

10 March 2025

English

---

**United Nations Group of Experts on  
Geographical Names**

**2025 session**

New York, 28 April – 2 May 2025

Item 8(a) of the provisional agenda \*

**Culture, heritage and language recognition: Geographical names  
as culture, heritage and identity**

**The Role of Geographical Names in Safeguarding Cultural  
Heritage in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia**

Submitted by the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia \*\*

---

\* GEGN.2/2025/1

\*\* The full report was prepared by ((Talal AlShafaey, The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, The General Authority for Survey and Geospatial Information))

## Background and Context

Saudi Arabia's cultural heritage is deeply embedded in its history, geography, and traditions. As the birthplace of Islam and a hub of ancient civilizations, the Kingdom's geographical names hold historical, religious, and linguistic significance. These names connect modern society to ancient trade routes, archaeological sites, sacred locations, and historical settlements, preserving the nation's rich legacy. However, urbanization, modernization, and globalization threaten these traditional place names, with oral traditions and historical records fading over time. Infrastructure expansion and urban development further accelerate the loss of these cultural identifiers.

To address this, Saudi Arabia has implemented measures to document, standardize, and integrate geographical names into national geospatial databases and digital platforms. The General Authority for Survey and Geospatial Information (GEOSA) and the Ministry of Culture collaborate to protect and promote these names, ensuring their accessibility and accuracy within the Kingdom's geospatial framework. This paper examines the role of geographical names in cultural heritage preservation, the challenges involved, and the impact of digital tools, tourism, and research. It highlights the ongoing efforts to safeguard Saudi Arabia's geographical heritage for future generations.

## Scope and Objectives of the Paper

This paper examines the role of geographical names in preserving Saudi Arabia's cultural heritage, highlighting their historical, religious, linguistic, and societal significance. It explores challenges in documentation, standardization, and digital preservation while showcasing government efforts and global best practices. Additionally, it assesses the impact of technology, urbanization, and public awareness on safeguarding these names.

Specifically, the paper seeks to:

To underscore the importance of safeguarding cultural heritage in Saudi Arabia, emphasizing why cultural identity matters in a rapidly modernizing nation.

- Demonstrate how geographical names serve as pillars of cultural, historical, religious, and linguistic heritage.
- Examine the cultural and historical significance of key Saudi locations and their contributions to heritage.
- Review government-led efforts, policies, and initiatives for documenting and standardizing geographical names.
- Emphasize the innovative application of digital tools, including story maps, geoportal and a dedicated geographical names portal, in enhancing the accessibility, preservation, and promotion of cultural heritage associated with geographical names
- Highlight the socioeconomic impact of preserving geographical names, particularly in tourism, research, and economic development.
- Identify the challenges facing geographical name preservation, including urbanization, modernization, and public awareness.
- Explore international best practices and case studies for geographical name conservation and global collaboration.

## Importance of Safeguarding Cultural Heritage

Cultural heritage is the collective identity of a nation, reflecting its history, values, traditions, and linguistic diversity. It serves as a bridge between generations, ensuring that the customs, knowledge, and stories of the past are preserved for the future. Safeguarding cultural heritage is vital in maintaining national pride, reinforcing social cohesion, and promoting historical awareness.

In the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, cultural heritage is deeply embedded in geographical names, historical landmarks, and oral traditions. These elements offer insights into the Kingdom's rich past, from ancient civilizations and trade routes to Islamic heritage and modern development. With increasing urbanization, globalization, and technological advancements, there is an urgent need to protect these cultural assets from being lost or altered.

Preserving cultural heritage is paramount in Saudi Arabia, ensuring that its historical legacy continues to inspire education, research, and tourism. Heritage sites such as Diriyah, Al-Ula, Makkah, Madinah, and Al-Balad not only attract global visitors but also contribute to the Kingdom's economy and international cultural diplomacy. Government efforts, community participation, and digital preservation initiatives play a crucial role in sustaining cultural heritage in an evolving world.

## Role of Geographical Names in Preservation

Geographical names are more than identifiers of locations—they are living records of history, cultural evolution, and environmental connections. In Saudi Arabia, place names hold deep cultural significance, often reflecting historical events, religious importance, and the Kingdom's diverse landscapes. Preserving these names ensures the continuity of cultural identity and historical accuracy.

