

Diriyah: From Deserted Settlement to Global Destination

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Abstract: *The city of Diriyah is one that boasts a rich history and culture, and which has evolved over time to become a destination for historians, tourists, and investors. This paper reveals Diriyah's background and the challenges that faced to become such a force reveals its transition from being abandoned and desolate to a center for royalty, the culture, and military. In particular, King Abdulaziz and his battle to recapture Riyadh within the context of strong opposing forces lends credence to the determination of the Saudis to regain and retain control of this region and to permit it to attain its former glory. Also, the remnants of its wall and battles, including a cannonball which was a relic of battles between the Saudis and the Ottomans from early history through the 1900s contributed to the growth of the area's importance. As a result, King Salman and his Crown Prince Muhammad sought to revive Diriyah as an eyewitness to the sacrifices and glories of the first Saudi state's founders and as a tourism and economic investment for Vision 2030.*

Keywords: Diriyah, battles remnants, Al-Turaif, King Salman, Prince Mohammed, the DGDA, tourism

The remains of an impressive city, constructed centuries ago using mud-brick materials, have been painstakingly restored and can be found just west of Riyadh's modern capital, Kingdom Tower, just 10 kilometers away. That impressive city is At-Turaif, an archaeological site that houses a wealth of historical artifacts, including royal residences, mosques, houses, and fortifications. These structures were erected during the 18th century in the capital city of the First Saudi State. At-Turaif is widely regarded as the birthplace of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, and it has been recognized as a UNESCO World Heritage Site since 2010. The site is of immense historical significance, as it played a pivotal role in the early chapters of the Saudi Arabian story. At present, At-Turaif is a central attraction in Diriyah, one of the largest gigaprojects in Saudi Arabia. Diriyah was an oasis settlement located along the Wadi Hanifah and founded in the 15th century by the ancestors of present-day Saudi Arabians.

Diriyah, which is also called (Al-Awja), is a city steeped in history. Located in the heart of Saudi Arabia, this ancient city has served as the capital of the first Saudi state, the birthplace of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, and a center of Islamic scholarship and culture for centuries. Its strategic location on the banks of the Wadi Hanifa made it a natural fortress as well as a hub of trade, attracting merchants and travelers from all corners of the Arabian Peninsula. Despite being ravaged by wars and natural disasters over the centuries, Diriyah has managed to preserve its rich cultural heritage, and today, it stands as a testament to the enduring legacy of the Saudi people. What was once a small, relatively isolated settlement stands today as a proud and thriving city that attracts millions of visitors annually. To understand Diriyah's development is to understand the history of today's Saudi Arabia. What follows is an exploration of the history of Diriyah, from its early days as a trading center to its status as the cultural heart of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia.

An Ancient City Abandoned

During a regularly scheduled maintenance project on one of the historic buildings in Al-Turaif, workers discovered a

cannonball. The discovery was made while the workers were repairing the foundation, and upon finding the object, one of the workmen immediately contacted the in-house archaeologist for further investigation. The cannonball was discovered at the rear of Salwa Palace, and archaeologists surmised that in order for it to have reached that location, it likely passed through or over multiple buildings (UNESCO, n.d., p. 80). The discovered artifact was the result of an explosion from two centuries ago—when an Ottoman soldier fired a cannonball.

It was just one of many weapons deployed during a siege on Al-Turaif, which was under attack by a vast Ottoman army. The Ottomans sought to suppress not only Al-Turaif but also the notion of an independently existing Arab state. Despite being significantly outnumbered by the Ottomans deployed by Ibrahim Pasha, the roughly 5,000 defenders of Al-Turaif persisted for nearly half a year before surrendering (Wynbrandt, 2004, pp. 141-142). Many of the young men gave their lives during the siege, while others were tortured and killed or exiled, all under the orders of the Ottoman empire's viceroy of Sudan and Egypt. During the brutal conflict, Ibrahim Pasha's army traded the severed body parts of their victims for a bloody reward in Cairo. The discovery of the cannonball at Al-Turaif, therefore, functions as a vivid reminder that the initial years of Saudi Arabia's history were composed of the blood of valiant individuals.

The ruined towers and damaged walls of Al-Turaif (Figure 1), which were deserted in 1818 but have been carefully rehabilitated and maintained during the last two decades, are tributes to the sacrifices made by previous Saudis and to the perseverance of a population striving to create their own path. With the assistance of Arab writers, we can be certain that this journey commenced in 1446, paving the way for the establishment of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia almost five centuries later. The initial strides towards the founding of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia were led by Manaa' Al-Muraide, a member of the Marada clan (Nugali & Gornall, 2022, para. 18). The clan was part of the Al-Duru' tribe which had established a settlement near Qatif on the Gulf before

returning to their homeland in the 15th century. They named their new settlement Diriyah in honor of their tribal name (Al-Duru') and carried it with them when they migrated near what is present-day Riyadh at the invitation of Ibn Dir, the ruler of Hajr in Al-Yamamah (Korea-Saudi Friendship Society, 2022, para. 11).

