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Archive Wars poses the fundamental question for historians of modern states: what does it mean for a state to not have an archive? Or indeed, can there be a state without an archive? And most generatively, can a material and ideological history of state-building be told through the attempt to construct an archive? The puzzle at the heart of Archive Wars is the inability of the Saudi state, despite making it a political priority to create a national archive fifty years after the process began.

Archive Wars examines Saudi state’s attempts, after the Gulf War, to ground its legitimacy around a secular national mythology built around the history of the house of Al Saud and away from religious millenarian thought, through assembling state archives, building museums, and transforming the built environment. Rosie Bsheer sets out a compelling case for locating materiality at the center of the politics of historical knowledge. In this case, the state’s material politics that shaped the creation of the archive reveal how state power is manifested. Taking materiality seriously, Bsheer offers a more expansive vision of the archive that encompasses both more traditional documents and the historical built environment. As she shows, the push to collect and centralize documents held in private hands both created economic value and market for the documents themselves and also led to fierce resistance, from princely families, local communities, and international oil corporations, to surrender their documents. These sites of historical knowledge production also became an economic resource and the basis for a new national tourism plan that allowed for capital investment and land development around these memorial spaces. Importantly, Bsheer shows how the production of this new archive was based on the erasure of sites that “alternative social imaginaries that were antagonistic to the regime’s legitimating mythos” (23), and how the people who inhabited these spaces found themselves navigating these new identities. The production of these archives mirrored the state’s constant negotiation between its political elites and its population, as well as within elites and those who were tasked with carrying out the process of centralization. Inter-institutional distrust led archivists and preservationists to subvert the processes of collection and curation.

Archive Wars offers Saudi Arabia as a paradigmatic site for understanding twentieth century state formation and the relationship between state-building and the material and discursive infrastructures of history. Indeed, through its rich and complex narrative, she shows how numerous regional and sectarian pasts, and political movements and identities, that predate or challenge the Saudi state were suppressed to bolster the state’s legitimacy. However, it is the very universality of the process to modern state making that Bsheer so carefully unpacks that underscores how “archive wars are central to transforming all territories” (231).

It is this insight that brought historians of the Middle East, of Islamic art and architecture, of early modern Europe and Latin America, and of modern South Asia into conversation on this roundtable. Reading Archive Wars in 2022–2023 as a historian of South Asia gave me a curious sense of foreboding, as the Indian government announced plans to demolish both the National Archives and the National Museum in Delhi in order to meet the needs and ambitions of twenty-first century India. Concerted efforts by historians led to the government to announce that the National Archives building, which was completed in the colonial period, would be preserved as a heritage structure, but the annex that stores most of the documents would be demolished. It also noted that a massive project of digitization would keep the records accessible for scholars.1 The National Museum, which was built after independence, is also slated for demolition and its collection will be sent to storage while its successor is being built. Simultaneously, mirroring Archive Wars discussions on redevelopment in Mecca, the Hindu temple towns like Varanasi witnessed massive redevelopment for the purposes of pilgrimage and tourism that led to the demolition of several small and ancient temples and the displacement of residents and shops to provide

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ease of access to pilgrims and tourists. The growing scholarship on the “history wars” in India and elsewhere have focused on the reshaping of narratives and texts, mobilized for ideological or majoritarian ends, and focused on the aesthetics and politics of display and curating the past. Yet reading these alongside Archive Wars makes visible the underlying extractive political economy of turning the past into a resource. The sudden discovery of “secret” or formerly closed archives have offered ways to rethink the politics of states, but Archive Wars pushes us to think about what the failure to make such an archive or enclose an archive might reveal about the fractures within a state. It is not surprising that the discussants in this forum find resonances with archive wars in a multitude of sites, from Israel, Egypt, Germany, and the United States.

Ahmed Dailami, a historian of the modern Arab peninsula, praises Archive Wars as transforming the field by moving away from decades of historiography that have explained modern Saudi politics as a set of compromises between elites, the Wahhabi religious establishment and the Saudi monarchy, that created a pact between secular and religious authority. As Dailami points out, by tracing conflicts and contingencies over the materiality of history Archive Wars explores the continuing conflicts between the so called interest groups, and the cleavages and fragments within in. It thus offers a window into the various tensions that continue in Saudi society between sects and regions and over questions such as representative government, gender equality. Bsheer shows that the contraction at the heart of a state-building project, the fact that even while claiming cultural specificity, the state must “deploy the universalistic and even liberal discourse of the modern state and market.”

Finbarr Barry Flood, a historian of Islamic art and architecture, draws attention to the productive power of Bsheer’s expansive definition of the archive that includes museums, built spaces, and historical sites, all of which evidence the processes through which historical materials are endowed with value, enclosed, and transformed. Flood draws attention to the curious contradiction whereby the Saudi state funds international exhibitions on the regions pre-Islamic art while simultaneously bulldozing historical monuments in Mecca and Medina. As Flood emphasizes Archive Wars shows, the Saudi state is actively invested in monuments and museums in an effort to diversify an oil-based economy with revenue from these new sites of entertainment and tourism, while simultaneously destroying and removing reminders of the past that do not conform to the national narrative.

Ananya Chakravarty, a historian of early modern Lusophone empire and South Asia, identifies Archive Wars as part of a wave of scholarship that “challenges the epistemological foundations of the discipline.” She argues that Bsheer rejects both the naive project of recovery of subaltern narratives by reading a fragmentary archive against the grain and the “nihilistic postmodern idea” that history is a narrative construction, akin to literary fiction. Chakravarty finds resonance with violence and historical erasure in a range of sites, be it the Hindutva project in India, counter-revolutionary military regimes in Egypt or gentrification of African American neighborhoods in the United States, Reading Bsheer’s book alongside scholars of gender and slavery in the

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Americas, Chakravarty praises Bsheer for foregrounding the production of archives alongside the political histories that they seek to document.\(^6\)

The conversations on this roundtable began during the pandemic, where new restrictions on travel and access to archival documents, though familiar to scholars from the global South, were increasingly being experienced by scholars in the West. The strengthening of authoritarian and ethno-nationalist regimes and their visible interest in controlling the historical narrative began foreclosing several fields from traditional historical research. Both factors generated a new form of archive fever, where historians and both public and private funding agencies turned to mass projects of digitization and access.

All three discussants read Archive Wars as calling upon historians and scholars to consider the ethical practices of the curation and production of history. As Flood points out, the Saudi state is attempting to diversify its oil-based economy by promoting heritage sites and museums as sites of revenue extraction through entertainment and tourism, and further capital investments around heritage spaces. While art historians, archeologists, and curators rush to seek patronage and opportunities legitimizing the process, the state continues to destroy historical sites. Chakravarty cautions those who are rushing to digitize and collect archives funded through new projects for digital humanities, suggesting that they learn from Archive Wars and exercise methodological and ethical care. There is need to think deeply and consultatively about the ways in which the production of these archives extracts the past from communities and encloses them for the benefit of the state and professional historians. As Bsheer points out, the very process of digitization of messy records allows for heightened surveillance and erasure of archival materials from public view.