Toponyms serve as markers of historical settlements, ancient civilizations, and sacred religious sites. They maintain linguistic heritage, preserving Arabic dialects and indigenous terminology that may otherwise fade over time. Additionally, geographical names aid in storytelling and oral traditions, linking generations through shared history.

## Historical and Cultural Significance in Saudi Arabia

Saudi Arabia is home to numerous culturally and historically significant locations, each bearing names that reflect the Kingdom's rich past. These names connect the present to ancient civilizations, Islamic heritage, and significant trade routes. Understanding their importance helps in safeguarding them for future generations.

- **Makkah and Madinah: The Heart of Islamic Heritage**

Makkah (مكة المكرمة) and Madinah (المدينة المنورة), the two holiest cities in Islam, hold immense cultural and historical significance, with key heritage sites that have shaped Islamic history for centuries. Makkah is home to Masjid Al-Haram (المسجد الحرام), the most sacred mosque, which houses the Kaaba (الكعبة المشرفة), the focal point of Muslim prayers. Nearby, Jabal Al-Nour (جبل النور) contains Hira Cave (غار حراء), where the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) received the first revelation. Another significant site is Jabal Thawr (جبل ثور), where the Prophet and Abu Bakr (أبو بكر الصديق) took refuge in Thawr Cave (غار ثور) during their migration to Madinah. Additionally, Mina (منى) and Arafat (عرفات) are key locations for Hajj rituals, preserving traditions practiced for over a millennium. Bir Zamzam (بئر زمزم), the sacred well within Masjid Al-Haram, holds immense religious significance as the source of water miraculously provided for Hagar (هاجر) and her son Prophet Ismail (إسماعيل عليه السلام).



ZamZam Well (Credit Wikipedia)

Madinah is known for Al-Masjid An-Nabawi (المسجد النبوي), the Prophet's Mosque, which houses his tomb and remains a spiritual and cultural focal point for Muslims worldwide. The historic Quba Mosque (مسجد قباء), the first mosque in Islam, and Masjid Al-Qiblatain (مسجد القبلتين), where the Qibla (قبلة) direction was changed, are also essential parts of Islamic heritage. Uhud Mountain (جبل أحد), the site of the pivotal Battle of Uhud (غزوة أحد), is another important location deeply tied to Islamic history. These sites, along with efforts to document and preserve them, play a vital role in maintaining Saudi Arabia's rich cultural and religious heritage, ensuring their legacy for future generations.

Dr. Abdullah Alkadi, a prominent scholar, has conducted extensive research on the Hijrah route taken by the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) from Makkah to Madinah. Over 16 years, he identified 63 milestones along this path, providing valuable insights into the historical journey. His work offers a detailed understanding of the ancient pilgrimage routes that have connected these two holy cities for centuries.

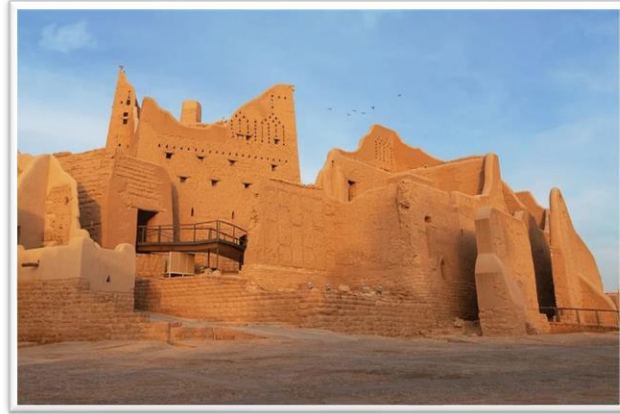


Alkadi measures milestone 19 (Credit aramcoworld)

- **Diriyah: Symbol of National Unification**

Diriyah (الدرعية) is the birthplace of the first Saudi state and played a key role in unifying the Arabian Peninsula. It symbolizes national identity and leadership.

At-Turaif District, a UNESCO World Heritage site, preserves Diriyah's Najdi architecture. The Diriyah Gate Development Program promotes its historical significance while maintaining its name.



Diriyah

- **Al-Ula: Echoes of Ancient Civilizations**

Al-Ula (العلا) is home to Hegra (Al-Hijr, Mada'in Salih), Saudi Arabia's first UNESCO World Heritage site. It was a key Nabataean trade and cultural center. Once a major stop on ancient trade routes, Al-Ula is now a tourism and research hub, with ongoing efforts to document its landmarks and indigenous names.



