Politics of Place in the Middle East and World Heritage Status for Jerusalem

Elvan Cobb

A New York Times article in 2010 chronicled a conundrum in the preservation of a historic synagogue in Cairo. The Secretary General of the Supreme Council of Antiquities in Egypt at that time, Dr. Zahi Hawass, commented on the building’s restoration: “This is an Egyptian monument; if you do not restore a part of your history you lose everything ... I love the Jews, they are our cousins! But the Israelis, what they are doing against the Palestinians is insane. I will do everything to restore and preserve the synagogue, but celebration, I cannot accept.”

Hawass oversaw this restoration since the project was planned, executed and funded by the Egyptian government. Since the nineteenth century, the people of the Middle East have been engaged in an intense process of identity negotiation centering around the concept of ‘nationhood’, combining the social and political. While this process invokes questions of national solidarity, religion, kinship, economics, and state politics, it also contains negotiations within the built environment. By continuing to host the remnants of a diverse past, the cities of the Middle East present challenges to the creation of unitary national narratives that center around a single religion and ethnicity.

Divergent nation-states and nationalism are relatively new phenomena across the Middle East, given the prior constrictive force of the Ottoman Empire. During the imperial period, populations were treated as ‘separate and unequal’, but an equilibrium was achieved that enabled the co-existence of religiously and ethnically diverse groups. People of the book, that is, people of the Jewish and Christian faiths, were allowed limited religious rights. The fragmentation of the Empire starting in the nineteenth century led to a heterogeneous group of nation-states, each determined to define their own unique identity in order to differentiate themselves both from their immediate Ottoman past and from each other. Part of this process involved the crystallization of populations through population exchanges based on criteria of constructed identity such as religion and ethnicity.

Some peoples voluntarily segregated themselves, but most were forcibly displaced. In the midst of these momentous changes, however, remained the diverse architectural heritage of a heterogeneous past. As a result, these cities and buildings were marshaled by competing interests in identity creation especially by the nation-states that now controlled these environments.

Over the last century, a variety of actors have attempted to influence the decisions made about

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3 Suraiya Faroqhi, Approaching Ottoman History: An Introduction to the Sources (Cambridge University Press, 1999), 14.
the fate of historic architecture in the Middle East. Nation-states have chosen to preserve, destroy, neglect, or repurpose places within their borders, while being constrained by politics and public opinion. However, not all influences are generated internally, and governmental and non-governmental international bodies are involved in the preservation of heritage. World Heritage is a United Nations convention, administered by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) that tries to identify and preserve heritage important to all humanity, focusing on individual monuments and urban as well as natural areas. World Heritage deems select places of cultural and natural heritage as ‘universally’ important, and thus worthy of global attention and protection, based on a value system of historical awareness that developed in Europe over the last few centuries. However, World Heritage has no jurisdiction within sovereign nations and thus it engages with the national hosts of the heritage through diplomacy in order to further its mission. Within this system, each nation nominates its own sites for World Heritage status. In this way, nations maintain control over choosing eligible sites and they assure their long-term care. In exchange, the World Heritage Committee has some say in how these sites are preserved. World Heritage also provides a branding mechanism that certifies the significance of selected heritage, regardless of the ideological motives of its selection. While World Heritage has been successful in focusing global attention on certain places, and has garnered both protection and economic benefit, its power to shape further dialogue is limited after a successful nomination. However, during the nomination stage, World Heritage can exert greater influence as governments tend to be eager to have their nominations accepted.

The World Heritage List is usually comprised of individual monuments as cultural properties, but entire urban areas can also be targeted for inclusion. This essay investigates the deployment, manipulation, and effects of World Heritage on urban environments. While individual monuments belonging to ‘others’ can easily be excluded from World Heritage nomination by a particular nation-state, the nomination of an entire urban area necessarily includes places that had witnessed the diverse life of the Middle East. Despite earlier scholarship that suggested limited interaction between different groups within cities in Islamicate societies, recent scholarship emphasizes a more complex and integrated mode of interaction between different confessional groups. Therefore, the exclusion of such narratives from World Heritage nominations brings the issue of erasure to the forefront.

The observations of Dr. Hawass regarding the preservation of the synagogue in Cairo highlight the interplay between the built environment and identity politics in today’s Middle East. Under the Ottoman policies of co-existence, the religious expressions of different confessional groups left a physical legacy in the major cities in the region, and especially in Jerusalem. Sacred places in this city became entangled in the competing national narratives of the twentieth century. At the same time, a number of international actors attempted to influence the fate of the city’s historic built environment, beginning with the British and continuing today with the World Heritage Convention of the United Nations. The methods employed by these different agents are traced here through a

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8 The concept of ‘Islamicate’ societies was developed by Marshall Hodgson to identify social phenomena arising in predominantly Muslim lands that were not due to the direct influence of Islam itself. See Marshall G.S. Hodgson, The Venture of Islam 1 (Chicago, IL: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1974). Consider, however, the problematicatization of this term, such as that offered by Kathryn Babayan and Afsaneh Najmabadi, Islamicate Sexualities: Translations across Temporal Geographies of Desire (Cambridge, MA: Center for Middle Eastern Studies of Harvard University, 2008), ix.