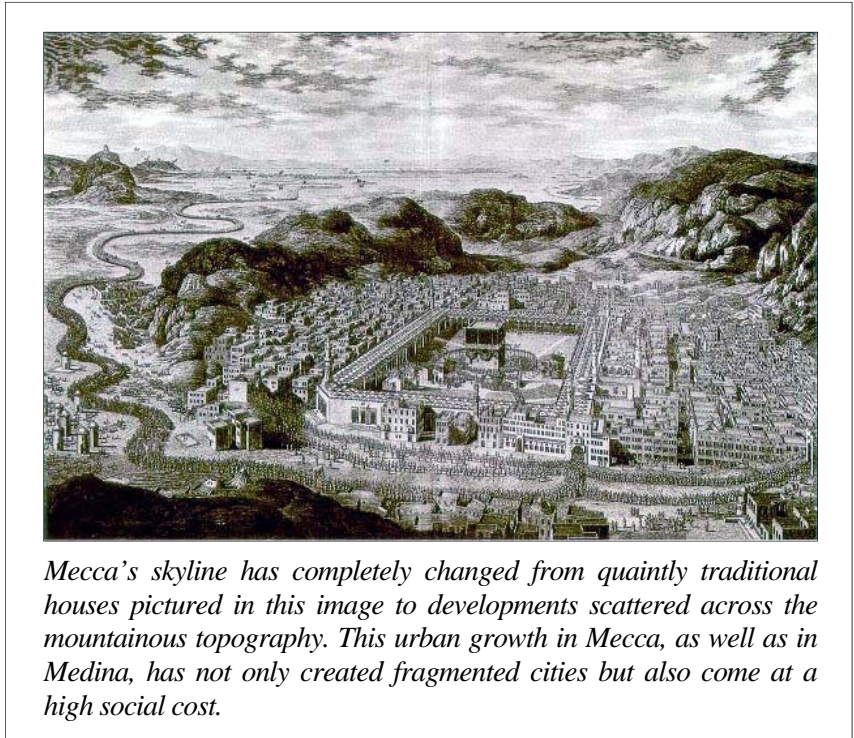


Mecca and Medina, Sacred Sites or Development Engines?

by Atef Alshehri

The ongoing transformation of Mecca and Medina is a deeply contested issue. As Islam's holiest sites, their spiritual significance implies a certain propriety of urban form prescribed by their history. Yet the current drastic changes engineered by private and state actors in Saudi Arabia represent a dangerously widening gap with their heritage with economics as the driving force. This rupture with the cities' sacred nature is the

outcome of such factors as state and private enterprise actions, permanent and transient population growth, economic competition, and development challenges in the desert kingdom. As a result, the urban heritage erosion has not only left fragmented cities behind but has also come at a high social cost.



Mecca's skyline has completely changed from quaintly traditional houses pictured in this image to developments scattered across the mountainous topography. This urban growth in Mecca, as well as in Medina, has not only created fragmented cities but also come at a high social cost.

The Imprint of History

As the primary loci of religious veneration for the entire Islamic world, Mecca and Medina are multiethnic cities attracting Muslims from all over the world. In pre-modern history, they were the reci-

ipients of cycles of patronage, from the Umayyads in the seventh century all the way to the Ottomans at the beginning of the twentieth century. Presiding over Mecca and Medina throughout Islamic history has been a decisive element for legitimizing political

authority. Even today, Saudi Arabia considers Mecca its religious capital, a notion sometimes challenged in the complex politics of the Middle East. Tehran has occasionally called for the holy shrines to be declared international territories, especially at times when its political tensions with Riyadh heightened. Politicizing the two cities is just one indicator of their delicate religious status as Islam's sanctum sanctorum where past and present, divine and mundane meet in one place.

Over the past two decades, however, both cities have undergone a massive spree of urban development, expansion, and land acquisition that has completely changed their character. In a typical post-oil boom fashion, this development spree has been characterized by diminishing state spending, increased privatization, and population concentration in large cities. With franchises, brand labels, and international hotel chains replacing traditional manifestations of ordinary life and causing severe damage to cultural heritage resources, the historical identity of both cities has been challenged. This is becoming a contested issue in public and scholarly circles, considering the unprecedented scale and the insensitivity of the urban transformation.