In her response, Bsheer underlines how the contestation over the archives exposes the fragility of Saudi state power and hegemony. As Archive Wars demonstrates that despite the fact that Saudi leaders have been able to sweep away traces of inconvenient pasts, to co-opt and suppress popular memories, and transform the built environment, they ultimately failed to establish a centralized archive, and by implication their state’s political authority. And it is through this contradiction that scholars of the modern state are challenged to think past the created narratives of a coherent and unitary state.

Contributors:

**Rosie Bsheer** is Frederick S. Danziger Associate Professor of History at Harvard University.

**Rohit De** is an Associate Professor of History at Yale University. His first book *A People’s Constitution: The Everyday Life of Law in the Indian Republic* (2018) won the Willard C. Hurst Prize for the Best Book on Socio-Legal History from the Law and Society Association. His next book, co-authored with Ornit Shani examines how thousands of ordinary Indians read, deliberated, debated, and substantially engaged with the anticipated constitution at the time of its writing and will be published in 2025.

**Ananya Chakravarti** is an Associate Professor of History at Georgetown University. Her first book, *The Empire of Apostles: Religion, Accommodation, and the Imagination of Empire in Early Modern Brazil and India* (Oxford University Press, 2018) received an Honorable Mention for the Bernard S. Cohn Book Prize of the Association for Asian Studies, awarded to the best, first book on South Asia. She is currently completing a

monograph, supported by the National Endowment for the Humanities, entitled *The Konkan: Space, Identity and History on an Indian Ocean Coast*, as well as a textbook on South Asian history, forthcoming from Routledge.

**Ahmed Dailami** is a Lecturer in the History of the Gulf and Arabian Peninsula at the Institute of Arab and Islamic Studies, at the University of Exeter. His current research focuses on the history of political thought and theory in the contemporary Arab World.

In his seminal work on archive fever, Jacques Derrida drew attention to the ontological and nomological sense of beginning encapsulated in the prefix *arkhe*, from which both our words “archive” and “architecture” are derived. Yet, we often tend to look to the former for our sense of where things begin and the latter for where they derive authority, reenacting the chasm between truth and authority which has come to define our disenchanted age. Rosie Bsheer’s rich work eschews this division to investigate the ways in which the destruction and (re)construction of archives and the built landscape have been constitutive of modern Saudi Arabia. In doing so, she upends not only commonplace views of Saudi Arabia as an exceptional nation-state, but challenges many of our disciplinary attitudes and ethical assumptions about conservation, archives, and the role of history itself.

The book begins with an introduction that successfully explains why the archive question is so fundamental to the modern Saudi state. The first chapter begins with a study of nineteenth century Mecca, which is focused on the Indian scholar Rahmatullah al-Kairanawi (1818–1891), who built an influential network of schools in the city. Bsheer’s analysis is consonant with and complements recent work written within broader transnational frameworks, from John Slight’s analysis of the Hajj in the context of British imperial politics and scholarship on Islam in the age of steam and print, to Ulrike Freitag’s recent urban history of Jeddah. She shows Mecca’s cosmopolitanism, its embeddedness within imperial, ecumenical and oceanic networks, and its importance as a battleground of modernity. More powerfully, however, Bsheer draws attention not only to the gulf between this historic city and the Saudi construction of Mecca as a timeless, sacred space, but also to the resulting disjuncture between the city itself and the Saudi nation-state, the result is that the city’s complex past can play no role in shaping alternative imaginations of modernity in the kingdom, in part because of the city’s role in nourishing early critics of the conquest.

Saudi chronophagy, which has flattened and occluded this past, is important to a state whose founders were patronized both by the waning British empire and the rising oil imperialism of the US, even as it sought to cast itself as an anti-imperial force against the Ottomans. Yet, its chronophagy had costs, as Bsheer shows in the following chapter. As Gamal Abdel Nasser, the president of Egypt, mounted a diplomatic war against Saudi Arabia after King Faisal’s coup in 1964, the state’s empty archives proffered little by way of defense. The production of the archive, beginning in 1966, was fundamentally a counter-revolutionary act, part of a concerted effort to tamp down the diverse and divergent political voices unleashed prior to Faisal’s coup. Yet, the very counter-revolutionary atmosphere of mistrust, paranoia and the struggle for power meant that the state’s attempt to centralize archival creation was undermined: not only did powerful imperial actors like ARAMCO continue to maintain their autonomous archives, but different factions within the government itself, as well as a variety of private actors, sought to hoard and restrict access to their own collections of archival data.

It was King Salman, during his tenure as governor of Riyadh, who brought a coherent and secular vision for the Saudi state’s concerted effort to deploy historical resources for its own economic and political purposes. In the following two chapters, combining a fascinating ethnography of Saudi archival and museumizing practices and archival research, Bsheer documents the twin effort to hoover up archival artefacts under the aegis of the King Abdulaziz Foundation for Research and Archive (Darah) and remake the built landscape of Riyadh. Riyadh would now serve as a site to project a state-sanctioned narrative of the past, as well as a new avenue for capital accumulation through conservation and tourism. Throughout, the specter of petro-

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capitalism and authoritarianism haunts Bsheer’s research sites: the mobile digitization units, that surreptitiously and deceitfully looted documents, or the neighborhoods wrested from ordinary people to make way for new historic sites speak to “the pervasive and multilayered violence [this effort] has inflicted on space, place, people and history” in the name of historical conservation.³

Returning to her starting point of Mecca, Bsheer takes full measure of this violence in the astonishing chapter on bulldozing the past. Reading Mecca as part of the Saudi state’s plan to diversify from petro-capitalism by exploiting its vital place in global Islamic pilgrimage, Bsheer examines in detail the relationship between the state and the Bin Laden group, its main contractor and “royal builder,” as well as the multibillion dollar Development of King Abdulaziz Endowment Project on Mount Bulbul. The latter became the motor of the redevelopment of Mecca in the Saudi state since the 1990s. Bsheer shows that the attendant wave of destruction, far from being religiously motivated iconoclasm, was driven by distinctly secular goals of power and profit. These drives nonetheless harken back to older discourses of orthodox iconoclasm to legitimate its actions. In a story familiar to observers of gentrification and urban capital accumulation around the world, developers dubbed living areas of the city to be “in ruins” in order to clear the way for violent displacement and dispossession of people and pasts.⁴ (For the US, the familiarity is more than incidental: Saudi authorities and developers used precisely the US legal tradition of eminent domain to wrest “private” property in the name of capital.) The result has exacerbated inequality both among the city’s residents and among the millions of pilgrims who visit each year. Given the enormous costs, there is undoubtedly local opposition from the city’s people, even if contestation has been discreet and circumspect at best. The final chapter examines this violent process of the territorialization of the past and the state’s attempt to centralize and pacify political opposition through the material production of history beyond Mecca, and indeed, beyond the borders of Saudi Arabia itself.