Al-Hijr

- **Al-Hasa: Historical Moments and Natural Resources**

Al-Hasa (الأحساء), one of the world's largest oases, is known for its ancient irrigation systems and palm groves. Its name reflects the region's reliance on underground water sources. A UNESCO World Heritage site, Al-Hasa's preservation ensures its historical, agricultural, and environmental significance is maintained for future generations.



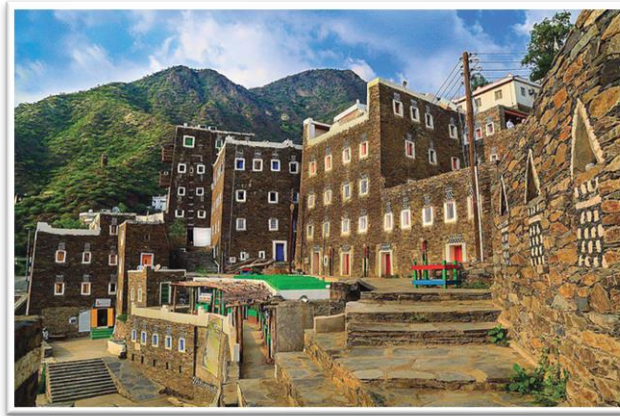
Al-Hasa ( Credit : Wikipedia)

- **Al-Balad: Historic Port City and Architectural Heritage**

Al-Balad (البلد), Jeddah's historic heart, dates back to the 7th century and served as a major port for Hajj pilgrims. It is famous for its coral stone houses and bustling markets. A UNESCO World Heritage site, Al-Balad's preservation ensures its commercial and cultural legacy remains a key part of Saudi Arabia's history.

- **Rijal Almaa Village: Traditional Architecture and Heritage**

Rijal Almaa (رجال ألمع), in the Asir region, is known for its stone-and-wood houses and vibrant painted interiors. It was a cultural hub along ancient trade routes. Restoration efforts focus on preserving its architecture, oral histories, and traditions, ensuring its identity remains a celebrated part of Saudi heritage.



Rijal Almaa Village (Credit : Arabnews)

- **Uruq Bani Ma'arid Reserve: A Natural and Cultural Sanctuary**

Uruq Bani Ma'arid (أروق بني معارض) is a protected desert reserve, home to rare species like the Arabian oryx and vital for biodiversity conservation. Recognized as a UNESCO World Heritage site, it reflects Saudi Arabia's natural and cultural heritage, with preservation efforts ensuring its ecological and historical significance.



Uruq Bani Ma'arid ( Credit : Arabnews)

- **Al-Faw Archaeological Area: A Window into Ancient Arabia**

Al-Faw (قرية الفاو), the capital of the Kingdom of Kinda, was a major pre-Islamic trade center near the Empty Quarter. Recognized as a UNESCO World Heritage site, excavations have revealed rock inscriptions, tombs, and irrigation systems, providing valuable insights into early Arabian civilizations. Ongoing preservation efforts ensure the protection of its archaeological and historical significance..

- **Rock Art in the Hail Region: Ancient Carvings and Cultural Legacy**



The Hail Region is home to some of Saudi Arabia's most remarkable rock carvings, depicting human and animal figures dating back 10,000 years. These sites provide insight into early Arabian life, traditions, and environmental changes. Recognized as a UNESCO World Heritage site, efforts focus on preserving its historical value.

- **Himā Cultural Area: A Testament to Early Civilizations**

Himā (حِمَى) is a UNESCO-listed site with rock art and inscriptions over 7,000 years old, located along ancient caravan routes. It showcases the cultural interactions of early civilizations, with preservation initiatives ensuring its historical and artistic significance remains intact.



