
Al-Ahsa Oasis (Saudi Arabia) No 1563

Official name as proposed by the State Party

Al-Ahsa Oasis, an Evolving Cultural Landscape

Location

Al-Ahsa Governorate
Eastern Province
Saudi Arabia

Brief description

Al-Ahsa Oasis consists of gardens, canals, springs, wells, a drainage lake, as well as historic buildings, urban fabric and archaeological sites that are seen to represent the evolution of an ancient cultural tradition and the traces of sedentary human occupation of the Gulf region of the Arabian Peninsula from the Neolithic Period up to the present.

Al-Ahsa Oasis consists of twelve component parts and is the largest oasis in the world with more than 2.5 million palm trees. The landscape of Al-Ahsa represents the different phases of the oasis's evolution and the interaction of natural and cultural heritage.

Category of property

In terms of categories of cultural property set out in Article I of the 1972 World Heritage Convention, this is a serial nomination of 12 *sites*.

In terms of the *Operational Guidelines for the Implementation of the World Heritage Convention* (July 2017) paragraph 47, it is nominated as a *cultural landscape*.

1 Basic data

Included in the Tentative List

8 April 2015

International Assistance from the World Heritage Fund for preparing the Nomination

None

Date received by the World Heritage Centre

26 January 2017

Background

This is a new nomination.

Consultations

ICOMOS consulted its International Scientific Committee on Cultural Landscapes and several independent experts.

Comments about the evaluation of this property were received from IUCN in November 2017. ICOMOS carefully examined this information to arrive at its final decision and its March 2018 recommendation; IUCN also reviewed the presentation of its comments in accordance with the version included in this ICOMOS report.

Technical Evaluation Mission

An ICOMOS Technical Evaluation Mission visited the nominated property from 15 to 23 September 2017.

Additional information received by ICOMOS

A letter was sent from ICOMOS to the State Party on 25 September 2017 requesting additional information regarding the boundaries of the nominated property and the buffer zone, questions regarding factors affecting the property, authenticity, conservation and management. A response with additional information was received by ICOMOS from the State Party on 31 October 2017. An Interim report was sent to the State Party on 24 January 2018. The additional information received on 28 February 2018 has been incorporated into the relevant sections below.

Date of ICOMOS approval of this report

14 March 2018

2 The property

Description

Al-Ahsa Oasis is located in the eastern part of the Arabian Peninsula, bordered on the North by Abqaiq province, on the east by the Arabian Gulf, on the west by the desert of Al-Dahna and on the south by the desert of Al-Rub' Al-Khali (the Empty Quarter). Al-Ahsa Oasis is a serial nominated property composed of twelve component parts totalling 8,544 ha in surface area, surrounded by seven buffer zones covering a total area of 21,555 ha. The property is nominated as an 'evolving cultural landscape' representing a landscape that evolved over millennia and continues to evolve, and presents as well a way of life in the Gulf region of the Arabian Peninsula.

The component parts are briefly presented below:

Component 01 (NP-001): the Eastern Oasis consists of densely cultivated palm groves of an irregular shape covering a total area of 3,885 ha. It is delineated by a network of canals that separates it from its buffer zone. It includes Jabal al-Qarah, the modern village of Bani Ma'an and a small rocky outcrop rising 30 meters above the surrounding oasis. It is connected to Al-Asfar Lake by a main drainage canal.

Component 02 (NP-002): this is the major part of the Northern Oasis, covering a total area of 2,010 ha. It is delimited on the east by the main north-south drainage canal and on the south, west and north by the 1970s project canals. It is roughly round in shape with carved

out areas for Al-Qurayn village and three areas for historic villages and their modern expansions.

Component 03 (NP-003): As-Seef is the central sector of As-Seef Oasis in Al-Hofuf, consisting of densely cultivated palm groves, covering a total area of 108 ha. It is defined on the east by Al-Hofuf historic cemetery. On its northeast side, the modern King Khaled Road delimits the component and the whole nominated property. It is defined on all other sides by the irregular shape of the oasis. An area of 150 to 200 meters is left as a green protective belt separating it from urban settlements.

Component 04 (NP-004): Qasr Ibrahim in the city center of Al-Hofuf is the main architectural built heritage from the Ottoman period of Al-Hofuf, covering an area of almost 2 ha. This component part includes a strip of land outside the defensive walls to guarantee the protection of the historic fabric.

Component 05 (NP-005): Suq Al-Qaysariyah is the main urban feature of the center of Al-Hofuf, which was recently rebuilt after a major fire. It consists of three buildings arranged on a north-south axis for about 250 meters along King Abdul-Aziz Road and covers an area of 0.93 ha.

Component 06 (NP-006): Qasr Khuzam is an historic fort located south-west of the historic city of Al-Hofuf. It covers a total area of 0.67 ha, including a strip of land to guarantee the protection of its outer facades.

Component 07 (NP-007): Qasr Sahood fort in Al-Mubarraz covers an area of 1.2 ha including a strip of land outside its walls to protect the outer facades.

Component 08 (NP-008): Jawatha archaeological site is a fenced plot of desert land of 284 ha following the limits of the land parcel. It is owned by SCTH (Saudi Commission for Tourism and National Heritage). It is located between Jabal Al-Bureiqah and Al-Ahsa National Park near Jawatha Mosque.

Component 09 (NP-009): Jawatha Mosque is restored and surrounded by a perimeter wall. Its total area is 0.08 ha.

Component 010 (NP-010): Al-'Oyun Village is composed of two connected parts: the traditional village and the palm grove. This component part is the most northerly part of the Al-Ahsa Oasis covering a total area of 63.35 ha. It is delimited by the circular boundaries of the village in the north and water canals on the other sides.

Component 011 (NP-011): 'Ain Qinas archaeological site was excavated in the 1970s and is owned by SCTH. It covers a total area of 18.8 ha and is entirely fenced.

Component 012 (NP-012): Extending over 2,170 ha, Al-Asfar Lake is a drainage zone collecting the waters from the oasis. It includes the northern part of the main drainage canal of the Eastern Oasis. It includes a

mangrove area and follows the winding boundaries of the watered areas and the sandy surroundings.

IUCN notes that *“available studies suggest that the natural environment within and surrounding the oasis components especially the ones with a more natural state (e.g. Al-Asfar Lake) is of significant importance to biodiversity, wildlife and local communities’ livelihoods. This is confirmed by the fact that Al-Hasa Lagoons are recorded in the Directory of Wetlands in the Middle East (Scott 1995). The lagoons have been also identified as an Important Bird Area by BirdLife International (BirdLife International 2017).”*

History and development

Al-Ahsa has been inhabited since high Antiquity, with settlements that flourished, perished or moved location in response to changes in landscape and human activities, wars and the rise and fall of different political powers. It has always been an important center in the eastern Arabian Peninsula and connected by a network of caravan routes to central Arabia.