Part of the initial appeal of such a richly documented work is its rarity, given the strictures on research in the kingdom. Yet, Bsheer successfully demonstrates not merely the ordinariness of the Saudi state in its secular search for power, but the very banality of its strategies in the annals of nation-making since the Rankean nineteenth century. Bsheer’s steadfast refusal to engage in an Orientalist discourse regarding the Saudi state’s exceptionalism, a discourse that the kingdom itself has judiciously employed, means that her clear-eyed recognition of the inherent violence of history is of far wider application. I read this work as a decided non-specialist and yet found myself making sense of my own areas of concern through Bsheer’s lens. Her analysis, for example, is of direct relevance for contemporary India, where the twin projects of remaking historical education and of bulldozing Muslim slums are part of the consolidation of a new Hindu majoritarian state.

The most powerful aspect of the work is how Bsheer undertakes the very methodological and ethical care that the violence of history makes incumbent upon historians. Through ethnographic and archival methods, she demonstrates how to consider and negotiate our implication in the struggle, contestation, and elisions of the past that is constitutive of history and history-making itself, never once falling into the all-too-easy trap of reproducing the Saudi state’s hegemonic narratives. This was perhaps most clearly apparent in the startling section describing the mobile digitization units through which the state attempted to centralize historical resources. While too many historians (particularly given our experiences during the pandemic) uncritically embrace digitization as a panacea for all kinds of archival ills, for many communities these methods are a tool of violence that divests them of control over their own past, leaving states and professional historians the primary beneficiaries.

Bsheer’s work is part of a new wave of scholarship that challenges the epistemological foundations of the discipline, without ceding the method of history itself, while addressing the role of history in making our

³ Bsheer, Archive Wars, 164.
⁴ For the US case, see, for example, Edward G. Goetz, New Deal Ruins: Race, Economic Justice and Housing Policy (Cornell University Press, 2013).
This new historical epistemology considers the coincidence of the very process of archival creation and the political processes we seek to reconstruct through these archives—and demands a commensurate level of methodological and ethical care from historians. Indeed, it demands a willingness to confront our own implication as historians in the contemporary politics of the past. Again, Bsheer’s work transcends the narrow confines of period and region: her careful approach, at least to me as a historian of the early modern world, is reminiscent of the best scholarship on colonial slavery. Reading Bsheer’s work alongside such seemingly removed historiographies reveals a coherent, and salutary, new direction for the field, one with relevance for practitioners in every corner of our discipline.


6 For example, Saidiya Hartman’s groundbreaking work foregrounds the fact that all aspects of slave society, and the archival traces it left, were made under a regime of terror, which demands a certain ethical response from the historian. Marisa Fuentes has not only shown the implications of both the structure of archives but of historical epistemology itself in the same historical processes that produced colonial slavery. Saidiya Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997); Marisa Fuentes, *Dispossessed Lives: Enslaved Women, Violence and the Archive* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2016).
Review by Ahmed Dailami, Institute of Arab and Islamic Studies, the University of Exeter

In their magisterial “On Kings” the late David Graeber and Marshal Sahlins describe the royal capital city “[as] a model of the universe restored to a state of abstract Platonic perfection. In this way where prophets foretell the total future resolution of the contradictions and dilemmas of the human condition, kings embody their partial present-day resolution.”1 Saudi Arabia is one place where kings have habitually built cities to herald an era of order and plenty. But Arabia is also home to not one, but two cities, which thwart such worldly promise: the holy cities of Mecca and Medina. Unlike a royal city, a holy city cannot be built overnight, nor can it be entirely destroyed. A royal city must therefore stand in its shadow while at the same time try to outshine it.

*Archive Wars* is a history of an uneasy and often violent relationship between such contrasting visions of order: an apprehensive monarchical nationalism as it attempts to replace an embattled and rapidly aging missionary puritanism. The ideological terrain of this conflict in *Archive Wars* is History, while its material manifestation is a country-wide struggle over the material record and the built environment in Saudi Arabia. By a conflict over History, I do not mean competing narratives that turn on including the excluded—or in that too—but History as the attempt to replace the eschatological time of the Wahhabi mission with the worldly time of a monarchical state, its founding battles, kings, and cities and the promises they make about the future. *Archive Wars*, among many things, is the story of a state in the throes of re-imagining itself not only in history, but as a historical entity. Describing this deeply conflicted and often violent process, the book documents what must be discarded but also created to that end.

Yet, for decades now, historical writing on modern Saudi Arabia has avoided conceptualizing the conflicts and contradictions of political order, and contains a series of compromises which historians have had to make in order to shore up their accounts of how the modern state came to be and what sustains it materially and ideologically. These compromises, usually called “bargains,” have almost always come in the form of a narrative that reconciles the profane and the sacred, or the material and the ideological without a fuller account of how those categories have related to one another over time. Take, for example, the Faustian pact that lies at the core of almost all modern Saudi historiography: the much-vaunted alliance between the Al Saud royal dynasty and the Wahhabi religious establishment. Modern Saudi Arabian history begins with, and has largely been made intelligible, through that union.2 Yet the very idea of a pact implies differences put aside to be dealt with another time. Even when the tenuous balance between royal and religious authority is conceived as such in the literature, scholars have rarely been able to shed the convenience of its explanatory power in the interests of producing something more penetrating.

Consider also the alliance between the United States and Saudi Arabia based on the free flow of cheap oil, or even the unsaid pact between the Saudi state and its citizens who, we are told, relinquished their political participation once they had been made recipients of state welfare.3 This patchwork of contractual metanarratives underpin our current understanding of Saudi history, thus leading to a field of scholarship that has been built on speculation on what conditions must obtain for such contracts to be ripped up, or for the pacts to fail. The study of the Gulf’s politics has always been, until recently, an exercise in the politics of prediction.

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Archive Wars begins elsewhere. Rather than assume a striking continuity in the state’s formal existence, Rosie Bsheer begins by marking the fundamental discontinuity at the heart of how we are to understand Saudi Arabia today. Contrary to decades of historiographical habit, the book seeks and explore the conflict between the political and the religious which lie at the heart of the legitimating practices of the state and its current projects of selective historical destruction and construction. In fact, the contradictions of Saudi Arabian politics and history are what drives Archive Wars and make it a seminal book in the way we understand the Arabian Peninsula but also how we can depart from historiographical prefigurations that reproduce rather than transform the field. In doing all these things, Archive Wars gives us something unprecedented on Saudi Arabia: a history of the present in its full political and ideological expression, rather than a discussion of which economic or cultural forces, usually oil or Islam respectively, crowd politics out.