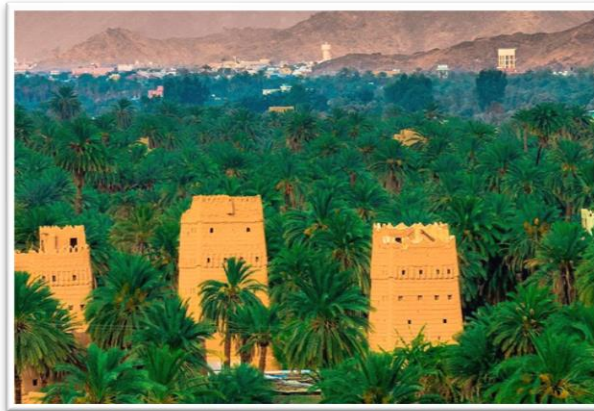
Himā Cultural Area

- **Thaimah and Al-Jouf: Ancient Trade Routes and Settlements**

Tayma (تَيْمَاء) and Al-Jouf (الجوف) were key trade hubs along historic caravan routes, linking the Arabian Peninsula to Mesopotamia and the Levant. These settlements hold archaeological remains, inscriptions, and ancient fortresses, reflecting their historical importance. Ongoing documentation and conservation efforts protect their legacy.

- **Other Significant Places**

Saudi Arabia has numerous other culturally and historically significant locations, each with unique heritage value. Sites such as Dumat Al-Jandal, Najran, and Khaybar highlight diverse aspects of the Kingdom's past, from pre-Islamic civilizations to key Islamic-era events. Continued preservation ensures these names and histories endure.



Najran

## Government Initiatives for Safeguarding Names

The preservation and management of geographical names are essential for maintaining cultural heritage, national identity, and effective geospatial data utilization. The Ministry of Culture and General Authority for Survey and Geospatial Information (GEOSA) play a pivotal role in this effort. The Ministry of Culture is responsible for establishing cultural heritage policies and providing detailed descriptions and historical context for cultural names.

These cultural name details are then shared with GEOSA, which integrates them into National Geographical Names Database and Geoportal, ensuring their accessibility and accuracy within the national geospatial framework. Through this collaboration, Saudi Arabia ensures the protection, documentation, and promotion of its rich cultural heritage.

### **National Committee on Geographical Names**

The National Committee on Geographical Names, led by GEOSA, is the primary authority overseeing the collection, standardization, and dissemination of geographical names in Saudi Arabia. The committee comprises 21 representatives from various government entities, working together to develop national policies and guidelines for managing geographical names in a unified and standardized manner.



National Committee on Geographical Names

### **Documentation and Standardization of Geographical Names**

To ensure consistency and accuracy, GEOSA undertakes the documentation and standardization of geographical names. This process includes collecting names, verifying names, ensuring correct spellings, and aligning them with international best practices. Standardization helps maintain uniformity across official documents, maps, and digital platforms, facilitating clear and reliable geographical references.

