

Saasa bin Sohan Shrine in Bahrain

VANDALISM AND SYSTEMATIC NEGLECT

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INTRODUCTION

The written history of Saasa Bin Sohan Shrine risk being lost or distorted through the changing dates of official dates. On the other hand, historical constants, which show the history, originality and identity of a people, can be destroyed only through vandalism, marginalisation and sabotage. Cultural heritage often faces destructive, systematic political policies by others to erase their past, and by extension, their right to exist in the present. Belief in the cultural and religious rights of peoples puts the issue of protecting cultural heritage at the centre of international concerns. The first obligation of States should be to make the necessary legal, technical, administrative and financial measures to preserve the heritage of its people, so that they can be passed on to future generations.

In Bahrain, there is a history of public disregard for Saasa bin Sohan Shrine, defined by continuous vandalism, encroachment, and willful neglect of the concerns by the Shi'a community by official authorities. The shrine is attributed to the great companion Sasa'a bin Sohan Al-Abdi, one of the companions of Imam Ali bin Abi Talib, who died in the year 70 AH. Located in the village of Askar, south of Manama, it is considered the oldest Islamic monument in Bahrain and the most important historical mosque that is more than one thousand and three hundred years old¹. The continuous encroachment and destruction of one of the oldest Bahraini Shi'a shrines, in its historical, cultural and religious dimensions, is an act of sectarian and cultural erasure.

1 <https://www.bbc.com/arabic/trending-65636840>

LEGAL FRAMEWORK

At the General Conference of the United Nations for Education, Science and Culture, held in Paris at its seventeenth session in 1972, the international community adopted the Convention for the Protection of the World Cultural and Natural Heritage, which stipulated in its Articles Four and Five the obligation of State Parties to designate heritage, protect it, and take legal, administrative and technical measures to preserve it, repair it, and pass it on to future generations². This undertaking obliges the state not to deliberately take any action that would harm, directly or indirectly, the cultural heritage, regardless of whether it belongs to any people.

The Kingdom of Bahrain is a party to the Convention for the Protection of the World Cultural and Natural Heritage under Decree No. 3 of 1991, which obliges it to adopt these measures and issue laws in line with its articles. Article 6 of the Constitution of Bahrain explicitly stipulates the Kingdom's pledge to preserve its Arab and Islamic heritage, contribute to the progress of human civilisation, work to strengthen ties between Islamic countries, and achieve the hopes of the Arab nation for unity and progress³.

² <https://whc.unesco.org/archive/convention-arb.pdf>

³ <https://faolex.fao.org/docs/pdf/bah117079Ar.pdf>

Religious shrines and sacred mosques, which bear a historical and cultural dimension, are an essential part of the heritage that the Kingdom of Bahrain has recognised for its importance in developing civilisation and strengthening hopes for unity, as well as an essential component of religious freedom adopted by the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights. Article 18 safeguards the right of the individual to profess, choose and manifest their religion in worship, and specifically to practice and perform rituals without any restrictions. Restrictions imposed on a person's right to manifest their religion or belief do not come in the right context if not justified by positive and necessary reasons.

Moreover, the Bahraini constitution, in its twenty-second article, acknowledges that freedom of conscience is absolute, and the state guarantees the sanctity of places of worship, and the freedom to perform religious rites, processions, and religious meetings in accordance with the customs observed in the country.

VIOLATIONS AGAINST SAASA BIN SOHAN SHINE

The reality of Bahrain's policies runs contrary to its existing agreements, recommendations, and decisions related to cultural property, as well as religious freedom that Bahrain has agreed to and recognised in its constitution and laws, on the other hand. The continuous encroachment on the the shrine of Saasa bin Sohan, and neglect from official authorities concerning continuous acts of vandalism against it, is considered a violation of the religious freedoms that the Jaafari sect has been deprived of. Moreover, the closure of this shrine prevents the right of Shi'a believers to manifest their religion, practice and perform religious rites.