Bsheer has also shown us a way out of the historiographical habits that depoliticize their subject by apprehending political life piecemeal: the analysis of discrete sociological units that constitute a society like Saudi Arabia’s and those whose interests are assumed to be transparent: competing princes, bureaucrats, tribes, religious authorities, and sects. The culturalism of such accounts is both obvious and yet subtly invisible when infused with and narrated through the hypermodernity of industrial scale petro-capitalism and (re)urbanization. Archive Wars places the various conflicts raging across Saudi society, be they that of the emancipation of women, the struggle for constitutional representation, or the inclusion of occluded regional histories as part of a larger process that gives these struggles legibility and conceptual content beyond the paradigm of repression versus liberalization.

Rather than posit a narrative that reiterates the seamless Arabian saga of Wahhabism embraced by the Peninsula’s rulers, Archive Wars is an account of how the past 30 years of history are no longer legible through that rubric. It begins with the moment when the state recognized, sometime after the First Gulf War in 1990–1991, that its reliance on religious legitimation made it vulnerable to the authority of the very clerics that it relied on for support. The book recounts the history of how various members of the ruling elite initiated the project of secular Saudi nationalism as the legitimating language of Islam became more of a liability than an asset. Framed as such, the book then delves into the questions that inevitably emerge around such discontinuity: what has to be destroyed, preserved, built, or rebuilt? Which institutions will manage such a process of hiding, hoarding, and selective honoring?

To that task the book is structured around five chapters, the first and last of which discuss Mecca. Archive Wars begins by showing how the holy city represents the numerous life-worlds that preceded the contemporary state of Saudi Arabia and which had to be suppressed to make way for the narrow puritanism and later nationalism that the contemporary state has cultivated. Yet crucially, Archive Wars is not written as an “alternative history,” a competing narrative to that of official accounts even though there is a wealth of material that catalogues those suppressed histories. Bsheer is more interested in underscoring the numerous paths that contemporary Saudi Arabia might have evolved out of, and its corollary, just how contingent and fraught the ensuing process of historical occlusion and consolidation became.

The result is a study that does not merely replace one account with more democratic ones, nor does it sound defensive or arbitrary, or posit that which it attempts to explain. Rather the book convincingly shows how individual subjects, more global processes, and national institutions are embroiled in the violence of history, which means taking history seriously as a contradictory endeavor; a practice that undermines itself in the act of its production. This is not just because of the traces, fragments, remnants, and in the case of Mecca, holy cities that cannot be purged altogether. Rather as the book ironically shows, the more institutionalized and systematic the acts of destruction and selective commemoration, the narrower the conception of the nation that emerges on the other end of that process.

It is this institutionalized and yet fragmentary and even contradictory process of state-driven historical consolidation that the middle three chapters of the book elucidate before returning to an urban history of...
contemporary Mecca, where speculative capitalism and the dynastic national imaginary meet. In documenting how the state-led archiving project evolved, but continuously failed to produce an agreed upon ideological or even physical center, Bsheer poses a crucial question: ‘Can there be a state with no archive…what does it mean for a state not to have an archive” (64)? For it becomes clear over these central three chapters that the process of institutionalized document collection and archiving as spearheaded by the King Abdelaziz Foundation for Research and Archives (better known as the Darah), became a project to produce a nation that had to deny rather than celebrate its past. Crucially Bsheer manages to go between two registers on this process, one that recognizes the universality of such denial and selectivity to the process of national archive building, and a second that enumerates the particularities of the Saudi case. Mecca in particular embodies the spectacular destruction of the pre-Saudi urban fabric when the city was handed over to the range of state and non-state actors involved in the slow-and not so slow-violence of speculative real estate and re-urbanization.

As I read Archive Wars I could not help but compare it to some of the path-breaking publications in which highlight the anxieties of archival consolidation, such as Laura Stoler’s Along the Archival Grain,4 or the way that Constantine Fasolt draws out how what is at stake when a state has to be re-imagined in history in The Limits of History.5 Yet Archive Wars made me think most of all of the late Fernando Coronil’s The Magical State, as historical ethnography of a petro-state (in Coronil’s case, Venezuela) in the throes of a self-induced reincarnation and that of the society it governs.6

Yet here lie some of the most interesting questions that the book opens up for the field. I pose them having been inspired by the author to think of where scholarship on the Arabian Peninsula might go from here. If we no longer conceive of Saudi Arabia in culturalist or materially overdetermined terms what new questions emerge that are otherwise foreclosed by much of the existing literature? The platitudes of nationalism, the rhetoric of stability and continuity, and now, even the political language of the fallen who are sacrificed in a secular jihad (in a reference to those soldiers who have died in fighting in Yemen) give us a window into how a counterrevolutionary state can no longer rely on its cultural specificity to justify itself, but must rather deploy the universalistic and even liberal discourses of the modern nation-state and market, and inevitably, some space for the citizen rather than the subject within them. In a context where Saudi Arabia has since 2011 led a regional counterrevolution, how do the secular varieties of historical discourse and nationalist imagination described in Archive Wars connect to global conservative trends so visible in the last few years? Moreover, given the extent to which Islamism is now the enemy as imagined by monarchist nationalists, what does conservatism look like if it is anti-Islamist? Indeed, how has liberalism itself become central to these projects of anti-revolutionary national consolidation as the state generates its legitimacy no longer by restricting personal freedoms but by granting them? Archive Wars starts to answer some of these questions, not by positing arbitrary answers but by historicizing the conditions under which these questions, and the new lines of antagonism and conflict they highlight, have become pertinent.

These are questions that place the full spectrum of political life into view for an audience that has historically been encouraged to think about the Arabian Peninsula through the image of the goliath of cultural and religious conservatism arrayed against a David of liberal (and, although less often, leftist) progress. Archive Wars complicates, if not entirely supplants, this Whiggish notion of historical change and will most likely be remembered as a text that made scholarship on this particular part of the world more rewarding, but also more difficult in the very best of ways.

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In his influential *Short Account of Early Muslim Architecture* (1958), K.A.C. Creswell, the doyen of Islamic architectural history, (in)famously declared that “Arabia, at the rise of Islam, does not appear to have possessed anything worthy of the name of architecture,” constituting instead “an almost perfect architectural vacuum.” This emphatic dismissal of pre-Islamic Arabian heritage would have come as news to those walking across the Place des Vosges in Paris in spring 2022. There, a vast, seductive image of the landscape of al-Ula in northwest Arabia, with its spectacular rock-cut Nabatean tombs, spread across the façade of the seventeenth-century *Pavillon du Roi*, the royal pavilion on the south side of the Place. That this massive advertisement for the inauguration of a direct flight between Paris and al-Ula by Saudia Airlines, marking its arrival as a tourist destination, was permitted to obscure an entire façade of this iconic Parisian historical landmark was remarkable. But its presence was the culmination of a decade-long campaign to market the pre-Islamic history and heritage of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA).