The earliest occupation of Al-Ahsa is in the location of the present Al-Hofuf, where remains from pre-ceramic Neolithic culture (before 6000 BCE) have been found. Other sites belonging to the 'Obeid Culture (5th and 4th millennium up to the first half of the second millennium BCE) have been found in Jawatha and 'Ain Qinas. A river that is now buried existed linking Jawatha with Al-Qannas ('Ain Qinas) site, according to archaeologists.

During the prehistoric period, Jawatha was a commercial center for the Hajar territory of Bahrain. Archaeological evidence shows that it exchanged products from southern Arabia and Persia as well as throughout the Arabian Peninsula. In the first half of the first millennium BCE, Jawatha was a node along the trade routes in eastern Arabia, firstly under the Chaldeans (605-592 BCE) and later under the Achaemenids (562-331 BCE) and continued during the invasion of Alexander the Great (335–324 BCE), then during the rise of the Seleucid and Parthian Empires, but was affected by changes to routes during the Roman Empire.

During the classical age of the Arabian overland trade (500 BCE-400 CE), Al-Ahsa Oasis was a major point along the route crossing Arabia. Jawatha was then a major urban center. The archaeological area within the nominated property is believed to preserve significant remains that are not yet fully excavated or documented. According to research and archaeological soundings carried out in 2000 CE, the remains of settlements are buried under the sand of the highlands northwest of Jawatha.

Al-Ahsa reached its maximum integration and size during the Islamic period (from 661 to the 10th century CE). It was known for the use of large scale utilization of hydraulic mechanisms operated by beasts of burden. The Al-Ahsa breed of donkey was well known

throughout the Muslim world. The circular urban shape of the villages of Al-Ahsa resulted from an irrigation canal on one side and a drainage canal on the other side circling the village as a result of the developed water management systems in Al-Ahsa.

Jawatha became important in the early Islamic period because of the conversion of the Bani Abd Al-Qais tribe to Islam. Its mosque became exceptionally important as the third mosque built in the history of Islam. The present day Jawatha mosque is a complete reconstruction by SCTH in the location of the original mosque.

From the 10th century onwards, Al-Ahsa was the capital of the Qarmatian state, which dominated most of eastern and central Arabia. But it is not known if Al-Ahsa town was built over or in the vicinity of the older town of Al-Hajar or in a totally new location. During the Qarmatian period, large areas north of Al-Ahsa Oasis were cultivated, then abandoned in later times, such as Jawatha.

The town of Al-Ahsa was invaded and reduced to an insignificant settlement by the Al-Uyuni dynasty who ended the Qarmatian dynasty. The location of Al-Ahsa town today is not certain, but there are theories suggesting that it might coincide with the present-day Al-Battaliyah village.

The Ottomans chose Al-Hofuf as their administrative capital in the Eastern Arabian Province. It is not clear when Al-Hofuf was established. It is not possible to establish its relationship with Al-Ahsa town because of the moving sand dunes. During the Ottoman period, Al-Hofuf developed as an administrative center, an important military position and an agricultural production center.

Qasr Ibrahim, consisting of a diwan building, a domed mosque and a Turkish bath, was probably founded before the full Ottoman conquest and control of the region. The Ottoman rule of the region, which started in 1549, was ended in 1680 by the Bani Khalid tribe. The earliest Friday mosque in Al-Hofuf, for which there is evidence, was called Masjid Ad-Dibs. Its location still exists to the present day in the Al-Kut quarter. The other mosque was a large domed building inside the citadel. No Turkish baths existed in either Al-Hofuf or Al-Mubarraz, except for the one in Qasr Ibrahim. The local tradition was to bathe in local natural springs.

After the 16th century, the population of Al-Ahsa Oasis was concentrated in about 50 villages spread throughout the oasis and the two cities of Al-Hofuf and Al-Mubarraz.

Al-Mubarraz town, the foundation date of which is not known, became the seat of power for the Bani Khalid rulers of Al-Ahsa from 1680 to 1792. They probably built Qasr Sahood. Nevertheless, Al-Hofuf continued to thrive as an important religious and agricultural town. Al-Mubarraz declined after the end of the rule of the Bani Khalid in 1790. Today, the fortification is the only

remaining building that is attributed to the Bani Khalid period.

The First Saudi State was established in 1792, with Ad-Dir'iyah as its capital and Al-Hofuf as its regional capital, which resulted in the growth of Al-Hofuf at the expense of Al-Mubarraz. In 1818, the First Saudi State lost Ad-Dir'iyah to Muhammad Ali, the governor of Egypt. The Second Saudi State was established by regaining control of the region between 1843 and 1871. Al-Hofuf regained its importance and its current historic core was created and remained (became the Al-Kut quarter) until the major developments of the 1970s and the 1980s.

The Second Ottoman Occupation from 1871 to 1913 resulted in the further development of Al-Hofuf as an administrative regional capital with a new large municipal building and the renovation of Qasr Ibrahim as an army barracks and office complex. Also, schools and hospitals were built. In 1913, Al-Ahsa was retaken by King 'Abdul-Aziz, who constructed a royal palace outside Qasr Ibrahim in 1920. Al-Hofuf continued as the regional capital until 1938. In the 20th century, Al-Hofuf was divided into six quarters, which were divided into smaller clusters. Between 1917 and 1923, Al-Qaysariyah was renewed.

The population of Al-Ahsa is almost equally divided into Sunni and Shi'a religious communities, with the Shi'a community mostly concentrated in the eastern part of the cities closer to the groves and the Sunni communities in the western parts, while most villages are inhabited by either one community or the other.

In 1938, oil was discovered in commercial quantities in the Eastern Province, which resulted in the foundation and growth of new settlements such as Dhahran, Al-Khobar, Abqaiq and Ras Tanura as well as the expansion of existing settlements such as Dammam with no relation to agricultural activities and economy.

In 1953, Dammam replaced Al-Hofuf as the capital of the Eastern Province, which led to the decline of Al-Hofuf and the expansion of residential areas of Al-Hofuf and Al-Mubarraz at the expense of farming areas. Since 1970, major projects have reversed the decline of Al-Hofuf as a result of the renewed importance of the city by the discovery of oil in the vicinity and also as a result of the sand dune stabilization project and the creation of a new canals network. After the great oil boom of 1973, Al-Hofuf continued to grow and merged with Al-Mubarraz. Al-Ahsa further developed and expanded towards Dhahran to the north and towards Riyadh to the west and became part of the road network of Arabian Gulf states.