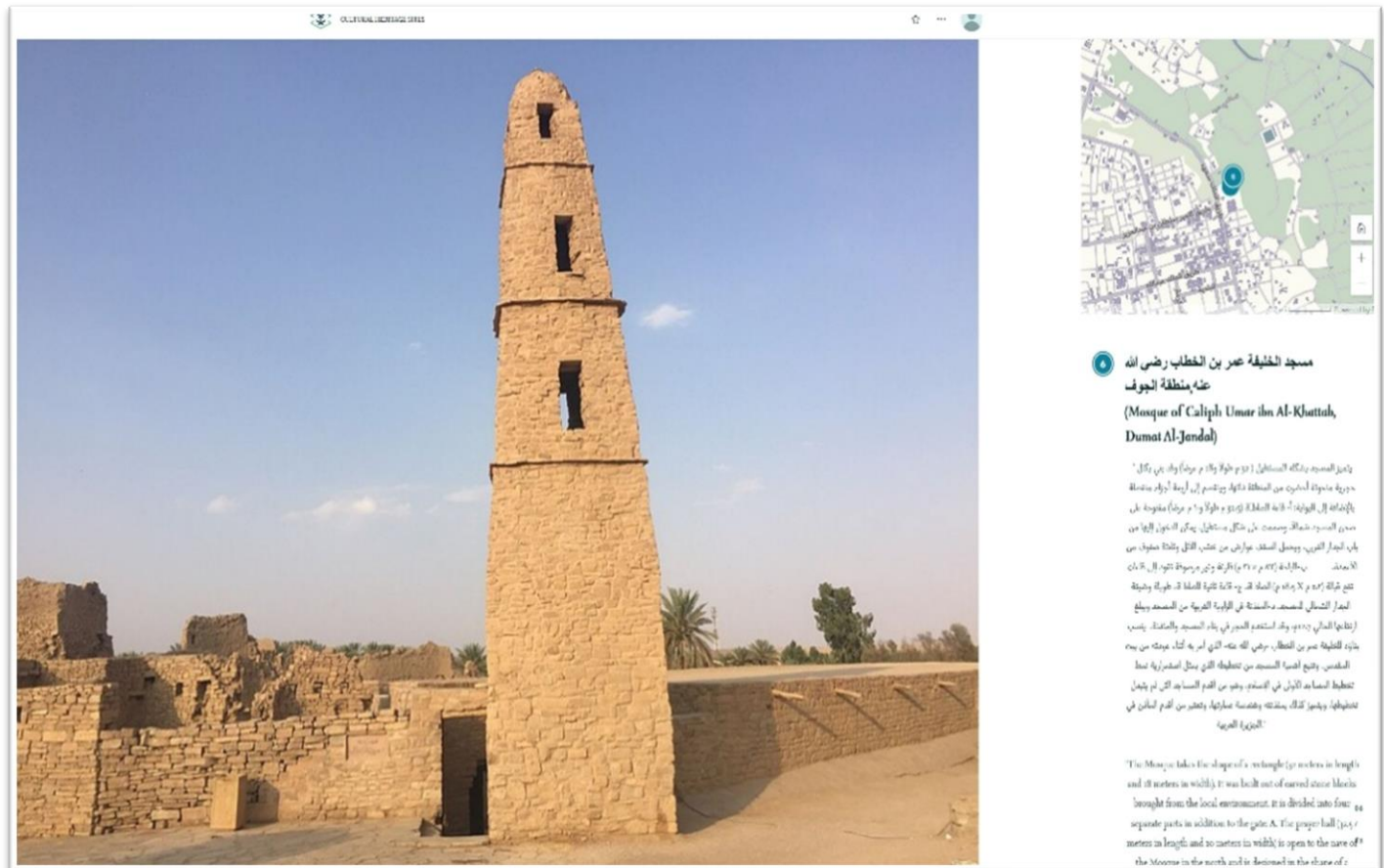
### **Geographical Names Database**

A comprehensive geographical names database serves as the backbone of name preservation and management. GEOSA has developed a national database that stores, manages, and maintains accurate information about Saudi Arabia's geographical names. This database integrates cultural and historical names, ensuring their preservation, accessibility, and accurate representation across various platforms.

### **Story Maps**

GEOSA utilizes Story Maps to enhance the preservation, accessibility, and visualization of geographical names. These interactive digital tools integrate maps, images, narratives, and multimedia content to provide engaging storytelling experiences. By highlighting the historical, cultural, and geographical significance of place names, Story Maps foster greater public awareness and engagement. They serve as a bridge between traditional knowledge and modern digital tools, ensuring that Saudi Arabia's rich geographical heritage is presented in an informative and visually compelling manner.