The immediate groundwork had been laid by a major exhibition, *AlUla: Wonder of Arabia*, at the Institut du Monde Arabe (IMA) in 2019–2020. A collaboration between IMA and the Royal Commission for AlUla; the exhibition was intended to highlight the significance of the region “as a global destination.” This conjunction between Saudi archaeology, European museology, and the global heritage industry had been anticipated by earlier touring exhibitions, such as the 2010 *Routes d’Arabie/Roads of Arabia* at the Musée du Louvre (and later, other European and US venues), which introduced European audiences to a range of spectacular pre-Islamic materials from the KSA, from monumental sculpture and wall-paintings to bronzes and stone carving.

Since the appointment of Mohammed bin Salman Al Saud (MBS) as crown prince of the kingdom in 2017, however, the selective instrumentalization of material history and the concomitant exponential growth of the heritage sector within the KSA (and as a form of soft power abroad) has reached a crescendo. Central to *Vision 2030*, MBS’s vision for the future of the kingdom and the diversification of its oil-based economy at a moment when the future of fossil fuel industries has never looked more precarious, is a massive investment in entertainment, heritage, and tourism sectors. The development of cultural institutions in the KSA and the promotion of its historical remains has increased exponentially, even as the kingdom is actively targeting heritage sites and museums in its ongoing war on neighboring Yemen.

The past five years have seen the influx into the kingdom of an exceptional array of archaeologists, artists, art historians, and curators all keen to avail of the patronage opportunities provided by *Vision 2030* and the institutions and projects that it has spawned, apparently unperturbed by the violence associated with the regime, whether against women, minorities, or political disidents, or in the ongoing assault on Yemen. A state-funded Islamic Arts Biennale held in Jeddah in spring 2023 saw invitations extended to a carefully selected group of international artists and scholars, many now transformed into social media influencers, waxing lyrical about *Vision 2030*. Such privileged guests of the regime deployed their Twitter and Instagram

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accounts in support of Vision 2030 in ways that are unimaginable to those imprisoned or threatened by the state as a consequence of using the same platforms for posts deemed critical of it.

Rosie Bsheer’s excellent Archive Wars is an indispensable guide to understanding these developments from a longue durée perspective. The book traces the vicissitudes of material history or material politics (the distinction is perhaps academic) in the kingdom since its establishment in 1925, when the kingdoms of the Hijaz and Najd were united under the house of Al Saud. In five well-researched and cogently argued chapters, Bsheer traces the shifting (and sometimes contradictory) investments of the Al Saud family in material history as part of a process of state-building that extends across almost a century. Bsheer’s writing is rich in observations whose implications resonate well beyond the book’s immediate subject.

Archive Wars offers an eye-opening analysis of the role of material history in the formation of the modern Saudi state. The investments of the regime in this project were intended to provide a past for a region often seen as devoid of history (in this respect, Creswell’s comments are paradigmatic), one in which the Al Saud dynasty played the starring role. Archive Wars asserts the need to historicize the instrumental use of material pasts in the KSA, but this is history written against the grain. One of the many strengths of the book is its highlighting of the ways in which the operation of contingency, conflict and contradiction went hand in hand with fitful attempts to constitute archives of various sorts capable of reifying a carefully choreographed national history.

Archive Wars is attentive to the apparent paradoxes and contradictions in the role afforded material histories in the formation of the state under Al Saud. Bsheer demonstrates how these were manifest on the one hand by a dialectic between the carefully choreographed (if episodic) collecting of historical documents accompanied by the foreclosing of access in order to control the historical narrative developed by the state, and, on the other hand, in the simultaneous selective (re)construction of material pasts in and around the capital of Riyadh, and the wholesale destruction of historic remains in Mecca, the focus of Muslim pilgrimage, and in Medina, where the Prophet Muhammad is buried. As this suggests, one of the many strengths of the book is its insistence on, and elucidation of, a complex constellation of competition, factionalism, and confrontation through which the investments of Al Saud in material history coalesced and mutated through the course of the twentieth century.

The 1990–1991 Gulf War emerges as a pivotal moment in the development of the regime’s attitude to matters archival, a moment that laid some of the foundations for the current investment in heritage, sport, and entertainment. At the same time, the post-war period saw a renegotiation of the relationship between Al Saud and the ulama, the religious scholars who had provided legitimacy to a dynasty whose religious credentials came from a historic relationship to Muhammad ibn ‘Abd al-Wahhab (d. 1792 CE), whose austere version of Sunni Islam was enshrined as the religious foundation of the state. In Bsheer’s reading, in the aftermath of the Gulf War, the archive acted as “a technology through which the regime reworked the relationship between secular and religious power in Saudi Arabia” (95).

Contrary to the popular perception of the KSA as a monolithic authoritarian theocracy with thin historical roots, Archive Wars deftly elucidates the competing agents and agendas, cleavages, fractures, and shifts through which the archives that are its subject came into being. Undermining any sense of absolute cohesion in the state, the analysis spotlights a significant element of contingency in the archival investments through which a specific history of Arabia was reified as part of the material politics operative under the rule of Al Saud. If all archives are shaped by contingency as well as by the violence of exclusions and erasures, Bsheer demonstrates how the deployment of various archival strategies served to obscure the cosmopolitan pasts of centers of commerce, pilgrimage, and learning such as Mecca, as well as foreclosing potential secular futures inimical to the regime. In fact, one of the most disturbing suggestions of the book is that potential opposition to Al Saud was subsumed and sublimated within contestations for representation within constructed narratives about the historical past “rather than economic redistribution or political equality” (96).
A compelling aspect of the book is its conception of the archive in an expanded field—extending to non-textual materials, such as museums and historical sites—as integral to the orchestration of a material politics. Bsheer demonstrates the relevance of both materiality and spatiality, with enclosure (as both metaphor and practice) preceding foreclosure, whether the immuring of documentary materials avidly pursued by the state, or the requisitioning and remodeling of urban space. Put succinctly, “The regular erasure of historical voices, the enclosure of primary source records, and the destruction and reconstruction of spaces became the field for forging a collective Saudi Arabian identity, one that shapes and is constantly shaped by dynamics and various forms of profit and speculation” (229).