3 Justification for inscription, integrity and authenticity

Comparative analysis

The comparative analysis in the nomination dossier is made according to typological categorization of oases around the world based on: climatic differentiation, distinguishing 'hot deserts' and 'cold deserts' – Al-Ahsa being a warm one; historical origins; physical Classification (dimensions and form); and geomorphology, hydro-agricultural and architectural space. Accordingly, oases are divided into 'mountain oases' and 'plains and depression oases'.

World Heritage Sites that were compared with Al-Ahsa in the nomination dossier are Al-'Ain, UAE (2011, (iii), (iv), (v)), Figuig, Morocco (Tentative List, 2011, (iii), (iv), (v)), Bam, Iran (2004, (ii), (iii), (iv), (v)), Shibam, Yemen (1982, (iii), (iv), (v)), M'Zab, Algeria (1982, (ii), (iii), (v)), Ghadames, Libya (1986, (v)), Bahla, Oman (1987, (iv)) and Ait-Ben-Haddou, Morocco (1987, (iv), (v)). Other comparisons were made with Siwa - Egypt, Al-'Ula, Taima and Ad-Dir'iyah - KSA, Ferdows, Meymah, Ardestan, Jupar and Gonabad – Iran, and Manhattan – USA.

ICOMOS notes that the comparative analysis could be further enhanced by including some relevant examples on the World Heritage List, such as Palmeral of Elche, Spain (2000, (ii), (v)), and other examples on the Tentative Lists, such as the Oasis of Gabes, Tunisia (2008, (iv), (vii), (x)), and Island of Djerba, Tunisia (2012, (v), (vi)).

ICOMOS notes that some comparators are not relevant in the sense that they have been inscribed on the World Heritage List for different sets of attributes and values than those proposed for Al-Ahsa.

ICOMOS notes that the comparison with Al-'Ain, United Arab Emirates, highlights the lack of coherence of the nominated property as a cultural landscape. Al-Ain is similar to Al-Ahsa in being composed of a number of component parts with no visual relationships between them including palm oases, historic buildings and archaeological sites separated by modern urban fabric. However, in the case of Al-Ain, the serial site is listed as cultural sites (i.e. a group of sites). On the other hand, Al-Ahsa is nominated as a cultural landscape as a single oasis including different plantations, settlements, buildings and archaeological sites that were not considered to be included within a single oasis, or any single entity, before the post-oil large-scale developments of the 1960s and 1970s.

ICOMOS considers that the comparative analysis is not adequate with regards to the coherence of the cultural landscape concept in terms of visual relationships between the oasis and the associated human settlements, and its relationship with the surrounding desert landscape.

ICOMOS considers that the comparative analysis does not justify consideration of this property for the World Heritage List.

Justification of Outstanding Universal Value

The nominated property is considered by the State Party to be of Outstanding Universal Value as a cultural property for the following reasons:

- It is a unique cultural landscape resulting from the interaction of man and nature in a particular geographic and geological position, which up to the present preserves material remains representing all stages of the oasis's history;
- It is an exceptional cultural landscape created by the association of large date palm groves and built environment, continuously over a long span of time and it still maintains all the characteristics including the geo-morphological and water conditions as well as the socio-cultural ones created by nomadic, sedentary and marine-lacustrine environments;
- It bears testimony to human occupation for thousands of years up to the present;
- It includes historic buildings, such as fortresses, religious sites and agricultural landscape elements;
- It is the largest oasis in the world containing more than 2.5 million palm trees;
- It is a spectacular example of an oasis demonstrating shared values, social cohesion and technical know-how;
- The serial approach is adopted so that it includes the different components that make up the cultural landscape of an oasis with historic layers representing all phases of its history and the geographic and geological elements representing the different aspects of its environment.

ICOMOS considers that Al-Ahsa clearly is an oasis with great time depth, it has persisted over time and was important economically through its connections to trade routes across the Arabian Peninsula.

The defining characteristics of this oasis were its cultivation of dates and the complex water and sewage management systems that underpinned this cultivation. Both of these appear to have been introduced in the Dilmun period when *'The spread of the date palm brought prosperity to the towns along the trade routes of the Arabian peninsula'*. What is also clear though is that although this system largely survived until the 1960s, when the town was still mainly an agricultural town, since then the oasis has been 'transformed' in three ways: from major extensions of the date palm plantations, from changes in the irrigation system and from urban growth based on the oil industry.

The date palm plantations now produce dates for a global market. The canal system has been extensively re-engineered and extended to service this growth, and

also to address the lack of efficient ground water irrigation distribution and drainage as a result of social change. These changes have radically altered the relative status of agriculture and brought water management under the control of the Al-Hassa Irrigation and Drainage Authority rather than the farmers. And during the same period the new urban areas have led to the fusion of two towns, of Al-Hofuf and Al-Mubarraz into one town, Al-Ahsa, and the re-building of most of the traditional buildings.

Given these recent changes, Al-Ahsa Oasis can no longer be seen to reflect mainly traditional water management practices for sharing water supplies, or social systems connected to traditional settlements many of which no longer survive.

Whereas in most cultural landscapes some modern interventions have been introduced to support the persistence of traditional practices, at Al-Ahsa the interventions have all replaced traditional practices. It is thus difficult to see Al-Ahsa as a cultural landscape that reflects persistent cultural traditions and the way people interact with nature.

ICOMOS notes that in evaluating nominations of evolved landscapes that are also continuing landscapes, as well as defining what has organically evolved, there is a need to show what aspects are continuing, and the limits of change over time that will be needed to sustain the attributes of Outstanding Universal Value and maintain the evidence of evolution over time.

Because of the recent changes, what has been nominated is not the whole oasis or even a substantial part of it but a selection of isolated components that do not add up to the idea of an overall cultural landscape and cannot readily be seen to reflect all aspects of the way the oasis functioned traditionally. The justification presented by the State Party around the notion of a cultural landscape is lacking the visual and functional relationships of the different component parts of the nominated property as well as the relationships between these parts and the surrounding natural environment.

There is thus some discrepancy between what is proposed in terms of values and what is nominated on the ground.

The nomination dossier proposes an equal assessment and treatment of traditional and modern typologies, methods, techniques and materials for buildings, farms, infrastructure and water management networks and it thus cannot be said that the oasis reflects longstanding traditional practices over time.