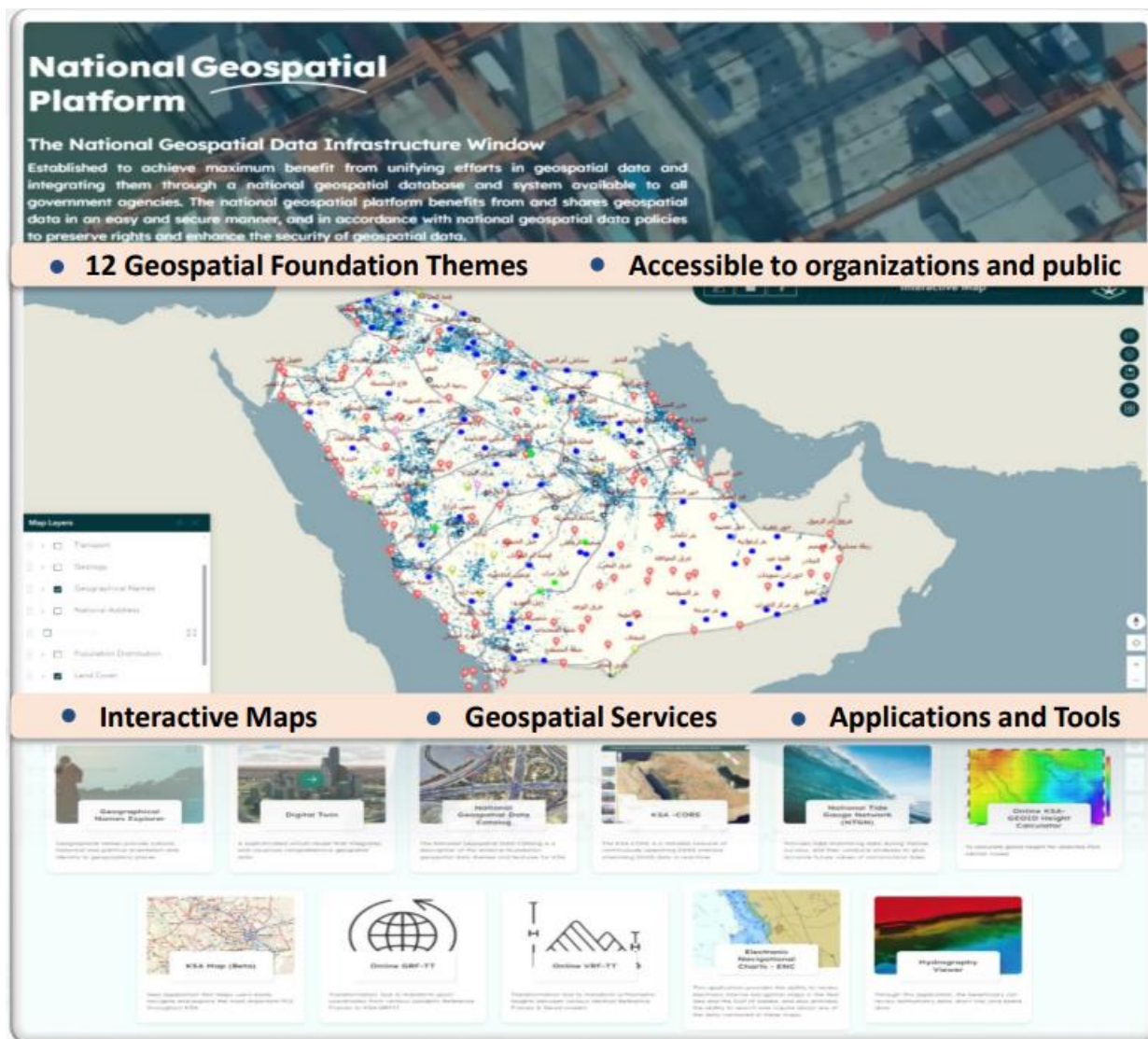




Story Maps

## National Geospatial Platform

The National Geospatial Platform (Geoportal KSA), developed by GEOSA, serves as a centralized digital platform for managing and accessing standardized geographical names and other geospatial data. It provides government agencies, researchers, and the public with an authoritative reference system, ensuring accuracy and consistency in geographical information. A key feature within the Geoportal is the Geographical Names Explorer, which allows users to search, retrieve, and analyse place names with detailed historical and cultural insights. In 2024, GEOSA successfully redesigned the Geoportal, enhancing its functionality, usability, and data integration capabilities. Through seamless digital mapping and advanced geospatial tools, the platform supports research, planning, and heritage preservation, reinforcing Saudi Arabia's commitment to documenting and safeguarding its geographical heritage.

