

### Featured Photo Essay: Walls of the GCC

by Rana Jarbou

One can easily see the impact of the GCC cities' rapid modernization by looking at their visual culture and urban discourse, which are manifest in graffiti. However, finding graffiti in the Gulf states is challenging. Only a few buildings have become canvases for graffiti artists and writers, and they are mostly found in old villages in Bahrain, scattered among Kuwait's abandoned pre-invasion structures, or in Qatif, Saudi Arabia. With little-to-no open-air public spaces, one can go long distances searching for a mere expression or drawing.

It is not a mystery why public spaces are impoverished or even nonexistent in such wealthy oil-rich countries. There are few green spaces and shaded streets, and thus there exists little street interface. These countries afford only isolated spaces, such as shopping malls and commercial centers, to which people most often need to drive. With the exception of the Dubai Metro, which only opened a few years ago, the poor public transportation systems in most Gulf cities cause over-dependence on vehicles. The lack of a rich and integrated graffiti culture reflects the ensuing absence of



Bahrain



*"Oh Allah, bless Muhammad & the family of Muhammad."* Sar, Bahrain. To pray for and send blessings for prophet Muhammad is a common practice for Muslims on many occasions, especially during prayer. Bahrain's closed-off village communities are rich with calligraphy ranging from Quranic verses to religious supplications and aphorisms, depicting a sense of belonging and collective social memory, as some of them emphasize the Shia identity.

In conjunction with the beautiful calligraphy and paintings, dissenting graffiti is in abundance, marked by the village communities' ongoing struggle. Sectarian tensions are manifest on these angry walls, ranging from displays of unequal education and employment opportunities among Bahrainis as well as their undermined representation in the political process. This graffiti, at the entrance of Sar village reads *"Steadfast street,"* marking the village boundaries. Police and protestors often clash at these village passageways.



Kuwait



*"Free Kuwait"* and *"Long live Kuwait"* Kuwait City, Kuwait. In the Kuwaiti capital, many abandoned buildings and houses from the Iraqi invasion in 1990 remain as canvases for graffiti writers and street artists. It is unknown when these walls were graffitied, but their western pop-culture aesthetics and influences are discernable. Some nationalist and religious graffiti can also be found among western idols, popularized symbols and graffiti fonts.

Like other cities in the GCC, graffiti in Kuwait is scattered across the city with various aesthetics and purposes ranging from the emerging popular art to the Bidoun (stateless people) writings calling for statehood. Still dominating this range is graffiti in the spaces where there are remnants of war.



Oman



Some western inspired graffiti in Muscat's outskirts, among the very little graffiti to be found in Oman. Nationalism and rap are prevailing themes. *"Oman is one pulse"* is one common Arabic phrase written across the island, found even on rocks and canoes.

*"In the name of Allah"* is graffitied on an aluminum structure in the middle of Wahiba sands, in the Rub' al Khali (empty quarter) desert. Religious graffiti, particularly "remember Allah," "There is no God but Allah," and "Allahu Akbar" are some of the most abundant in all GCC countries.

an urban ecosystem of social and public spaces, and thus the lack of outdoor activities and relations.

This is why graffiti has become confined to villages and residential areas, where there is a sense of community. Censorship and surveillance play roles, too. And yet even on the clean white walls of the new oasis cities, people have left their marks. The walls of Saudi Arabia and Bahrain harbor some degree of social and political commentary, but for the most part religion, love, poetry and

song lyrics, tribal codes, nationalism (and nostalgia for one's homeland), football, hip hop, and digital codes (such as blackberry pin numbers) seem to be dominating the graffiti culture of these "cities of salt."

*Rana Jarbou is an independent media artist who researches and documents graffiti and street art throughout the Arab world. These photos are a sample of graffiti captured from 2007 to present as part of an ongoing project documenting graffiti as counter-narrative.*



In the Doha outskirts and areas inhabited by expat communities, there is much graffiti that asserts one's racial or national identity. "Baluch" is one dominant identity marked on Doha's walls, though Oman and the UAE are more populated by them. 50 Cent is idolized here, in line with many of the western hip hop icons celebrated in other GCC cities.

"No wind shakes you, bu Azooz" comes from the old Arabic proverb, "oh mountain, no wind shakes you," to mean you're so strong and resilient, and it became a common expression used in numerous colloquial song lyrics. Bu Azooz is a name tag and also seen here are 3-digit tribal codes, a common graffiti practice in the Gulf.



"Harby and the wafa' (loyalty) is my path." Ha'il, Saudi Arabia. "Harby" is in reference to the Harb tribe. This rhythmic phrase is a common practice among young proud tribalists, adding to the "I am here" graffiti motif to say "I am from here." In addition to their digital codes, ranging from blackberry pin numbers, online social profiles and other modes of communication, there are 3-digit codes signifying tribes' names. Along with these codes and rhyming in colloquial dialect are proud tribal slogans and they extend to other Gulf countries.

"Oh, time, I wish I know what is coming in my life before I pay the price, I'm losing it." Al Hilla, Riyadh, Saudi Arabia. Lyrics from the song, "Jizaty," meaning "my reward" by the Saudi hip hop artist Klash (short for Kalashnikov). Saudi Arabia's graffiti culture is very rich and diverse, reflective of the very disparate communities across the country with themes ranging from joyriding to love.



Grffiti is uncommon in Abu Dhabi, and in the UAE for that matter, apart from the infamous Dubai writer Arcadia Blank. However, there are a few tags and phrases lurking behind an alleyway here or there, such as joyriding (hajwalah) references to Quranic verses in English. This graffitied phrase is on a main highway heading towards Saadiyat Island and it reads, "Rest in peace, the soldiers of this nation," assumingly in reference to the ongoing war in Yemen.

It is more common to find graffiti in the smaller local and expat communities and towns in the UAE, with themes including hip hop, rebellion and profanity as is depicted here in Sharjah.