Accordingly, ICOMOS does not consider that the justification presented by the State Party, based on the concept of an 'evolving' landscape, can be supported.

Integrity and authenticity

Integrity

As a serial nomination, integrity refers to whether the component parts of the nomination sufficiently cover the attributes needed to demonstrate the Outstanding Universal Value suggested by the State Party. Integrity thus relates to the ability of the 12 selected sites to represent and reflect the necessary attributes of the proposed Outstanding Universal Value.

The State Party justifies the integrity of the nominated site by five criteria: structural integrity, landscape integrity, integrity of use, development of the human settlements and control of threats.

The nomination dossier argues that the conditions of integrity of the nominated property are met through its twelve component parts by the sheer size of the property and the physical presence of the attributes of the proposed Outstanding Universal Value, including 2.5 million palm trees, water canals and water-lifting methods, urban settlements, historic buildings, and archaeological sites within the property that covers 85 km².

According to the nomination dossier, the integrity of the nominated property as an evolving cultural landscape is justified by the long history of the habitation of the oasis over thousands of years and up to the present, which implies a combination of traditional and modern methods and techniques of water management, urban settlements and commercial activities.

ICOMOS considers that there is an issue of connection between the selected component sites, which constitute a fragmented serial nomination, some elements being very isolated from the others. The visual relationships of the different component parts, as well as the visual relationships between the different components and their natural environment, do not consistently fulfill the conditions of integrity of a cultural landscape.

ICOMOS notes that the large-scale modern water system, which was introduced in the 1960s and later, greatly impacts the visual integrity of the nominated property. Furthermore, the large-scale development of the city has engulfed the oasis and changed its setting dramatically. For example, As-Seef Oasis (NP-001, NP-002, and NP-003), where over the last few years, vast areas of new urban development have occupied the empty spaces of small *sabkha*-s, and where the traditional architecture of the villages that were supposed to be located at the edges of the groves have been mostly replaced with modern urbanization, have left the palm groves with weak visual and physical connectivity.

ICOMOS notes, furthermore, that future plans for both urban development and water irrigation networks may impact the integrity of the property. Indeed, the

regulations for the farms permit developments on the edges of roads and highways, as well as up to 30% inside the plantations. For example, urban conservation approaches required for Al-'Oyun Village (NP-010) conflict with the plan adopted for the village. Also, the Al-Asfar lake (NP-012) would certainly be affected with the creep of urbanism towards its southern border. Such threats reduce the ability of the property to be considered complete and free of current development threats.

Authenticity

The nomination dossier relates the authenticity of the whole serial site to 'the authentic environment', as the dynamics of the oasis ecosystem are present throughout the component parts on a massive scale and with a unique historical depth that goes back thousands of years. And that despite the rapid development of the nominated property during the 1960s and the 1970s, it preserved its authenticity by the preservation of archaeological sites, historic buildings and pre-historic landscape features, setting it apart from other oases in the world.

The State Party argues that the rapid development, modernization and transformation of the territory has secured the livelihood and sustainability of the oasis up to the present as an evolving cultural landscape.

ICOMOS notes that the nomination dossier applies the concept of an evolving landscape (i.e. the oasis is continuously evolving) in a way that raises questions pertaining to the authenticity of the built environment and the water management network.

In response to ICOMOS' Interim Report, the State Party argued that "Al-Ahsa Oasis is unique and sustainable, but it has already out-grown from just being an oasis to a more developed landscape". Furthermore, the State Party argued that with regards to evolving living heritage, integrity and authenticity should be assessed differently to allow for modifications to conserve its function and living status, referring to "ICOMOS 2015 Thematic Study, Cultural Heritage of Water (the cultural heritage of water in the Middle East and Maghreb)".

ICOMOS acknowledges that the oasis landscape has continuously evolved since the Dilmun period. However, it is the view of ICOMOS that the nature and extent of change that has occurred over the last 40 years are of a totally different nature from the pre-1960s developments.

ICOMOS considers that the present agriculture and production of dates in the oasis is a modern global mass production that differs essentially from the traditional agriculture that used to support the livelihood of the community in pre-modern times.

Whereas some modern interventions to support the persistence of traditional practices could be supported, as suggested by the ICOMOS study, the introduction of modern interventions that replace traditional practices

'can be too great a disruption, which changes the nature of our profound understanding, and thus the expression of heritage values.'

ICOMOS considers that the widespread practice of undocumented heavy-handed restoration and/or reconstruction impacts the authenticity of the historic buildings and urban fabric components of the nominated property in an irreversible manner.

In conclusion, ICOMOS considers that the conditions of integrity and authenticity have not been met for the serial property.

Criteria under which inscription is proposed

The property is nominated on the basis of cultural criteria (iii), (iv) and (v).

Criterion (iii): *be a unique or at least exceptional testimony to a cultural tradition or to a civilization which is living or which has disappeared;*

This criterion is justified by the State Party on the grounds that Al-Ahsa Oasis is a unique cultural landscape and an exceptional testimony to the sedentary human occupation, and the long oasis cultural tradition in the Gulf region, that has continued up to the present. It is manifested in surviving historic fortresses, mosques, springs, canals and other water management arrangements, as well as al-Qaysariyah market for food, spices and fabric. Al-Ahsa is also rich in archaeological sites.

As set out above, ICOMOS considers that an equal assessment and treatment of traditional and modern typologies, methods, techniques and materials for buildings, farms, infrastructure and water management networks cannot be said to reflect an outstanding reflection of a longstanding cultural tradition over time.

ICOMOS also notes that the inclusion of selected isolated buildings while excluding villages and large areas of historic urban fabric within the property or its landscape surroundings do not support the concept of cultural landscape or adequately reflect all the component parts of an oasis.

ICOMOS considers that criterion (iii) has not been justified.

Criterion (iv): *be an outstanding example of a type of building, architectural or technological ensemble or landscape which illustrates (a) significant stage(s) in human history;*

This criterion is justified by the State Party on the grounds that Al-Ahsa is an outstanding example of the oasis landscape. It is a unique geo-cultural landscape. Its history goes back for millennia of different phases of human history and preserves today traces representative of all its stages. The vast area of the

oasis includes some 2.5 million palm trees, making it the largest oasis in the world.

ICOMOS notes the historical importance that Al-Ahsa acquired in the past. However, the impact of grand-scale modernizations of plantations, water management networks and urban development next to the widespread use of heavy-handed restorations and reconstructions undermine the integrity and authenticity of what remains today of the historic Al-Ahsa. What now survives cannot be said to reflect a significant stage in human history.