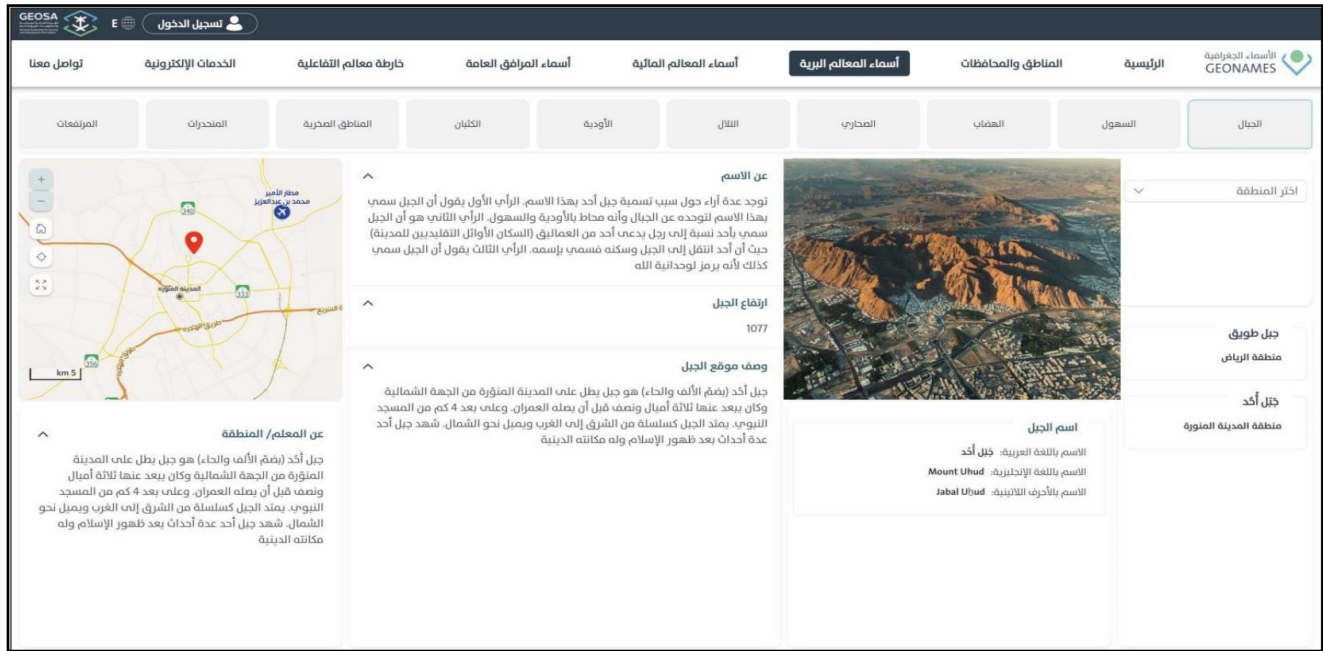


National Geoportal

## Development of the Geographical Names Portal

The Geographical Names Portal, developed by GEOSA, will serve as a centralized platform for accessing standardized geographical names. It will provide government agencies, researchers, and the public with an easy-to-use interface for retrieving and verifying place names, ensuring a unified reference system. As a gazetteer, it will offer detailed place name data, historical context, and geospatial references to support cultural heritage preservation, governance, and research.

Unlike the Geographical Names Explorer in Geoportal, the portal will seamlessly integrate into the national geospatial framework. It will feature more detailed data and advanced functionalities tailored for geographical name management, research, and analysis, enhancing documentation and visualization of historical and cultural names.



Geographical Names Portal prototype

## Impact on Tourism, Economy, and Research

The preservation and proper management of geographical names play a crucial role in promoting tourism, economic growth, and academic research. By safeguarding historical and cultural place names, Saudi Arabia enhances its global appeal, strengthens its economy, and provides valuable resources for researchers and historians.

Accurate geographical name documentation enhances the visibility of Saudi Arabia's heritage sites, attracting international tourists. Locations such as Diriyah (الدرعية), the birthplace of the Saudi state, Al-Balad (البلد), Jeddah's historic district, AlUla (العلال), home to the UNESCO-listed Hegra (مدائن صالح), Edge of the World (حافة العالم), with its breathtaking cliffs and panoramic desert views, and Rijal Almaa (رجال ألمع), a historic village known for its vibrant stone architecture in the Asir region, benefit from standardized naming and digital mapping.

Heritage sites contribute significantly to the economy by boosting tourism, hospitality, and local businesses. Proper documentation and promotion of places like Diriyah, Al-Balad, and Al-Ula:

- Increase tourism revenue by attracting more visitors.
- Encourage investment in cultural projects and infrastructure.
- Create job opportunities in preservation, tourism, and hospitality sectors.

The Geographical Names Database and Geoportal support researchers in studying the historical, cultural, archaeological, and linguistic aspects of Saudi Arabia. These locations serve as key sites for academic exploration, providing valuable insights into the Kingdom's cultural evolution, urban history, and heritage preservation.

## Challenges in Safeguarding Geographical Names

Despite efforts to preserve geographical names, urban development, cultural shifts, and technical challenges impact their protection and continuity. Rapid urbanization often leads to the modification or loss of traditional names, as expanding cities and infrastructure projects overshadow historical identities. To mitigate this, integrating heritage preservation into urban planning, enforcing naming regulations, and promoting digital records can help safeguard historical names. Additionally, oral traditions and indigenous knowledge are at risk due to generational shifts and

reliance on modern naming conventions. Structured documentation, digital archiving, and community engagement are essential for preserving traditional names.