Ibn Dir wanted to settle unused fertile land he owned with friendly people who could put it to productive use. And Al-Muraide and his clan welcomed the invitation. In 1446 they started their migration from old Diriyah on the eastern coast to where they would come to establish the new Diriyah, at the heart of the Arabian Peninsula. Ibn Dir and Al-Muraide saw an opportunity to restore the trading and pilgrimage routes of their ancestors and agreed to settle in the region (Vassiliev, 2000, ch. 3). They transformed the land into a strategically located and productive oasis. Although it would take several centuries before the significance of this settlement became obvious, these events were formative to the history of the Arabian Peninsula. Al-Muraide's arrival at the new Diriyah marked the origins of what was later to become the state of Saudi Arabia.

The clan's Al-Muqrin and Al-Watban branches engaged in a power struggle over the settlement for several years until Saud ibn Mohammed rose to power around the 1720s. Thus was born the House of Saud. Historians typically date the founding of the first Saudi State to 1727, when Saud's son came to rule over Diriyah. That first leader and Imam – Mohammed ibn Saud – is the ancestor of King Salman ibn Abdulaziz, the present-day monarch of Saudi Arabia. And Mohammed ibn Saud's primary objective upon coming to power was to ensure the stability of the Diriyah emirate through economic prosperity (Al-Rasheed, 2010, pp. 73-75). To this end, he fostered the area's pilgrimage and commercial routes, in the process establishing considerable autonomy from other emirates in the region. Following his demise in 1765, Imam Abdulaziz took over and strove to advance his predecessor's vision. During his reign, the royal district of Al-Turaif was established and Salwa Palace was constructed. (The latter continues to be among the most remarkable structures that tourists flock to at the UNESCO World Heritage site.) Succeeding Abdulaziz was Saud, who was widely referred to as Saud the Great because of the dramatic expansion of the Saudi state during his reign. The state expanded from Sanaa in the south to the Euphrates in the north, and west to east from the Red Sea to the Arabian Gulf.

The success of the Saudi state in the early 19th century challenged the power of the Ottoman Empire, which had claimed the title of Caliphate of Islam through force since the early 16th century. In 1804, Yanbu and Madinah became a part of the Saudi state, and several years later, Meccah was also absorbed after the last Ottoman forces were routed. With these developments, the Saudis controlled the Two Holy Cities, which had previously buttressed the Ottoman empire's claim that they were the defenders of Islam. Determined to crush the threat, the Ottomans responded with the aforementioned campaign led by Ibrahim Pasha—a venture that ultimately resulted in Diriyah's defeat.

Diriyah, which had been the capital of the Saudi state, was destroyed. But the Saudis persevered and reversed their

fortunes under Imam Turki bin Abdullah Al-Saud, who managed to expel the Ottomans once and for all in 1824. Since Diriyah and Al-Turaif were badly damaged, he opted to base the Second Saudi State in the nearby town of Riyadh. However, the struggle for independence was far from over. Following his assassination in 1834, and after a period of civil unrest, his son Faisal became Imam and attempted to consolidate the newly revived state despite a period of exile imposed by a resurgent Ottoman threat. After he passed away in 1865, the state once again suffered from internal strife until Ibn Rasheed seized Riyadh in 1891. As the Second Saudi State ended, the Al-Sauds and their followers decamped to Kuwait. At this time, a hero arose in the form of 16-year-old Abdulaziz ibn Abdul Rahman Al-Saud, later to be known as Ibn Saud and the founder of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia.

Prince Abdulaziz is remembered by all Saudis for leading a small group of warriors to recapture Riyadh in 1902 when they stormed the Masmak Fortress located 12 miles southeast of Al-Turaif. This heroic mission revived the House of Saud to its previous glory and made Prince Abdulaziz famous around the world, in no small part because of a report sent to London by Gertrude Bell, a British diplomat serving in Iraq during World War I. She spoke Arabic fluently and first had contact with the young prince in late 1916. Upon meeting him, she commented on his impressive stature, describing him as "a man of splendid physique" and "accustomed to command" (McLoughlin, 1993, p. 51). She was also impressed by his charismatic leadership and understanding of statecraft, both of which helped him to recapture Riyadh by vanquishing Hashemite and Ottoman forces. By 1924, Prince Abdulaziz and his followers have once again brought Mecca under Saudi control. Less than a decade later, in 1932, he declared the founding of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia with the uniting of Hejaz and Najd. This set the stage for the rebirth of Diriyah in the 1970s just miles outside of the quickly expanding capital of Riyadh. More than a century after it had been deserted in 1818, a descendant of King Abdulaziz would remind all Saudis of the monumentally important history of the First Saudi State's capital.