Nowhere are the intersections between destruction, reconstruction, monetization, and identity formation more apparent than in the wholesale erasure of the historic fabric of Mecca and Medina. It is often assumed that historical precedents for the interventions of Al Saud in the holy cities in the 2000s can be found in their earlier treatment by the followers of Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahhab. In 1803 and 1804, after they gained control of the holy sites from the Ottomans, the Wahhabis stripped the Prophet’s tomb in the Friday Mosque of Medina of the riches that had accumulated there and prohibited visitation of the tomb. Similarly, after the city came under the control of Al Saud in 1925, many of the tombs in the Baqi’ cemetery in Medina, among them tombs of the Companions of the Prophet Muhammad, were demolished.  

Such acts of iconoclasm reflected the objections of the Wahhabi ulama to material mediation, shrine visitation, and the memorialization of the dead as innovation (Ar. bid’a), deviations from an originary Islam that smacked of idolatry. This religious rationale provided a gloss for the demolitions wrought on the historic fabric of Mecca and Medina over the past two decades. Apart from its inability to explain what might have changed in the 2000s to permit the destruction of most of the historical fabric of the holy cities (including even the dynamiting of their surrounding topography to clear the ground for the construction of shopping malls and hotels), the explanatory narrative of proscriptive piety locates such acts in an eternal present. In doing so, it reinforces the narrative of continuity that has been central to the archival endeavors of Al Saud.  

By contrast, Archive Wars argues the need to interrogate the narrative of Wahabi piety as the driving force behind the erasure of the historical heritage of the holy cities. Such a rational may have struck home with some, but rather than reflecting the agency of the ulama (among whom support for the ravages visited on the city were far from uniform), the rebuilding of Mecca happened at a moment when Al Saud was attempting to marginalize the role of the ulama. In short, Bsheer convincingly demonstrates how the state “capitalized on the rhetoric of iconoclasm” (24) in a move that simultaneously erased the traces of Mecca’s cosmopolitan (multi-ethnic, multi-linguistic and multi-sectarian) past, marginalized the ulama and maximized the economic potential of pilgrimage traffic to the benefit of multiple actors, mostly immediately the Saudi Binladin Group.

It is true that each preceding dynasty that had claimed the title “Custodian of the Two Holy Places” had put its dynastic stamp on the sanctuaries at Mecca and Medina through remodeling and rebuilding—to judge from photographs, the majority of what was visible before the destruction seems to have been a complex mélange of Mamluk and Ottoman styles. But none had done so on this scale or with the monumental hubris entailed in reworking the mountainous topography of the city around the sanctuary, in such a way that the heart of Islam, the Ka’ba, was dwarfed by a series of skyscraper hotels and mall surrounding a monumental

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clock tower built on the site of a destroyed Ottoman fort. As Bsheel notes, this monumentalization and homogenization of the Meccan landscape was accompanied by a campaign of Arabization, which saw the replacement of linguistically heterogeneous street names with Arabic equivalents, underlining the close linkage between simultaneous erasures that operated in different material registers.

Outside of the KSA, reaction to the erasure of what had been a palimpsest constructed by myriad acts of devotion, economic investment, and political patronage extending over nearly a millennium and half was relatively muted. The total extent of what was lost, in historical terms, is unclear since, despite publications on specific aspects of the Meccan sanctuary, it was never subject to a systematic project of documentation before its demolition. But the loss was considerable. In the autumn of 2013, I had a small glimpse of it when I came into possession of cellphone images of wooden beams uncovered during the rebuilding of the haram in Mecca. These had been taken and circulated by some of the contractors working on the project, who had recognized the antiquity of what they were uncovering and were concerned by their ultimate fate, a good example of some of the spontaneous acts of resistance mentioned in Archive Wars. These spectacular carved wooden beams belonged unmistakably to a late antique tradition of carved vine ornament—they were in fact very closely related to those well documented in the Alqsa Mosque in Jerusalem, and so dated certainly no later than eighth century.

The final fate of these rare architectural documents of connections between the early Islamic Hijaz and Palestine remains unknown to me. An optimistic reading might see them as consigned to one of the museums in which selected remains of Islamic heritage were immured, as Bsheel notes (204). As a technology of desanctification born amidst the violence of revolutionary iconoclasm, the museum is frequently deployed to secularize fragments of sacralized pasts that are deemed problematic. As Bsheel notes (206), Vision 2030 envisages the creation of the largest museum for Islamic heritage to date, superseding the impressive scale of those already constructed in the Gulf States. Seen in this light, the destruction of sites associated with the Prophet Muhammad in Medina takes on a particular irony viewed against the 2022 opening in the Aramco-funded King Abdulaziz Center for World Culture in Dharan, or Hijrah, an immersive exhibition retelling the story of the Prophet’s migration from Mecca to Medina in 1 AH/622 CE.

As Bsheel brilliantly shows, the radical homogenization of Mecca and Medina in order to fully capitalize them entailed a dehistoricization that contrasted with the selective (re)construction of architectural heritage, most obviously in the palace identified as that of Muhammad ibn Saud (d. 1765) at Dir‘iyya near Riyadh. At the same time, the KSA began to promote its pre-Islamic heritage: in 2008. For example, the Nabatean site of Hegra (Mada‘in Salih) in the northwest became Saudi Arabia’s first UNESCO World Heritage Site, followed two years later by the inauguration of the Roads of Arabia exhibition, which would showcase the largely pre-Islamic heritage of the region in Europe and the US to spectacular effect.

That monumental pre-Islamic statuary was being circulated in the museums of the West as exemplary of the kingdom’s cultural heritage, even as the historic monuments of Mecca and Medina were falling victim to dynamite and the bulldozer, ostensibly because of religious objections to certain modes of memorialization, is telling. All the more so when read against Bsheel’s analysis of the attempt by Al Saud to distance its relationship to the ulama after the First Gulf War of 1990–1991, and especially after the events of 11 September 2001.

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10 Idries Trevathan, Hijrah: In the Footsteps of the Prophet (Munich: Hirmer, 2022).
It is perhaps worth noting the irony that this selective valorization of, and investment in, the recuperation and preservation of material archives associated with specific pasts reiterates a model long associated with Orientalist projects of historical construction in the region. The reported discarding of earlier material that could not be associated with the house of Al Saud in Dir'iyya (159), echoes for example a common practice of Orientalist archaeology, which frequently discarded the upper, Ottoman and Islamic, levels of archaeological sites in order to access the more “historical” and culturally significant pre-Islamic stratigraphic levels.11

Such analogies bring us to an apparent paradox that runs through *Archive Wars*: a tension arising from close attention to historical particularities within a narrative that insists on the paradigmatic nature of the Saudi experience, its capacity to act as a case study in the violence and erasures attendant on all projects of modern state formation, and the contested relationships between archive, state and power that they engender. The apparent paradox is frankly acknowledged by Bsheer early in the book when she states that her aim “is to de-exceptionalize the state and reveal its complexities and specificities” (28). The rationale appears as a resistance to the official state narrative of exceptionalism, in which the foundation of the KSA is rooted in “divine power and the genius of Abdulaziz ibn Saud” (58).