A lack of public awareness and participation further weakens conservation efforts. Encouraging local communities, historians, and researchers to contribute to Story Maps, Geoportals, and educational programs is vital for maintaining cultural heritage. Ensuring accuracy and consistency across platforms remains a technical challenge, requiring collaboration between agencies, linguistic expertise, and digital integration. A unified national framework, advanced geospatial technologies, and inter-agency cooperation can streamline standardization and enhance the accessibility of historical names.

## **Best Practices and International Case Studies**

Preserving and managing geographical names requires a strategic approach, integrating global best practices and international frameworks. Various countries and organizations have successfully implemented initiatives to safeguard geographical heritage, offering valuable insights for Saudi Arabia.

Many nations use structured policies, digital tools, and community engagement to protect place names:

- New Zealand works with Māori communities to preserve indigenous names through a dual naming system, restoring original names like Mount Taranaki (formerly Mount Egmont).
- Canada restores indigenous names and promotes bilingual usage (English, French, and indigenous languages), ensuring clear policies like avoiding names of living persons to prevent politicization.

UNESCO and UNGEGN provide global guidelines for standardizing and preserving geographical names:

- UNESCO World Heritage Sites stress maintaining the historical and cultural significance of place names.
- UNGEGN resolutions emphasize standardization, multilingual documentation, and digital accessibility to protect geographical identities.

## **Future Directions for Safeguarding Cultural Names**

To preserve geographical names, Saudi Arabia must strengthen policies, enhance public engagement, improve digital tools, and expand global collaboration. Strengthening regulations will standardize names, integrate historical conventions, and enforce protection. Public participation through education, citizen contributions, and expert collaboration will aid documentation. Enhancing Story Maps and the Geographical Names Portal will improve accessibility and visualization, while AI can support verification. Strengthening ties with UNGEGN, UNESCO, and global partners will align efforts with international standards. By implementing these strategies, Saudi Arabia can safeguard its geographical heritage, ensuring names remain protected, accessible, and accurately represented for future generations.

## **Conclusion**

The preservation and management of geographical names are essential for safeguarding Saudi Arabia's cultural identity, historical heritage, and geospatial accuracy. Through strategic initiatives, including standardization, digital integration, and public engagement, Saudi Arabia is actively working to ensure the protection and accessibility of its geographical names. Challenges such as urbanization, loss of traditional knowledge, and technical barriers must be addressed through stronger policies, enhanced digital tools like Story Maps and Geoportal, and global collaboration with organizations like UNGEGN and UNESCO. By adopting best practices, leveraging technology, and fostering public participation, Saudi Arabia can maintain its rich geographical heritage while supporting tourism, economic growth, and academic research. Moving forward, a continued commitment to innovation and preservation will ensure that geographical names remain a vital part of the nation's cultural and historical legacy for generations to come.

## Points for Discussion

1. Enhancing Geographical Name Documentation – How can we further improve the accuracy and richness of cultural and historical place name records?
2. Public Engagement and Awareness – What strategies can be implemented to involve communities, researchers, and the public in preserving and promoting geographical names?
3. Future Digital Developments – What additional functionalities should be considered for the new Geographical Names Portal to better support research and heritage conservation?

## References

Experience AIUla Official Site – *History of AIUla* ([History](#) | [Forever Revitalising](#) | [Experience AIUla](#)) ([History](#) | [Forever Revitalising](#) | [Experience AIUla](#)).

WorldHeritageSite.org – *Historic Jeddah description* ([Historic Jeddah](#) | [For UNESCO World Heritage Travellers](#)).

UNESCO Heritage sites in KSA <https://whc.unesco.org/en/statesparties/sa>

New Zealand Geographic Board – *Standardization Practices Document* (2018) ([NEW ZEALAND GEOGRAPHICAL NAMES STANDARDISATION - UNSD](#)).

Diriyah Gate Development Authority – *Diriyah UNESCO World Heritage Site Description* ([At-Turaif](#)).

Saudi Press Agency (SPA) – *Uruq Bani Ma'arid Reserve UNESCO Inscription News* ([UNESCO listing of Uruq Bani Ma'arid Reserve puts Saudi conservation efforts in the limelight](#) | [Arab News](#))

Restoring Native American names

<https://edition.cnn.com/travel/article/denali-renaming-natural-sites-feat/index.html>