ICOMOS considers that criterion (iv) has not been justified.

Criterion (v): be an outstanding example of a traditional human settlement, land-use, or sea-use which is representative of a culture (or cultures), or human interaction with the environment especially when it has become vulnerable under the impact of irreversible change;

This criterion is justified by the State Party on the grounds that Al-Ahsa is an exceptional example of human interaction with the environment. It perpetuated a great oasis throughout the millennia shaping the landscape in uninterrupted development. Al-Ahsa illustrates the main significant phases of human settlement in the Arabian Peninsula.

ICOMOS notes that Al-Ahsa is a greatly modernized oasis, with highly developed plantations, water management networks, urban developments, infrastructure and agricultural mass production industry, with little or no differentiation between historic elements, approaches and ways of life in the oasis on the one hand and on the other hand, modern elements, technology, approaches and ways of life. The lack of differentiation obscures any attributes that may represent the persistence of a traditional way of life in an oasis and its relationship with the natural environment.

ICOMOS considers that the long-standing traditional relationship between the nominated property and the natural landscape of the surrounding desert environment disappeared as a result of great developments since the 1960s and 1970s. This makes it hardly possible today to grasp the concept of an oasis and the way it functioned in Al-Ahsa, despite the great number of palm trees.

ICOMOS considers that criterion (v) has not been justified.

In conclusion, ICOMOS does not consider that the criteria have been demonstrated.

4 Factors affecting the property

The State Party identifies two groups of issues affecting the nominated property: firstly, environmental issues such as the decline of water resources, sand invasion, salinization and soil loss, which are escalated by global warming; and secondly, issues caused by modernization such as major modernization of constructions and agriculture, including agricultural infrastructure such as water works and waste-water disposal networks, as well as changes in legal systems that have replaced community and social norms and practices; and the great impact of modernization is a consequence of the discovery and exploitation of oil since the 1950s.

According to the nomination dossier, oil mining is not considered an issue with any present or future impact on the property, despite the fact that the biggest oil field in the world, "Al-Ghawwar", is adjacent to Al-Ahsa Oasis.

ICOMOS notes that the delay in implementing the protection law for the 'Urban Heritage' in Al-Ahsa is risking the disappearance of large sections of the traditional urban fabric. The extent of the demolition that has taken place recently in the Al-Kut neighbourhood, and the one located towards the east of Al-Qaysariyah (NP-005) is certainly a large-scale irreversible loss of urban value.

ICOMOS notes that many of the future plans for the development of the oasis are partially incompatible with the conservation of the attributes of the proposed Outstanding Universal Value. Those plans are focused more on the economic development of the Oasis (e.g. allowing large scale plantations to be developed in the north of the Northern Oasis (NP-002)). Also, urban conservation approaches required for Al-'Oyun Village (NP-010) conflict with the plan adopted for the village. In addition, Al-Asfar Lake (NP-012) would certainly be affected by the creep of urbanism towards its southern border.

ICOMOS considers that the future plans for substituting the traditional irrigation systems (*saih* and *mugharra*), with the 1970's water irrigation system, and to further modify this with the automated dripping-water system, adopted and presented by the Irrigation Directorate, might have an irreversible impact on Al-Asfar Lake's natural ecological system, and on the growing of many other traditional crops beside dates.

ICOMOS considers that the main threats to the nominated property are environmental issues, particularly those accelerated by climate change as well as modernization and development pressures for urban areas, farms and irrigation networks accelerated by the impact of oil discovery, exploitation and the consequent developments.

5 Protection, conservation and management

Boundaries of the nominated property and buffer zone

The boundaries of the nominated property are delineated as follows:

- Agricultural and natural components (NP-001, NP-002, NP-003, NP-010 & NP-012) are defined by the natural lines of oasis palm trees or natural features, watering or drainage canals, oil pipes, and infrastructure features such as roads or electricity lines;
- Historic buildings and built up areas (NP-004, NP-005, NP-006, NP-007, NP-009 and the village part of NP-010) are defined by the actual historic buildings - and in most cases including an extra strip of land outside the building to protect outer facades; and
- Archaeological sites (NP-008 & NP-011) are entirely fenced areas belonging to SCTH.

The twelve component parts of the nominated property are buffered by seven buffer zones, which are grouped in three sectors. According to the nomination dossier, the aim of the delineation of the buffer zones is to:

- Prevent encroachments;
- Direct development projects; and
- Preserve the nominated property's visual integrity.

ICOMOS notes that the boundaries of the nominated property include selected single buildings in isolation from their immediate surroundings. In addition, the boundaries do not illustrate recognizable relationships between the different component parts or with the desert natural environment, in contradiction to the concept of a cultural landscape.

In conclusion, ICOMOS considers that the boundaries of the nominated property and its buffer zones are not adequate to illustrate a cultural landscape as they do not show harmonious and understandable relationships among the different component parts and between the property and its natural environment.

Ownership

The nominated property is in both private and public ownership. The majority of the twelve component parts and seven buffer zones are privately owned. Thousands of agricultural parcels in the oasis and urban plots in the villages and built up areas are privately owned by as many owners. The archaeological sites are owned by SCTH. Infrastructure, such as roads and water management systems as well as natural resources such as mountain and desert areas, is owned by the government. Hundreds of agricultural parcels and urban buildings and plots are tied to the Islamic endowment system (waqf), which implies that some properties are managed by the Ministry of Endowments (Awqaf) and others are managed by caretakers or heirs.

Protection

Environmental protection of the nominated property is covered by Articles 2, 5, 6, 7 and 32 of the 1992 Basic Law (referred to as "the constitution of Saudi Arabia"). However, the enforcement of the law is not always applied outside the main industrial sites.

Development is regulated by the 'Public Environmental Law' (No. M/34 dated 16 October 2001). There are also legal instruments addressing the conservation of biodiversity, including:

- Agriculture and Veterinary Quarantine Regulations, 1975;
- The Uncultivated Land Act, 1978;
- The Forest and Rangelands Act, 1979;
- The Water Resources Conservation Act, 1980;
- The Saudi Wildlife Authority Act, 1986;
- The Fishing Exploitation and Protection of Live Aquatic Resources Act, 1987;
- The Wildlife Protected Areas Act, 1995;
- The Wild Animals and Birds Hunting Act, 1999;
- Trade in Endangered Wildlife Species Act, 2000;
- Environmental Code, 2002.

