Yemen’s Threatened Cultural Heritage

The heartbreakingly destructive civil war in Yemen has put some of the world’s most treasured Islamic manuscripts in peril.

BY CHRISTIAN C. SABINER

SINCE 2015, the civil war in Yemen has caused untold human suffering: tens of thousands killed or wounded, families displaced, and a cholera epidemic. In an extraordinary step, the Yemeni, the 12 world leaders and 50 U.S. support for the Saudi-led campaign to oust the Houthi rebels. As the Yemen war continues, it’s important to remember that Yemen has also experienced a tempest from the sky, which is among the richest in the Middle East.

Throughout history, Yemen has been at the crossroads of Arabia, East Africa and the Indian Ocean. Bordered by the Red Sea and the Persian Gulf, the country has been a hub for seafarers and traders for millennia. Its rich cultural heritage includes the Old City of Sanaa, a UNESCO World Heritage site distinguished by its medina, old houses, narrow streets and traditional crafts.

But Yemen has also been threatened by conflict. The civil war that began in 2015 has caused untold suffering, and the ongoing war has put the country’s cultural heritage at risk.

A Yemeni man reads the Quran at the Great Mosque in the Old City of Sanaa, a picture from March 2016 of Yemeni-British buildings in Sanaa that were destroyed by air strikes carried out by the Saudi-led coalition, above 20th-century manuscript of ‘South of the Hejaz’ by Imam al-Manasir Abū ‘Abd Allāh, on display at the Yemen National Library in Sanaa, a commentary on a famous Zaydiyya theological text, below left, workers renovating a historic building in the Old City of Sanaa in May, below right.

The war has taken a toll on Yemen’s cultural heritage. The msan, or vernacular Arabic, is a language that has been used for centuries in Yemen and is a key part of the country’s cultural identity. The war has led to the destruction of many cultural sites and the loss of valuable manuscripts.

In addition to the destruction caused by the war, Yemen’s cultural heritage is also threatened by neglect and lack of funding. The Yemeni government has not invested enough in the protection and preservation of its cultural heritage, leaving it vulnerable to natural disasters and other threats.

The Yemeni government and international organizations are working to preserve Yemen’s cultural heritage. The Yemeni government has established a National Commission for the Protection of Cultural Heritage, and international organizations such as UNESCO have provided assistance.

Yemen’s cultural heritage is under threat, but there is hope for its preservation. By working together, Yemen’s cultural heritage can be protected for future generations.

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