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Guest Lecture by

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Global History as experienced by a Saudi Arabian Oasis, c. 1870s to 2025

The small oasis town of al-ʿUlā in the northern Hedjaz region of Saudi Arabia has a long history of transregional connectivity, given that it is situated on the old caravan route connecting the South of the Arabian Peninsula to Egypt and the Syrian lands. This route was used by the incense trade as well as, later on, by Muslim pilgrims on their route to and from the holy cities of Mecca and Medina. In the late 19th century, when tribal fighting engulfed the region, the Ottoman government attempted to strengthen its grip on this strategically important region. The construction of the Hedjaz railway did much to strengthen this grip in the early 20th century, and during World War I, Ottoman, German and British forces passed through al-ʿUlā in their bids to control the Arabian Peninsula. With the establishment of the modern Saudi Kingdom, new routes for motor transport bypassing al-ʿUlā were established, thus relegating the town to a rural backwater. Only recently, the projects expanding tourism on the Arabian Peninsula initiated by Saudi Crown Prince Muhammad Bin Salman have catapulted al-ʿUlā into international limelight, with posters in European airports and direct flights from Paris.

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