That (following Talal Asad), the state “has the function of defining the acceptable public face of ‘religion’” (213) is as true of twentieth-century France as it is of the KSA. Moreover, the violence of heritage-making as a mode of producing or erasing history, whether through displacement, enclosure or occlusion, is certainly not specific to the KSA. On the contrary, the relationship between the forging of sanctioned memory and the operation of power is a familiar aspect of modern state formation. To this extent, the demolition of historical cemeteries or monuments in Mecca and Medina might be considered alongside other cases of selective erasure among them the destruction of historical Muslim cemeteries by the Israeli authorities: the demolition of the Yusufiya Cemetery in East Jerusalem in 2021 to construct a park as part of a Biblical heritage trail,12 for example, or the bulldozing of graves in the Mamilla Cemetery in West Jerusalem in 2010–2011 to construct part of a Museum of Tolerance, with little sense of irony.13

The final sentence of *Archive Wars* emphasizes how far from exceptional the Saudi experience is, despite the careful attention to historical specificity in the preceding 231 pages: “At heart, unfolding how violence, struggle, and contestation—and their elision—are constitutive of history and history making reveals archive wars as central to transforming all territories, not just Saudi Arabia, into modern states.” And yet, for all the need to challenge narratives of Saudi exceptionalism, the gravitational pull of the claim by Al Saud to be the protectors of two holy cities whose fabric it has ravaged cannot be underestimated, especially when backed (at least until recently) by unlimited amounts of petrodollars.

The massaging and manipulation of the *haramayn*, the Two Sanctuaries, under the tutelage of Al Saud was, for example, prefigured on a smaller scale by the profound changes wrought on the mosques of the Balkans, not only as part of internecine campaigns of ethnocide, but also by the support extended by the Saudi authorities

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as part of the post-war reconstruction projects in Bosnia in the late 1990s, and in Kosovo later.\textsuperscript{14} This resulted in the deliberate destruction of Ottoman era structures, gravestones, and even the ornamentation of historical mosques, ostensibly because they ran counter to the understanding of Islam promoted by the Saudi funders. This kind of cultural imperialism marked by a capacity to shape material histories was underwritten by a combination of financial and symbolic resources unique to Al Saud.

Whether or not the need to deconstruct a narrative of state formation as an exceptional collaboration between the workings of divine providence and royal benefaction tipped the balance in favor of the paradigmatic rather than the particular, \textit{Archive Wars} should be essential reading for all those concerned with the materialization of history and the seductions that this entails. The book may have benefitted from some more careful editing—the frequent repetition of some key ideas and phrases gives them the feel of mantras—but this is a brilliant, courageous work that deserves the widest possible readership.

I am grateful to Rohit De for chairing this roundtable discussion, writing its introduction, and bringing together this stellar group of historians who are diverse in their thematic and temporal specialization. At first glance, putting an early modern Europeanist (Ananya Chakravorty), a historian of Islamic Art (Finbarr Barry Flood), and a South Asianist (Rohit De) in conversation with an intellectual historian of the Arabian Peninsula (Ahmed Dailami) to discuss a book on late-nineteenth and twentieth-century Saudi Arabia may seem odd. But I could not have hoped for a better outcome. The different registers through which these scholars approach the book, and their careful and engaging readings, foreground some of the book’s interventions beyond Gulf, Arabian Peninsula, and Middle East studies, and especially in the historical discipline, in ways I could not have imagined, let alone articulated. I thank the roundtable participants for engaging so closely and generously, and also Diane Labrosse and Cindy Ewing for patiently shepherding the process.

Several interrelated threads stitch together these otherwise diverse observations on Archive Wars. These include issues of continuity and change; the relationship between religious and secular forces; questions of the particular and the paradigmatic; and how all these relate to and challenge the epistemological and methodological underpinnings of the historical discipline, and, I would add, of the modern state. How to think about change over time—especially about contingency—is a central concern for historians, one that the reviewers take up in slightly different ways. Dailami astutely lays out the historiographical landscape that has dominated Saudi (and to a lesser extent Gulf) Studies and positions Archive Wars against a dominant wave of scholarship that assumed continuity in state formation and governmentality. Indeed, absent access to local archives and, until recently, to the country itself, historians have largely had to rely on government proclamations, state-controlled newspapers, and speculation, what Dailami refers to as the “politics of prediction.” On the ground, the ruling elites in Saudi Arabia have been overhauling the political-economic system at least since the early 1990s. History, as Dailami writes, became the ideological and material grounds on which “to replace the eschatological time of the Wahhabi mission with the worldly time of a monarchical state, its founding battles, kings, and cities and the promises they make about the future.” The archive war that ensued entailed producing a secular state-sanctioned national history that rested on the selective occlusion of certain (especially but not only religious) pasts whose attendant material traces in the built urban environment were replaced with built life that signified Al Saud’s past and infrastructural capabilities.

Dailami’s reading centers the contingent factors that intervened in and altered the already fraught, messy, and violent processes of archive and space making. Indeed, there were many contingencies—local, regional, and global, as Flood points out—that compelled ruling elites to alter, and at times, altogether abandon existing plans. Struggles among political and economic elites and their foot soldiers (both religious and secular), financial backing or the lack thereof, resistance among as well as far beyond members of the archival and urban planning industries, regional wars, and the 11 September 2001 attacks on the United States, are just a few. What remained constant since the 1990s, if not earlier, was then-governor (and now King) Salman’s steadfast support for the archiving project, which he was able to micromanage as governor of Riyadh and as head of the institutions that oversaw the late-twentieth century transformations (Darah, Arriyadh Development Authority). Salman was also able to influence countrywide cultural heritage production through his son, Sultan bin Salman, who worked for the Saudi Commission for Tourism starting in 2000, initially as secretary general and then as president and chairman. Sultan managed the many makeovers the institution experienced until his brother, Mohammed bin Salman, removed him from this post upon becoming crown prince several years ago.

Few in these industries (across positions and ranks) were not aware of, let alone involved in, the execution of Salman’s project. Pressed for time, Salman made sure of it. But the handful of contentious incidents that played out in public, and official responses to them, were enough to publicize these struggles, as I show in the book. The level of anxiety was palpable even among those in the lowest rungs of the libraries, archives,
museums, development authorities, and heritage organizations in which I conducted research over a period of
four years. At the height of the project’s making and the quickly changing attendant norms, these state
employees worried that a document that was in circulation on any given day would get them in trouble in the
future if it were later deemed “sensitive.” Those employees who opposed the centralizing project were equally
troubled by its future implications. They attempted to obstruct or, at the very least, to slow it down by
delaying the processing of “priority” documents and by scanning documents that they knew were destined for
the basement. One way they did so that involved me was by regularly delivering records that I had not
requested—many of which were not even catalogued—because they thought they revealed some “secret” that
the political elites would want to suppress. These contentious incidents are a few of many that I discuss in the
book and that blur the constructed separation between state and society, between state institutions and
opposition forces.