Water management for landscape and agricultural lands is regulated by the Ministry of Water and Electricity (MOWE), the Ministry of Agriculture (MOA), and the Al-Hassa Irrigation and Drainage Authority (HIDA). They function under the 'Regulation Concerning the Protection of Water Sources', issued by Royal Decree No. M/34 of year 1400 H/1979 AD.

Traditionally, Islamic civil law was implemented, as codified under the Ottoman Empire prior to World War I in *Majallat al-Ahkam al-Adlia* (abbreviated as *Majallat*). Islamic civil law with regards to regulating water resources management is still respected today as Article 1 of the 'Regulations Concerning the Protection of Water Sources' of 1979 states that "*all sources of water are public property provided that rights established according to Islamic law are not infringed upon.*"

Archaeological sites and listed historic buildings are protected by the 1972 Saudi Antiquity Law, managed by the Saudi Commission for Tourism and National Heritage (SCTH).

The urban heritage within the nominated property is protected by the 'Law on Antiquities, Museums and Urban Heritage', approved in 2014. Article 46 of the law defines the coordination mechanism between SCTH, the Ministry of Municipalities and Rural Affairs (MoMRA) and the Ministry of Interior pertaining to the protection and development of urban heritage areas.

Urban regulations on the local level are defined by 'Al-Ahsa 2030 Master Plan' and the 'Indicative Plan Report for Al-Ahsa Metropolitan area' (2014), which synchronizes studies, approval plans, and regulations that are issued by MoMRA. The Plan protects agricultural land located within an urban context, which

is relevant to component part NP-003 and buffer zones ii and iii.

The municipal planning documents define Al-Hofuf's historic core as a "special environment district", and thus it is regulated accordingly.

The 2009 plan for the historic centre identifies "priority heritage axes", allocating public spaces for cultural activities but doesn't address conservation needs of the historic urban fabric.

ICOMOS notes that the municipal planning documents acknowledge the importance of preserving the existing plantations. However, its regulations permit developments on the edges of roads and highways. Furthermore, it permits development inside the plantations up to 30%, which threatens the integrity and authenticity of the plantations with modern constructions.

ICOMOS notes that the 2014 law of Antiquities, Museums and Urban Heritage should provide adequate protection to historic urban fabric, historic buildings and archaeological sites within the property. However, the law is not yet effectively implemented.

ICOMOS notes that landscape and agricultural lands are not protected by Saudi law and that the protection of the ecosystem in and around Al-Asfar Lake is not ensured.

In conclusion, ICOMOS considers that the legal protection in place for the nominated property and its buffer zones is not effectively implemented and is in need of further development and synchronization with development plans.

Conservation

The conservation state of the nominated property is established by the State Party based on the idea of "evolving" landscape as the driving concept. The aspects are addressed within a holistic vision:

- The natural and landscape features such as lake, mountains, caves, springs, etc.;
- The oasis eco-system including gardens, canals, palms, etc.; and
- The urban fabric, historic buildings and archaeological sites.

The assessment of the state of conservation by the nomination dossier is based on the understanding that "landscape" is never "static", but an "evolutionary" phenomenon in constant transformation. Thus, the state of conservation assessment addresses the "directions" of the ongoing transformation.

The oasis eco-system was subject to an in-depth investigation in 2013, which concluded that Al-Asfar Lake is a long-established and functional ecosystem that shows some resilience to considerable pollutant loads entering the system. In addition, the lake system supports significant bird life. Studies on the biodiversity associated

with the oasis should be promoted: this would reveal the importance of the biodiversity living in the oasis itself and the environments surrounding it, and the role of local people which should be better known or better specified in order to better manage the natural components of their oasis.

Traditional date palm agricultural techniques are complemented with modern techniques aiming to improve the quality and quantity of the oasis output, which constitutes a major share of the Saudi national production of dates.

The Date Palm Research Centre (DPRC) was established in 1983 at King Faisal University in Al-Hofuf and aims to be *"the leading regional centre and a worldwide recognized pole of excellence in date palm research and development"*. The nomination dossier argues that the massive production of the high quality dates of Al-Ahsa is *"a proof of the extraordinary vitality"* of the oasis and of its extraordinary *"state of conservation"* as a living productive landscape.

As for the urban fabric, Al-'Oyun Village (component part NP-010) is mostly in a ruinous dilapidated state and mostly deserted. The nomination dossier states the start of a *"precise survey of the historic core"* as a step towards the conservation and rehabilitation of the village.

Historic buildings and archaeological sites are managed and maintained by SCTH. Interventions have been made to some monuments over the last twenty years, some of which were restored or reconstructed and others were reused. SCTH carried out the restoration project for Qasr Ibrahim, Al-Mubarraz and the fortress of Al-Hofuf. Al-Turath Foundation carried out the restoration of Al-Amiriyah School, which included partial reconstruction, and Jawatha Mosque.

ICOMOS notes that no adequate records or reports of the state of conservation exist for the different component parts of the nominated property. Although the additional information submitted by the State Party as per ICOMOS' request includes some records, the available records remain either outdated or not conforming with international best practices for documentation of cultural heritage.

ICOMOS is of the view that the premise that "landscape is never static, but an evolutionary phenomenon in constant transformation" does not mean that appropriate records, monitoring and reporting on the state of conservation are not needed for preserving the significance of the property and its integrity and authenticity.

In response to ICOMOS' Interim Report, the State Party argued that they *"are in the process to review the output documents and to prepare a more detailed update."*

ICOMOS notes that the widespread practice of heavy-handed restoration and/or reconstruction affects the authenticity and the state of conservation of the historic buildings and urban fabric components of the property.

While most of the said practices were observed in the recent past, the nomination dossier does not include clear indications that a major change of approach and philosophy of conservation have been adopted by the State Party.

In response to ICOMOS' Interim Report, the State Party expressed their understanding of the concerns raised by ICOMOS and stated: *"We are in dialogue with our regional partners and took active measures to minimize the impact of such works and we are ready to cooperate with whom WHC deems to be important in this regards"*.

ICOMOS notes that reversing such widespread practices that have been adopted for a long time requires the implementation of long-term training programs. Such changes will be greatly appreciated as they should positively impact future interventions. However, damage and loss of authenticity that resulted from previous interventions cannot be reversed.

In conclusion, ICOMOS considers that the state of conservation of the nominated property overall is not proven to be adequate.

Management

Management structures and processes,
Including traditional management processes

The different component parts and aspects of the nominated property are currently managed by five national level main stakeholders and ten local level main stakeholders. The coordination of all stakeholders is carried out by 'The Oasis Higher Management Committee' under the direction of HH the Governor of Al-Ahsa, which meets monthly.

