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Apart from violence against other human beings, nothing seems to have attracted more revulsion about the Islamic State’s (IS) behaviour around the world than that organisation’s willingness to destroy historical artefacts. IS’s destruction of ancient structures in Palmyra, Syria, as well as its demolition of mediaeval mosques in countries like Iraq have caused despair among archaeologists and art historians around the world, not to mention local people proud of their own heritage. Although these acts of destruction have received widespread media coverage, the deeper reasons behind IS’s antipathy towards domes, mosques and other Islamic edifices built over graves of Muslim prophets, scholars or saints have not received much academic attention.

The publication under review has drastically changed this situation by focusing fully on the contentious issue of graves in Islam, the rituals surrounding them and the Salafi criticism of the latter, which has often resulted in the destruction of domes and mosques built over Muslim graves, frequently to the horror of other believers. Written by Ondřej Beránek, director of the Oriental Institute at the Czech Academy of Sciences, and Pavel Ťupek, researcher and assistant professor in the Department of Near Eastern and African Studies at Charles University in Prague, this is—to my knowledge—the first academic book to concentrate on Salafi views of visiting graves and rituals of worship associated with them. Because of the contentious nature of the subject, this was sorely needed and the authors have generally done a very good job at filling this gap.

The book is divided into an introduction, four chronologically ordered chapters, each dealing with an important period of Islamic thought with regard to the issue of graves, and a conclusion. In the introduction, the authors point out that in medieval times the issue of visiting graves (ziyāra) was mostly confined to scholarly discussions that barely had an impact on ordinary believers, unlike in modern times, when mass media, urbanisation and the spread of education had an adverse effect on the traditional forms of religion that valued graves as shrines (p. 4). It is these traditional expressions of Islam, the authors argue, that Salafi actors such

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as the Saudi state seek to eradicate so as to “act as the protector of Ibn ʿAbd al-Wahhab’s reformism in order to strengthen the legitimacy of the regime” (p. 5). It is this “systematic destruction of religious monuments [...] within Sunni Islam” (p. 6) that the authors want to explore in the book under review.

Chapter 1 concentrates on graves and shrines from pre-Islamic times to the late Middle Ages. The authors show that visits of graves took place before the advent of Islam and that, according to the Qurʾan, some of them became objects of veneration for Arabs (p. 19). While this may suggest that this practice is forbidden in Islam, the book presents ḥadīths showing that the Prophet Muhammad himself was not entirely averse to visiting graves and asking for intercession with God on people’s behalf himself. Yet the Prophet also seems to have feared the veneration of the dead and did not encourage (or even actively discouraged) the building of tombs over graves (pp. 21–22). It is probably this ambiguity—along with the increasing veneration of the Prophet—that led many Muslims to erect mosques and other buildings over Muhammad’s grave and those of other prophets, martyrs and saints, while simultaneously causing other Muslims to condemn such practices (pp. 23–26).

The authors show that the reasons some scholars objected to shrine-building and grave rituals such as praying at graves, touching them for healing purposes or wailing over the dead were quite diverse and ranged from the prohibition of acting like Jews and Christians to seeing such rituals as forms of impermissible idol-worship (shirk). Some, often Hanbali, scholars therefore agreed that casually visiting such graves was not necessarily sinful, but doing so on purpose to perform religious rituals constituted a religious innovation ( bidʿa) and should be condemned (pp. 26–29). Despite such objections, the culture of building mausoleums, shrines, domes and mosques for the dead flourished in medieval times, often acting as places of pilgrimage that were not only believed to give strength, help settle disputes and restore health (among other things), but also provided cheap alternatives to the  hājj in Mecca (pp. 30–40). It was in this context that Hanbali scholars such as Ibn Taymiyya (1263–1328), his pupil Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyya (1292–1350) and others took a stance against many of these practices (pp. 40–58).