Concerns over Sasaa bin Sohan Shrine date back to 2003, when the shrine was first exposed to deliberate vandalism. Complaints were neglected by official authorities⁴. The second attack on the mosque happened in the year 2007. The

damage included, according to the Director of the Jaafari Endowments, Awn Al-Khunaizi, uprooted the doors, structural damage from stones thrown, and five broken windows on the northern side of the shrine.


Following the 2011 protests, and their suppression there was a wave of attacks that insulted religious sanctities and belittled Shi'a heritage, included offensive and immoral writings written inside the shrine, the throwing rubbish and stones in its rooms, and the looting of its contents. These acts of vandalism mirror state oppression against Shi'a cites during the crackdown: while security forces resulted in the demolition of more than 38 mosques, dozens of others were pillaged and vandalised by non-state sectarian actors.

In March 2012, vicious attack against Saasa bin Sohan Shrine was recorded, damage both its façade and interior⁵. The clear public disregard and deliberate official neglect of protecting the sacred and archaeological shrine became evident from the failure to provide a permanent security guard to prevent recurrence of incidents of tampering and vandalism, as well as the failure of supposedly highly securitized government agencies to identify, much less charge, culprits⁶. The Supreme Council for Islamic Affairs (a

4 <http://www.alwasatnews.com/news/1143609.html>

5 <https://bahraininterfaith.org/?p=2685&lang=ar>

6 <https://lualu-atv.net/%D9%87%D8%B0%D9%87-%D8%AD%D8%A7%D9%84-%D9%85%D9%82%D8%A7%D9%85-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B5%D8%AD%D8%A7%D8%A8%D9%8A-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%AC%D9%84%D9%8A%D9%84-%D8%B5%D8%B9%D8%B5%D8%B9%D8%A9-%D8%A8%D9%86-%D8%B5%D9%88/>



governmental body), announced by its president at the time, Abdullah bin Khalid Al Khalifa, his adoption of the project to rebuild the Saasa bin Sohan Shrine. However, those promises have not been kept, despite the continued attacks on this historical Islamic site. Vandals are not the only ones who prevent worshipers from performing the obligatory prayers and rituals, the Ministry of Interior, the Ministry of Justice and Islamic Affairs, and the Bahrain Authority for Culture and Antiquities persist in taking preliminary measures and practical steps towards protecting and preserving Saasa bin Sohan Shrine.

The fifth attack took place in 2014, which rendered the shrine's valuables and contents vulnerable to tampering, along with vandalism that affected the archaeological arena of the tomb of the great companion⁷. More acts of vandalism took place in the year 2016, and affected all rooms in the shrine, including the shrine room itself, all the way to the roof of the site and the prayer rooms for men and women⁸. This shrine suffered from deliberate neglect, which was accompanied by continuous attempts to obscure the reality of the attacks destruction, the latest of which was recorded on July 1, 2021⁹.

7 Published on the website for studies of Wahhabi thought and Salafi currents: A new attack on the shrine of the companion "Saasa bin Sohan" and a demand to stop the demolition of the Askariyin Mosque in Bahrain, April 2014 ,24.

8 <https://almanar.com.lb/519374>

9 <https://al-hodaonline.cm/article/25943/>

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The oldest Islamic monument in Bahrain has suffered a continuous series of vandalism, destruction, encroachment, and marginalisation, in which repeated calls and media reports have failed to enact change or push the concerned authorities to assume their responsibility in preserving the sanctities of Shi'a Muslims and protecting their religious and cultural heritage. The official authorities have not yet taken measures to prevent the recurrence of attacks and vandalism on this archaeological site, which constitutes a continuation of the government's discriminatory approaches, especially with regard to religious rights.

SALAM for Democracy and Human Rights urges the Bahraini authorities to:

- Re-open Saasa bin Sohan Shrine and implement its obligations to rebuild and repair it;
- Take legal, administrative and practical measures to protect this archaeological site and preserve its contents;
- Conduct effective investigations to officially reveal the parties responsible for vandalism, destruction and theft; and
- Commit to international agreements and local laws that guarantee religious freedom and the right to worship and perform rituals.



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