, fuel and medical supplies.



*Sana'a Old City, one of 11 UNESCO World Heritage sites in Yemen, was bombed on June 12th., [see this](#).*

Less reported is that these bombardments show a pattern of targeting cultural heritage sites in a country that has made extraordinary contributions to world civilization. Mohannad al-Sayani, director of Yemen's General Organization of Antiquities and Museums, confirmed to me by email that 25 sites and monuments have been severely damaged or destroyed since the

beginning of the conflict.

Thought by many to be the historic home of the [Queen of Sheba](#) , Yemen is one of the great jewels of human antiquity, with a legacy of magnificent temples, [water-management projects and](#) towering cities dating back thousands of years. This cultural wealth is not limited to ancient sites: Three of Yemen's cities are on the Unesco World Heritage [list](#) for their breathtaking vernacular architecture.

Yemen is central to the story of mankind: Sixty thousand years ago, early man walked through Yemen along the [Bab al-Mandab](#) , one of the major out-of-Africa routes that Homo sapiens took to colonize Eurasia. Archaeologists like me have found the remnants of prehistoric cultures that navigated the Red and Arabian Seas 8,000 years ago; these early travelers and traders left behind impressive megaliths.

Then there are the prehistoric walled hilltop towns and massive cities that were ruled by the South Arabian kingdoms of the first millennium B.C. Yemen also boasts a rich Islamic heritage that includes some of the oldest, most elaborately decorated mosques in the world.

On [June 12](#) , the historic city of Sana, itself a Unesco World Heritage Site, was bombed by the Saudis. This city, continuously inhabited for over [2,500 years](#) , contains some of the most beautiful traditional architecture in the world. The deliberate targeting of a civilian district of the old city was inexcusable and raises serious questions about Saudi Arabia's intentions in this conflict.

Ten other sites in Yemen are on the tentative Unesco World Heritage List. One of these, the old city of Saada, has also suffered extensive damage from air attack.

[Another is the Marib Dam, one](#) of the most renowned monuments of Yemen. Constructed no later than the first millennium B.C. and still in operation [until around the sixth century A.D](#) ., this feat of engineering genius enabled the irrigation of an estimated 24,000 acres of fields by means of an elaborate system of canals. The dam, adorned with inscriptions in ancient South Arabian script, allowed the Sabaean kingdoms, famous for having controlled the incense routes, to subsist in the desert margin.

The Saudis' behavior in Yemen is an absolute outrage, compounding multiple previous outrages, largely unnoticed by American media because...

It's seriously needless to expect a modicum of intelligence and wisdom from Saudis on regular basis, forget about asking to act responsibly...

On May 31, the Marib Dam was bombarded and gravely damaged by the Saudi-led coalition. There can be no legitimate reason to attack this ancient monument. It is not a military target, and lying in an uninhabited area at the edge of the Ramlat al-Sabatayn desert, it has no strategic value.

The desecration of these archaeological sites and monuments, as well as the architecture and infrastructure of Yemen's historic cities, can be called only a targeted and systemic destruction of Yemeni world heritage. Yet it has not been named as such.

The international media has devoted extensive coverage to the barbaric destruction of museums and archaeological sites in Iraq and Syria by the Islamic State. This is not the case with the continuing aerial vandalism perpetrated in Yemen by Saudi Arabia.

The same obscurantist ideology by which the Islamic State justifies its destruction of cultural heritage sites appears to be driving the Saudis' air war against the precious physical evidence of Yemen's ancient civilizations. There is no other explanation for why the Saudi-led offensive should have laid waste to these irreplaceable world archaeological treasures.

In fact, several sources have confirmed that Unesco and the State Department gave the coalition a list of specific sites to avoid. But far from rebuking its ally for ignoring this advice, the [United States is providing](#) logistical, intelligence and moral support for the Saudi air campaign.

Saudi Arabia is thus responsible not only for devastating a country of [25 million impoverished people](#), who are now suffering from famine, deteriorating sanitary conditions and a lack of medical supplies, but also for a strategy of demolishing significant world heritage sites. This Saudi cultural vandalism is

hard to distinguish from the Islamic State's.

The United States itself has a deplorable record of protecting irreplaceable archaeological treasures during its occupation of Iraq from 2003. It could start to atone for that cultural catastrophe by reining in the regional and ideological ambitions of its Saudi partners. Only the United States has the capacity to stop the Saudis before their bombs rob the world of even more of its precious heritage.

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