The process of nominating the property initiated a series of meetings of local stakeholders and a 'Management seminar' was organized for all main stakeholders in October 2016 and a second seminar was scheduled for March 2017.

A new Management Scheme has been formally approved by the Governor of Al-Ahsa, which aims to better coordinate and integrate management mechanisms of the oasis at Municipal and Provincial levels on the one hand, and on the other coordinating field activities with the headquarters of MoMRA and SCTH in Riyadh.

The new Management Scheme formed a 'Higher Committee' (HC) and a 'Site Management Unit' (SMU) based in Al-Ahsa Municipality.

According to the nomination dossier, an Action Plan will be completed and submitted to the World Heritage Centre as additional information. The HC will be responsible for overseeing the implementation of the Action Plan.

The SMU will play the role of site manager and will be responsible for verifying all planning regulations for the

nominated property, its buffer zones and the larger urban and natural setting, in order to ensure their conformity with the requirements and principles of the World Heritage Convention.

An independent 'Scientific Committee' will be established to provide technical advice to local leadership for the management of the nominated property.

Policy framework: management plans and arrangements, including visitor management and presentation

Within the framework of the 'Management Plan Guidelines', which was prepared within the process of preparing the nomination of the property, a number of initiatives for the conservation and development of the oasis have been identified as follows:

Landscape initiatives:

- The revitalization and re-creation of Al-Ahsa Oasis's traditional environment in a selected area;
- Water pollution control and ecological revitalization of Al-Asfar Lake;
- Heritage Impact Assessments for all development projects;
- Coordination of the private sector to create modern tourist facilities.

Architectural and urban heritage initiatives include the preservation and revitalization of the remaining heritage fabric of Al-Hofuf and Al'Oyun village.

Archaeology and cultural initiatives:

- Creation of a new museum;
- Launch archaeological excavation campaigns and archaeological research work;
- Creation of visitor center;
- Survey, listing and preservation whenever possible of remaining traditional components of the oasis;
- Revitalization, maintenance and reuse projects for major historic buildings;
- Control, coordination and supervision of ongoing private sector projects in Jawatha area and Al-Qarah caves;
- Organization of an international scientific conference on "Oasis and Development".

The budget for the preservation and revitalization of the nominated property is allocated by the central Saudi government through the Ministry of Municipalities and Rural Affairs (MoMRA), and managed by four main stakeholders: SCTH, Al-Ahsa Central Municipality, the Ministry of Agriculture and HIDA.

The local SCTH Heritage Department consists of 15 staff, including the director (an archaeologist), two museum experts, an administrator and eight site guards.

The tourism staff consists of 17 employees engaged mainly in tourism-related public relations and media tasks.

Other local staff of the Municipality, the Irrigation and Drainage Authority, the Department of Agriculture, Al-Ahsa National Park, as well as staff at headquarters of these bodies, are also engaged in the management of the nominated property.

The nominated property is the first Saudi nomination of a 'cultural landscape'. SCSH is working on developing the number and professional qualifications of its staff in managing this kind of property.

According to the nomination dossier, the intended development of a comprehensive strategy for the sustainable development of the oasis will include risk preparedness. The SMU will oversee the realization of the risk management strategy in coordination with national security and civil defense.

Sustainable cultural tourism strategy is one of the priorities of the site management plan, with the intention to offer a holistic presentation of the property including tangible and intangible aspects. It is part of a large-scale regional tourism plan for the Eastern Province and the Gulf coastal area.

Visitors to Al-Ahsa have increased in number over the past few years. There are seven licensed hotels offering 668 rooms and furnished apartments offering another 1,664 rooms, and eleven tour operators active in the city, which are expected to grow in number. There are 40 travel agencies and 15 licensed tourist guides, who are also expected to grow in number.

IUCN notes that *"the need for the management of the oasis to include a specific component of studying, understanding, monitoring and conserving the biodiversity of the oasis as an integral part of its heritage protection and sustainability. Focus should be given to the biodiversity within the oasis as well as surrounding it. Regular monitoring of the water quality in main water bodies of significance to waterfowl and other related biodiversity groups is also deemed important for the maintenance of natural habitats of the property. The above suggested measures need to take into account the past, current and foreseen impacts of climate change on key ecosystem services provided by the property."*

ICOMOS notes that it is not clear how the SMU will work within the Municipality and how it will relate to all other stakeholders and authorities. Also, the mechanism of how SMU will work with the HC for an effective implementation is not clear.

ICOMOS considers that capacity building programs are required for the SMU personnel in conservation theory and methodologies.

ICOMOS notes that the chosen location for the new museum at the southernmost part of the property will not

make it easy for visitors to grasp the totality of the property, given its great size and individual components.

ICOMOS notes that efforts for interpretation, presentation and visitor management of the property need further development to address the vast area of the property and the big distances between the different component parts.

Involvement of local communities

The preparation for nominating the property brought together a number of grassroots organizations, the civil society and the local university. The management plan foresees an important role for the civil society and local community in supporting the sustainable development and conservation of the property.

In conclusion, ICOMOS considers that special attention is needed for mechanisms of coordination and collaboration of the large number of stakeholders for the management of the different components of the property. Also, attention is needed for capacity building, interpretation, presentation and visitor management, and for including the local communities and traditional knowledge in the conservation of the cultural and natural components of the property.

6 Monitoring

There is no formal monitoring regime in place, but HC and SMU are working on bypassing current administrative barriers and establishing a mechanism of coordination with different stakeholders. The nomination dossier identifies monitoring indicators according to the following groups:

- Environmental indicators
- Agricultural indicators
- Conservation indicators
- Planning indicators
- Tourism indicators

SMU will gather and elaborate the reports on a monthly basis and statistics from different stakeholders to form an annual report on the 'State of Conservation' for the nominated property. The report will be approved by SCSH headquarters.

ICOMOS notes that, in general, the indicators identified by the State Party are appropriate. However, a more precise periodicity is recommended.

In conclusion, ICOMOS considers that the monitoring regime, once in place, could be considered valid in a general sense, but could be improved by more precise periodicity.

7 Conclusions

Al-Ahsa is clearly important as an oasis that has long time depth having been inhabited since antiquity, and developed over time in response to changing political and historical circumstances. It was also important in economic terms when linked to the network of caravan routes across the Arabian Peninsula. The defining characteristics of this oasis were its cultivation of dates, introduced in the Dilmun period and the complex water management and drainage systems that underpinned this cultivation.