Chapter 2 points out that various scholars in eighteenth-century Arabia were strongly influenced by Ibn Taymiyya’s and Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyya’s work and, as such, promoted this in their own writings, including with regard to the issue of graves. The authors pay special attention to famous
Yemeni scholars such as Muḥammad b. Ismāʿīl al-Ṣanʿānī (d. 1769) and Muḥammad al-Shawkānī (d. 1839), but particularly to the Najdi reformer Muhammad b. ʿAbd al-Wahhāb (1703–1792). Especially the latter was a strong proponent of strict views on the unity of God (tawḥīd) and he and his ideological followers therefore actively encouraged the destruction of tombs (pp. 73–92, 98–114). The authors also show that, despite the bad reputation that these “Wahhabi” Salafis enjoyed among many Muslims, modernist Salafis like Nuʿmān Khayr al-Dīn al-Alūsī (1836–1899) and his nephew Mahmūd Shukrī al-Alūsī (1857–1924) rehabilitated Ibn ʿAbd al-Wahhāb as well as Ibn Taymiyya through their writings (pp. 92–98).

Chapter 3 deals with modern-day Saudi Arabia and how this state, through the promotion of its Salafi ideology, has shaped the discourse on graves in modern-day Sunni Islam. The authors point out that the Saudi-led Ikhwan destroyed several shrines in the early twentieth century and that prominent state-employed scholars like Muḥammad b. Ibrāhīm Āl al-Shaykh (1893–1969) and ʿAbd al-ʿAzīz b. Bāz (1910–1999) used their scholarly clout to fulminate against grave rituals (pp. 130–145). The authors also show that the quietist Saudi Salafi discourse was used to counter the more politicised ideas espoused by the Muslim Brotherhood, but that this was also picked up by more radical Salafis like the Saudi militant Juhaymān al-ʿUtaybī (d. 1980) and the ideologue Abu Muḥammad al-Maqdisī (b. 1959) and thus turned into a jihadi-Salafi ideology (pp. 145–156).

Chapter 4, finally, picks on these Jihadi-Salafi ideas and links them to the policies and practices of IS. The authors pay special attention to the relationship between Saudi Arabia and IS, pointing out that while there is clear enmity between the two, there is an equally clear ideological link with regard to their views on graves, although they also refer to Jihadi-Salafi opposition to IS’s destruction of tombs (pp. 174–186). The chapter ends with a long description of the demolition of shrines and grave monuments throughout the Muslim world, ranging from the Arabian Peninsula to Africa and parts of Central and (South-)East Asia (pp. 186–206). In the conclusion, the authors state that, despite the differences between the various groups, trends and scholars dealt with in the book, the “doctrinal aspect of visiting and constructing graves, on the basis of their exclusionary teaching of shirk” has been emphasised in particular by Salafi scholars (p. 224). As such, the authors remark that this “approach towards cultural heritage [...] has proved to be a very powerful instrument in the fight against Sufis, Shiʿis and various forms of popular Islam” (p. 226).
The authors have done a great job in giving a nuanced, highly readable and detailed historical account of why Salafis object to grave rituals so much. One thing that the book conveys well is that the issue is complicated, not clear cut and therefore likely to result in the type of polemical discussions that Salafis have with their non-Salafi co-religionists. Still, the authors could have made more of an effort to contextualise Saudi attempts to use the issue of graves to appear pious to both local and regional audiences in order to stave off criticism of its other policies, particularly its ties with the United States. Readers may also wonder why the authors spend so much time on, for example, modernist Salafis and radicals like Juhaymān al-ʿUtabyī and Abu Muḥammad al-Maqdisī, when their contribution to the central issue—Salafi opposition to grave monuments and rituals—is minimal and not integrated very well in the broader discussion of the book.

One could argue that such information was added simply to give a more well-rounded intellectual history of Salafi ideas. Yet much of this has already been dealt with in the secondary literature and, more importantly, it makes it all the more astonishing that the authors’ treatment of Henri Lauzière’s *The Making of Salafism* is so wide off the mark. While the book claims that the latter distinguishes a “movement” called “modernist Salafism” that was “represented by figures such as al-Afghani or ʿAbduh” (p. 13), Lauzière actually says the opposite. These points notwithstanding, the authors have written an important contribution to the study of Salafism that deserves to be read by students of that trend and that is likely to remain the standard work on the issue of graves for some time.