The ultimate failure of Salman’s project to centralize history, the archives, and commemorative space is
evident in the fact that I was able to write a book that lays bare its very making. But this project, like all
archives, is future oriented. Eventually, in years to come, the historical narrative-in-the-making and its
materiality and spatiality will become the only one that researchers in Saudi Arabia can “extract.” This has
serious implications for digitization, the crown jewel of Salman’s archiving project. Chakravorty aptly
describes it: “While too many historians (particularly given our experiences during the pandemic) uncritically
embrace digitization as a panacea for all kinds of archival ills, for many communities these methods are a tool
of violence that divests them of control over their own past, leaving states and professional historians the
primary beneficiaries.” If anything, digitization—messy as the process is—has allowed institutions to vet
many of the records in their possession and either remove from circulation or redact information from those
deemed sensitive. We should thus train our students to be as critical of digital repositories as they are of
physical ones and to explore what happens to physical collections once they are digitized. The Israeli State
Archives (ISA) is a case in point, and some scholars have already written about it. In Saudi Arabia, with
attempts at archival centralization, many of the physical and digital collections at the main state archives were
duly sanitized. Those accessible today are compatible with the state-sanctioned historical narrative. One now
finds records of individuals who only a few years ago were persona non-grata or whose very existence in the
records was occluded, the likes of Mohammed Kairanawi, Abdullah Tariki, and Abdelrahman Munif.
Subsumed into the new history as national heroes, their political and ideological pasts have been purged from
the now cleansed documentary record.

The city as archive is thus especially pertinent for historical research. For decisionmakers in the archiving
industry, space was not only inseparable but also necessary for the success of the archiving project that
Salman spearheaded beginning in the 1990s. Rarely did those who oversaw archival repositories not
meaningfully bring up issues of space and the work being done on sites of commemoration in Riyadh and, to
my greater surprise, “redevelopment” in Mecca. The opposite was also true. Architects, engineers, urbanists,
and project managers who worked on these commemorative sites were, also to my surprise at the time,
guided by the crafting of a narrow top-down historical narrative for what they regularly referred to as a
“young monarchy with no history.” Spatial decisions were often made accordingly. In retrospect, the co-
constitutive nature, everywhere, of archives and the built environment should have been obvious.
Chakravorty poignantly frames this co-constitutiveness through Jacques Derrida’s arkhē, “from which both
our words ‘archive’ and ‘architecture’ are derived.” As Chakravorty notes, bringing the archival and the spatial
frames together challenges both the narrative of Saudi exceptionalism and “many of our disciplinary attitudes

1 Lisa Goldman, “Classified: Politicizing the Nakba in Israel’s State Archives,” +972 Magazine, February 19,
2016; Haggai Matar, “The End of History at Israel’s State Archives?” +972 Magazine, April 12, 2016; “Digitization
of State Archives Could Affect Access To Archival Material,” Middle East Studies Association, Committee on Academic
Freedom Letter, April 19, 2016; Seth Anziska, Special Document File: “The Erasure of the Nakba in Israel’s Archives,”
and ethical assumptions about conservation, archives, and the role of history itself.” I especially appreciate the points Chakravorty makes about the ethical, a discussion that is often lacking in our historical discipline.

In fact, it is precisely the wider applicability of bringing the archival and the spatial frames together and its implications for our discipline that has made the book of interest beyond Middle East Studies, as the reviewers note. This is supported by a point that the reviewers do not dwell on here, and that is the reality that the everyday, bureaucratic practices I am describing in the realm of archives and space making are pillars of modern statecraft and sovereignty everywhere. As I write in the book, this makes Saudi Arabia “a paradigmatic site for understanding twentieth-century state formation as well as the fortunes, the battles, and the consequences of state consolidation and history’s material and discursive infrastructures” (29). These practices are structural to all states. Russia and China are usually the immediate examples that scholars think of. But they are also structural to those states that are hailed as the most modern, secular, and liberal, like France, the United Kingdom, and the United States. Recent scholarship and reporting on these places has described very similar archival struggles, whether in the making of the French National Archives after the French Revolution, in the British effort to foreclose official records of the violence they inflicted on the Mau Mau uprising, or in the purging of thousands of British imperial records and the secret hiding of many more between the 1950s and 1970s. Those interested in the contemporary US context can read about similar struggles over history and archiving that occurred during the Obama and Trump administrations and that uncharacteristically made their way to the public. So, in response to Flood’s interesting observation about the tension between the paradigmatic and the particular, the book shows that while these are universal practices, what varies from place to place is the precise political-economic stakes in the struggle over knowledge production and state form. To the extent that Saudi Arabia differs from other sites, then, it is a matter of scale, especially when considering that the case involves a petrostate that is destroying the sacred sites on which it once legitimated its rule, a contradiction that initially motivated this work. That the demolition took place in the age of internet, and in Mecca, one of the most visited places in the world, likely added to the exceptionalist reporting with which many outside Saudi Arabia are familiar.

One related aspect of the book that connects to the above but is not mentioned here, and that I probably should have further developed in the book, has to do with the nature of power. Bringing together the archival, spatial, and economic underpinnings of the archive wars foregrounds the fragility of Saudi Arabia’s authoritarianism—its existence as a regime of dominance without hegemony. As a matter of fact, my archival and ethnographic research reveal the ongoing confluence of two facts about how Saudi power manifests itself. On the one hand, the Saudi state appears strong, legitimate, and dynamic. It has managed to suppress and/or co-opt domestic popular political mobilizations and to delimit the rules and boundaries of discursive and material practices. On the other hand, the state appears weak, decentralized, and incoherent. It is unable to centralize its archives, let alone its political authority, and struggles to fashion subjects along its evolving national ideals. The Saudi state has also failed to maintain regime legitimacy—which remains fragile—and regularly undermines, if not altogether sabotages, itself. Far from being contradictory, these tensions trouble the ways in which academics and laypersons have come to think about the state itself in coherent and singular fashion. They dispel the myth of a cohesive and unitary state—authoritarian or otherwise—and instead make visible the multiplicity and plurality of state and regime, and the competing forces that shape it. It is only by

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attending to both facts of power at once, the top down and the bottom up, and the material practices associated with them, that we can understand the machinations of power.5 Ultimately, I hope the book opens up new research questions about Saudi Arabia and the Middle East, as Dailami suggests, but also about the politics of history, power, and the state more broadly.