In the past 50 years, Al-Ahsa has rapidly developed to become the largest oasis in the world and one that now functions on an industrial scale. In the process major transformations have taken place to the physical as well as social structures. The date palm plantations have been much extended, the canal system extensively re-engineered and new urban areas developed resulting in loss of most traditional buildings. Given these changes, Al-Ahsa Oasis can no longer be seen to reflect mainly traditional water management practices or the social systems connecting traditional settlements to the farming and desert landscapes.

Whereas in most cultural landscape some modern interventions have been introduced to support the persistence of traditional practices, at Al-Ahsa the interventions have all but replaced traditional practices. It is thus difficult to see Al-Ahsa as a cultural landscape that reflects persistent cultural traditions involving interaction with nature.

ICOMOS notes that in evaluating nominations of evolved landscapes that are also continuing landscapes, as well as defining what has organically evolved, there is a need to show what aspects are continuing, and the limits of change over time that will be needed to sustain the attributes of Outstanding Universal Value and maintain the evidence of evolution over time.

A further issue is that what has been nominated is not the whole oasis or even a substantial part of it but a selection of isolated components that do not add up to the idea of an overall cultural landscape and cannot readily be seen to reflect all aspects of the way the oasis functioned traditionally through interacting with its natural environment.

Thus, an evolved landscape is one where the current form of the landscape or aspects of it clearly reflects, through its 'component features', the way it has evolved over time and these need to persist. ICOMOS therefore considers that the identification of the nominated property as an 'evolving' landscape is inappropriate as it fails to identify the permissible limits of change. Furthermore, it does not pay attention to the difference in nature, approach, scale, materials and technology between the modern development plans and expansions since the 1960s on the one hand, and the pre-modern traditional evolving of the oasis on the other hand.

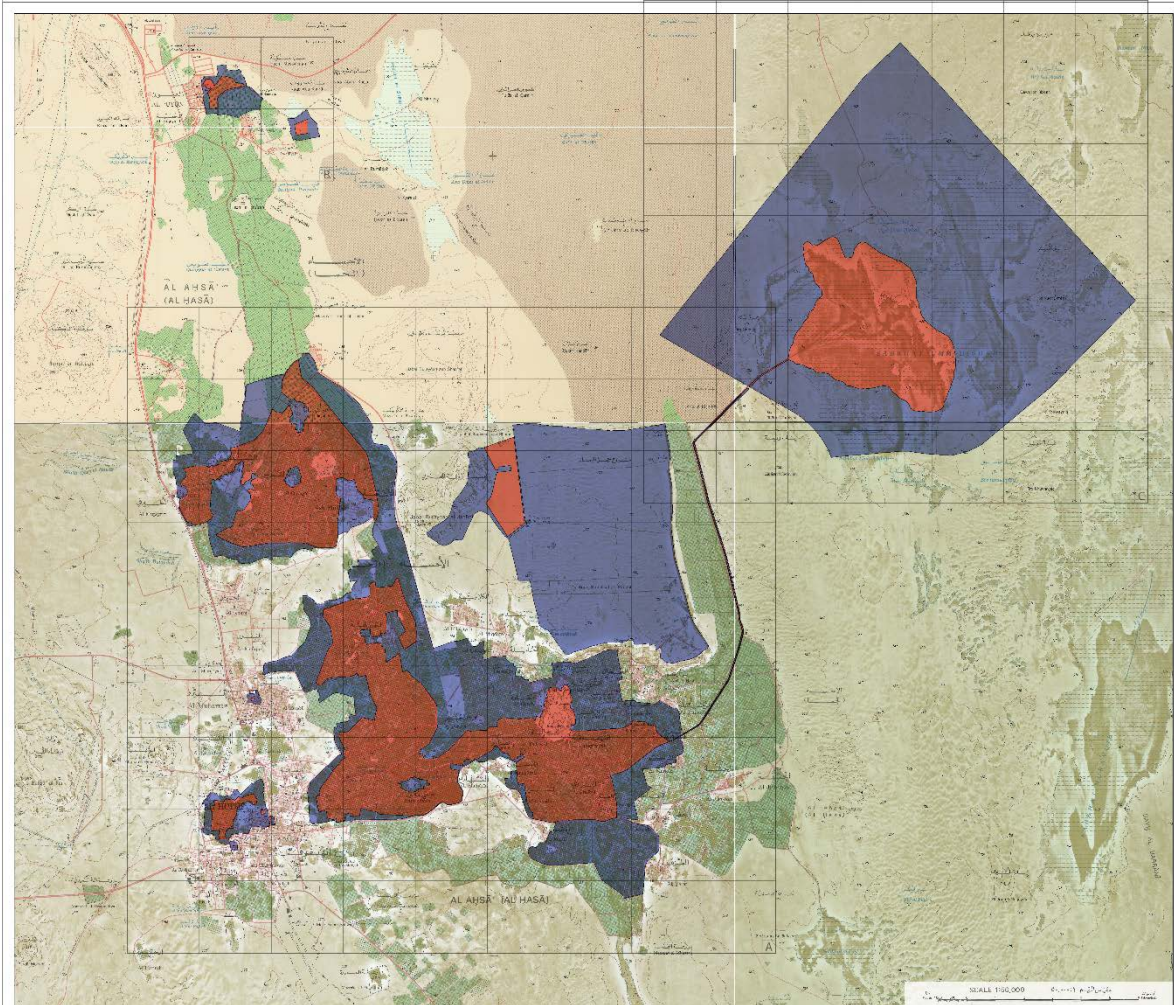
ICOMOS also considers that the integrity of the nominated property is not demonstrated as the large-scale modern water management networks, and the modern urban developments since the 1960s, have greatly impacted the property. Furthermore, the property is threatened by the future development plans for Al-Ahsa.

In conclusion, ICOMOS considers that the property has not demonstrated Outstanding Universal Value.

8 Recommendations

Recommendations with respect to inscription

ICOMOS recommends that Al-Ahsa Oasis, an Evolving Cultural Landscape, Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, should **not be inscribed** on the World Heritage List.



تخطيط التسمية للمنطقة المقترحة
Proposed Nominations Planning
 مملكة البحرين - Kingdom of Bahrain
 وزارة التراث والثقافة - Ministry of Cultural Heritage
 رقم التسمية - Nominations Number
 التاريخ - Date
 1443 هـ / 2021 م
 15/05/2021

Map showing the boundaries of the nominated property



Al-Qubbah Mosque in Qasr Ibrahim



Al-Ahsa Oasis, irrigated fields