

Saudi Plans to Destroy Fort Cause Outrage in Turkey

Policy Toward Monuments Highlights Kingdom's Stance on Islam

Castle to Make Way for Trade Center, Hotel and Residences for Muslim Pilgrims

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JIDDA, Saudi Arabia — A row between Muslim nations Turkey and Saudi Arabia over Saudi plans to destroy an 18th century Ottoman castle in the holy city of Mecca is refocusing attention on the kingdom's puritan interpretation of Islam.

Saudi authorities reportedly intend to demolish the Al Ajyad Castle, built in 1780 by Ottoman rulers, to allow for the construction of a trade center, hotel and residential towers to accommodate Muslim pilgrims. Other culturally sensitive buildings have already been destroyed in Saudi holy cities.

Saudi analysts and architects say the dismantling of the 23,000-square-meter Al Ajyad fortress, which overlooks Mecca's Grand Mosque, is part of a policy to destroy monuments from the period of early Islam to prevent them from becoming places of pilgrimage. Saudi government officials couldn't be reached for comment, but an unnamed foreign ministry official defended tearing down the castle in a domestic newspaper.

The move sparked outrage in Turkey, which, led by Mustafa Kemal Ataturk, arose in its modern form in 1923 from the ashes of the Ottoman Empire. Turkish Culture Minister Istemihan Talay lodged a complaint with the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, the agency responsible for the preservation of cultural relics. In the complaint, Mr. Talay compared the plan to tear down the castle with the Taliban's destruction last year of two giant historic statues of Buddha in Afghanistan. The Al Ajyad fortress isn't on Unesco's World Heritage List of protected monuments.

"This is a crime against humanity, and Unesco should expose this disgraceful and ugly destruction and cultural massacre," Mr. Talay said.

Mr. Talay said Turkey was demanding that Saudi Arabia reconstruct the castle, believed to have been partly destroyed last week. He said the demolition activity violated a pledge given by Saudi Arabia last year not to raze the monument.

"Cultural heritage in every country is public property irrespective of what its origin is or the period in which it was built," he said. "Cultural heritage has to be protected." The Arabic-language Saudi newspaper Okaz, which often reflects government views, defended Wednesday the dismantling of the castle, arguing that it wasn't a vital Islamic monument. The paper said the castle could be rebuilt and incorporated into the hotel development.

Okaz quoted an unidentified foreign

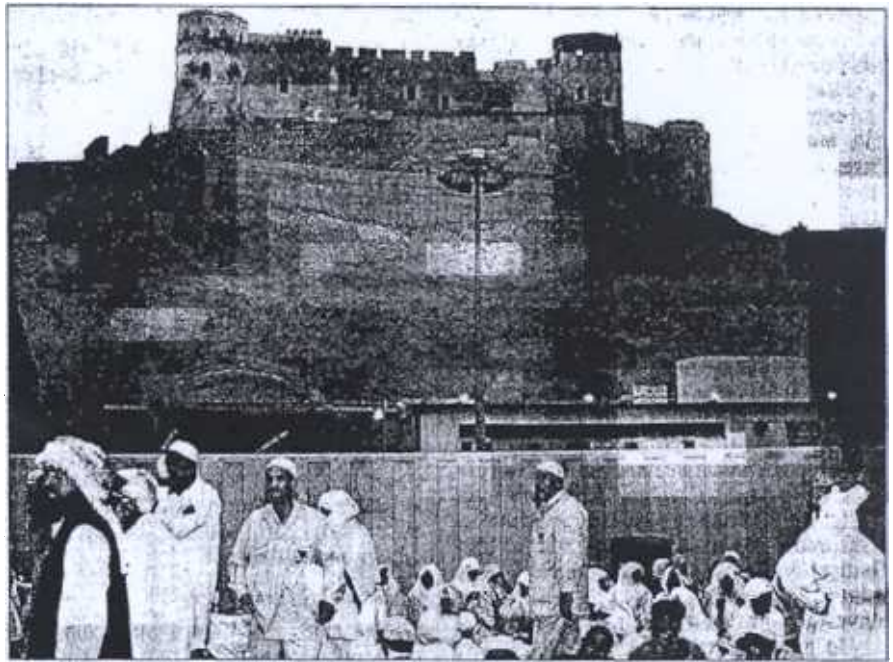


Photo: dpa

This file picture shows Muslim pilgrims sitting under an Ottoman fortress overlooking the Grand Mosque in Mecca. Saudi authorities plan to demolish the fortress, to build residential towers and a five-star hotel, provoking anger in Turkey.

ministry official as saying that the castle wasn't a holy site and that the Saudi government could tear it down if it wished.

Reflecting a widely held Saudi view of Turkey, Okaz stated in its article that "Turkey is the last country to talk about preserving Islamic or human heritage because Turkey did not hesitate to erase its history (and) . . . became a country with no identity." Okaz was referring to the replacement of Islam with a secular system by Ataturk.

People close to the \$120 million (€134.4 million) project said the dismantling of the castle had been halted and that the government was looking at integrating the monument into the project. The people said the government is revisiting the project, awarded to Saudi Oger Ltd. and the Bin Ladin Group, the winner of many construction contacts involving the holy sites in Saudi Arabia, following protests from residents of Mecca.

The castle "means a lot to us. We were used to seeing it standing there for a long time. It reminds us of our history," the Jidda-based Arab News quoted a resident of Mecca, which is off-limits to non-Muslims, as saying.

The Saudi government has embarked on plans to demolish other sites of early Islam. Four of seven early-period mosques in Med-

ina, which also is off-limits to non-Muslims, are believed to have already been demolished.

But local residents said they were seeing signs that the government may be bowing to pressure not to continue with the project. "There are no signs of bulldozers near the sites anymore. There appears to have been some kind of pressure," said a Medina resident reached by telephone, who asked not to be identified.

Analysts and architects said Saudi authorities in recent years had covered Bir al Khatem, a well where the Prophet Muhammad is said to have dropped a ring, with cement, and turned Uhud, the site of a major battle in Islamic history, which is near Medina, into a parking lot.

Saudi historians said the destruction of monuments from the period of early Islam had begun shortly before the establishment of the kingdom in 1932 with the 1928 demolition of the house of Khadija, the wife of the Prophet Mohammed, but had gathered pace in recent years. They said the campaign threatened to drive a wedge between Saudi Arabia and the Islamic world.

"The whole Islamic world is on one side and the hard-line Saudi Wahabis are on the other side," said one historian referring to the dominant Muslim sect in Saudi Arabia.