A Capital Reborn

As history reveals, Diriyah has always been an important site in the history of Saudi Arabia, having served as the capital of the first Saudi state in the 18th century. However, it gained renewed attention from King Salman Al-Azz and Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman in recent years due to their efforts to promote tourism and preserve the country's cultural heritage under the Vision 2030 plan. In 2016, Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman announced plans to develop Diriyah into a cultural and tourist destination as part of the Vision 2030 plan. He recognized the potential of Diriyah to showcase the rich history and cultural heritage of Saudi Arabia to the world, and to diversify the country's economy through tourism.

Since then, King Salman bin Abdulaziz and Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman have been actively involved in the development of Diriyah. They have overseen the establishment of the Diriyah Gate Development Authority (DGDA), which is responsible for the development and

preservation of Diriyah and have provided the necessary funding and support to make the project a reality. The royal family's personal connection to Diriyah may also have played a role in their interest in the city. King Salman bin Abdulaziz is a descendant of the Saudi royal family that founded the first Saudi state, and Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman has expressed a deep appreciation for the country's history and cultural heritage. Thus, Diriyah's significance in Saudi Arabian history, coupled with its potential as a cultural and tourist destination, has made it a priority for the Saudi royal family under the Vision 2030 plan. Already shops and museums have opened, with many more attractions planned for the future (Figures 2&3).

Even the DGDA's logo shows the respect and attention to detail with which the Saudi royal family has treated this reconstruction and preservation effort. The DGDA's logo (Figure 4) is a stylized representation of the historic Al-Turaif district in Diriyah. The logo symbolizes the most prominent historic palaces within the Al-Turaif district, which is Salwa Palace. In addition, the two swords symbolize strength and sacrifice, while the palm tree symbolizes vitality, growth and prosperity. This logo represents the country's national identity and pride. It also reflects the DGDA's mission to promote cultural heritage, innovation, and sustainable development, while also paying homage to Diriyah's rich history and traditions.

The development of Diriyah is in line with Saudi Arabia's Vision 2030 plan to improve its economy and showcase its culture before an international audience. The development will include various amenities, such as shops, luxury resorts, restaurants, art galleries, and recreational sites—in short, the sorts of things that the Saudi government under King Salman bin Abdulaziz and Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman knows will appeal to Western tourists (Bay et al., 2022, p. 10718). And although Diriyah will have modern amenities, it will also incorporate traditional architectural styles and materials, similar to those found in the historic Al-Turaif district. What sets Diriyah apart is its commitment to preserving and showcasing the cultural and social heritage of Saudi Arabia, with a particular focus on the historical Al-Turaif district at the heart of the development. Just last year, the Saudi government even proclaimed February 22 to be an annual Founding Day holiday, further marking the importance of Diriyah.

The Saudi royal family's interest in promoting and developing Diriyah also has practical political and economic

dimensions. For one, the development of Diriyah as a cultural and tourist destination supports the Vision 2030 plan, which aims to diversify Saudi Arabia's economy and reduce its dependence on oil revenue. By attracting foreign investment and increasing tourism, the DGDA is helping to create new sources of revenue for the country, which is in line with the Saudi royal family's interest in creating a sustainable economic base for Saudi Arabia in a world transitioning away from fossil fuels (Kerr, 2020). The DGDA and Vision 2030 plan also enhances Saudi Arabia's image as a culturally rich and diverse nation. Such an image helps to counter negative perceptions of the country in the international community. Additionally, Diriyah's historical significance as the birthplace of the first Saudi state makes it a strategic site for the royal family. By reviving Diriyah, the royal family can present themselves as the defenders of Saudi history and Saudi culture. The fact that Diriyah is centrally located is also a factor. The region is home to many of the country's most important institutions, such as the capital city Riyadh and the King Abdulaziz City for Science and Technology. In short, it is a hub for trade and commerce in the region, just as it was in centuries past.

Diriyah has become a major tourist destination, attracting visitors from around the world to experience its rich history, folklore, culture, and architecture. It has also hosted major international events, such as the Diriyah E-Prix, a Formula E electric car race, Diriyah Equestrian Festival, the competition historic Diriyah fight (boxing) and the Diriyah Season, a cultural and entertainment festival.

What was the abandoned birthplace of the first Saudi state has now become a crowning achievement in the Saudi government's push to cultivate stronger ties with the world community while preserving Saudi Arabia's rich history and cultural traditions? Diriyah's history is a testament to the resilience, courage, and determination of the Saudi people. From its humble beginnings as a small oasis settlement to its role as the birthplace of the first Saudi state, Diriyah has played a pivotal role in shaping the country's history and identity. And all indications are that it will continue to do so for decades to come.

This achievement is considered one of the most wonderful achievements of King Salman and his Crown Prince, Mohammed bin Salman, which is a source of pride and honor for every Saudi citizen.

Appendix



Figure 1: The ruins of At-Turaif in Diriyah. Source: Google Images.



Figure 2: Diriyah, as envisioned by Project 2030. Source: Diriyah Gate Development Authority.



Figure 3: Diriyah, as envisioned by Project 2030. Source: Google Images.



Figure 4 Logo of the Diriyah Gate Development Authority. Source: Google Images

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