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## New Saudi generation reestablishes Al-Balad to keep the past alive

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Sinem Cengiz

In mid-August, despite the hot and humid weather of Saudi Arabia's Red Sea port city of Jeddah, taking an hour-long walk in Al Balad, the oldest neighborhood located at the heart of the city and a [UNESCO World Heritage Site](#) since 2014, feels like a walk through centuries of rich history. It is like an open-air living museum. "You can consider this place as Doha's Souq al-Waqif or Kuwait city's Souq Al-Mubarakiya; however, Al-Balad in Jeddah possesses a captivating history that sets it apart", explained a local Jeddawi who, driven by fond childhood memories of Al-Balad, served as my guide during the walk.

In Arabic, Jeddah's motto is "Jeddah Ghair," translating to "Jeddah is different". There is a common belief that cities situated by the sea tend to be more welcoming and open to strangers. Jeddah is an example of such coastal cities, boasting its distinct ambiance that sets it apart from others. The name "Jeddah" itself carries multiple meanings, each linked to different stories. The most prevalent explanation is that "Jeddah," or "Jadda" (جدة), meaning "grandmother" in Arabic, is derived from the tomb of Eve – considered the grandmother of humanity – which is claimed to be

located in Jeddah. Another interpretation is that "Joddah" signifies "seaside" in Arabic, while yet another meaning is the "bride" of the Red Sea.

For centuries, Al-Balad, the historic old town, served as the primary entry point by sea for pilgrims en route to their annual Hajj pilgrimage to the holy city of Mecca, located 40 miles away, as well as a vital trade route for goods. Within the town, the old pilgrimage road, also known as Al-Dahab Street, retains its distinctive characteristics, providing a glimpse into what the pilgrimage journey was like centuries ago. With its narrow streets, stone buildings with wooden windows and plenty of small shops, life starts at Al-Balad after the sun sets.

Pointing towards Bait Naseef, also known as 'the house with the tree,' my Jeddawi guide highlighted, "This is one of the most significant architectural sites in Al-Balad." Built in 1881, this building served as the residence of King Abdulaziz, the founder of Saudi Arabia, during his three-year stay in Jeddah where he entered in December 1925. The building, one of the best-preserved structures in the town, underwent renovation and has been serving as a museum since 2009, retaining its Ottoman-style architecture.

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<sup>1</sup> All articles published under "Gulf Insights" series have been discussed internally but they reflect the opinion and views of the authors, and do not reflect the views of the Center, the College of Arts and Sciences or Qatar University, including the terms and terminology used in this publication.

### *Importance of Heritage in Vision 2030*

Historically, many heritage cities around the world are confronted with significant risks that could jeopardize their existence for future generations. Recognizing these challenges, Saudi Arabia has taken a proactive approach to safeguard these cities and preserve their rich heritage. As a nation undergoing a profound transformation, Saudi Arabia has embraced a fresh perspective on heritage that fosters a deeper appreciation for preserving and strengthening its cultural identity and national pride. Heritage is seen as an essential component of a nation's identity, one that must be passed down to succeeding generations.

In 2018, the Ministry of Culture and Information [was divided](#) into two separate ministries and the new Ministry of Culture was restructured. In early 2020, the Ministry of Culture [established](#) 11 independent commissions, one of them was the Heritage Commission.

The following year, Saudi Arabia's Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman (MbS) [unveiled](#) the "Revitalize Historic Jeddah" project as part of a larger initiative to transform the area into a hub for business, cultural endeavors, and a destination for entrepreneurs. A statement by the state-run Saudi Press Agency emphasized the Crown Prince's commitment to preserving historical sites, aligning with Vision 2030, and highlighting the Arab and Islamic heritage of the Kingdom. However,

before 2021, there were ongoing efforts of the municipality to restore some parts of the neighborhood.

The UNESCO-protected Al-Balad, often referred to as the Gateway to Mecca, is undergoing extensive restoration, and is reestablishing itself as a cultural hub. The Saudi leadership, in tandem with Vision 2030, is encouraging the country's younger generation to safeguard Al-Balad's rich heritage for future generations. The leadership is trying to transform the town from a place that has been left to fall apart into touristic cultural spot. In 2021, Al-Balad [hosted](#) the Red Sea International Film Festival, a significant move in terms of national branding. These efforts aim not only to boost tourism but also to revive the history and culture.

### *Motives behind raising youth awareness*

Saudi Arabia is embarking on a transformative journey to realize the goals of Vision 2030, a comprehensive government initiative aimed at reshaping the country. This transformation hinges on the active involvement of the nation's youth, who constitute [63 percent of the Kingdom's population](#). Consequently, Crown Prince MbS' approach emphasizes empowering young people, a pivotal driver in Saudi Arabia's Vision 2030. By encouraging youth participation in the restoration endeavors of Al-Balad, the Saudi leadership reinforces collective

awareness of Saudi Arabia's illustrious cultural heritage, guided by the principle that the path to a better future lies in understanding and embracing one's past.

In July 2023, UNESCO and the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia [launched](#) five projects to safeguard cultural heritage. In September 2023, the 45th session of UNESCO's World Heritage Committee commenced in Saudi Arabia. The inaugural session, called the [Young Professionals Forum](#) under the theme of "Looking Ahead: The Next 50 Years of Protecting Natural and Cultural Heritage, sought to empower the youth in the conservation of world heritage by enhancing their skills and nurturing their talents.

Investing in heritage preservation has led to the creation of job opportunities and the inclusion of hundreds of cultural professions. This aimed to nurture talented and creative youth to contribute to cultural identity in a professional way.

The historic buildings around Bait Naseef are set to be transformed into boutique hotels and new restaurants for visitors. The management of these projects is entrusted to Saudi youth. One prominent figure is Ahmad Angawi, a young Saudi artist whose father, Sami Angawi, is a renowned architect and social activist. Ahmad, who is the grandson of a Mutawwif (a knowledgeable guide for Hajj pilgrims), oversees these projects alongside other young Saudi artists and architects. The

Angawis, now in their third generation, share a common belief in the role of history and tradition in shaping the architecture and transformation of historic cities. I highly recommend visiting Angawis' distinctive house in Jeddah, built and designed in the traditional Hejazi style, similar to the houses in Al-Balad, which boasts over 650 historical buildings dating back 200 to 300 years.

Not even a decade ago, a trip to experience Saudi Arabia's historic sites and culture would have been unthinkable for many. However, as the kingdom opens its doors to international visitors, it is reviving its history with the hands of the youth through Vision 2030, which aims to nurture the country's cultural scene.

#### **About the author**

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#### **About the Gulf Insights series:**

The "Gulf Insights" series is published by the Gulf Studies Center on a weekly base with the aim to promote informed debate with academic depth. The Gulf Insights are commentaries on pressing regional issues written by the GSC/GSP faculty, staff PhD and MA students, as well as guest scholars, and they can be between 1,200 to 1,500 words.

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