Mecca: City of Pilgrimage

Mecca is both a global and a local city. It is the birthplace of Islam and home to the religion's holiest shrine, the Kaaba, as well as the site for the Muslim annual pilgrimage, the Hajj. Historically, it was the most important trading center of western and central Arabia being at the junction of two major routes. One went south and north, through the mountainous Hejaz from Yemen

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and the Indian Ocean to Syria and the Mediterranean; the other went east and west from Iraq, Iran, and Central Asia to Abyssinia and eastern

Africa.

As a shrine, access to Mecca has always transcended political realms. In this sense, there has been continuous pressure on Saudi Arabia to accommodate more pilgrims. The steep rise in the number of pilgrims started with a little over 100,000 pilgrims in the early 1950s to almost a million pilgrims by 1975.¹ In 2012, the number of pilgrims exceeded three million.² The steady increase can be attributed to several factors. Most importantly, after World War II, many Muslim states gained independence; their respective populations increased, and the demand for access to the Mecca pilgrimage sites rose. This trend corresponded with unprecedented ease of access provided by international air travel that boomed in Saudi Arabia by the end of the 1970s. Yet the annual sharp increase in pilgrims did not match the pace of Mecca's urban development or infrastructure capacity.

Although pilgrimage has sustained Mecca's growth for centuries, it is a double-edged sword. Similar to private enterprise, state initiatives to upgrade the city's infrastructure capacity took a heavy toll on the quality of urban space. For instance, in order to ease crowd movement, an urban jungle of highways, tunnels, and bridges cut across Mecca from all directions, turning the

¹ Adil Bushnak, "The Hajj Transportation System," in Ziauddin Sardar and Zaki Badawi, eds., *Hajj Studies* (London: Croom Helm, 1978). pp. 87-116.

² *Pilgrimage Statistics Report*, General Authority of Statistics, Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, Riyadh, 2016.

once walkable city into an entangled maze of concrete and asphalt. Nowadays, it might be difficult to tell where Mecca actually begins or ends.

Modern Mecca has also been subject to the development process found in Saudi Arabia as a whole. Since the oil boom of the mid-1970s, the urban growth of major Saudi cities, including Mecca, became acute. Large building and infrastructure projects and transport and road networks sprang up everywhere and swallowed the delicate, historic urban fabric. This accelerated cycle of physical change moved much faster than parallel social and cultural processes.

This rupture between the place and its memory is a development side effect, which Mecca shares with other cities as the rush for modernization during the oil boom years generated no effective preservation policies. Most historic centers of major Saudi cities whether in Riyadh, Jeddah, or Dammam were not treated as loci of preservation. The pressures of rapid development coupled with the availability of vast financial resources made it possible to simply raze the old cities and recreate them. On a regional level, the same trend can be seen in other Arabian Gulf cities, such as Dubai, Doha, or Kuwait.

Mecca: Over-scaled Development

Mecca today bears the name of the old city, but the image holds no likeness. Until the beginning of the 1970s oil boom, the city's urban growth maintained strong links



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Until the 1970s oil boom, Mecca's urban growth maintained strong links with its pre-modern heritage. However, outside of the Grand Mosque, most of the historic city of Mecca has been demolished to allow for infrastructure and commercial developments sponsored by state and private actors.

with its pre-modern heritage. In fact, most of Mecca's built heritage can be generally attributed to the Ottoman era, including the Grand Mosque, which was extensively rebuilt during the reign of Sultan Suleiman the Magnificent in the sixteenth century. Today, only the domed arcade that surrounds the Kaaba still exists from that era. Outside the Grand Mosque, however, most of the historic city of Mecca has been demolished to allow for infrastructure and commercial developments sponsored by state and private actors.

Mecca has to reconcile two opposing challenges—demographic growth (both seasonal and permanent) and its topographical limitations. On top of the annual pilgrimage, the number of international visitors who perform the lesser pilgrimage throughout the year (*umra*) is expected to increase from the current six million per year to fifteen million

visitors annually by 2020.³ Furthermore, Mecca's permanent population has risen to almost two million as a result of internal migration over the past two decades, in addition to the undocumented population of migrant workers and visitors who overstay their visas.

The rising population numbers are faced with a naturally confined space. Historically, Mecca was a linear tract stretching along the dry valley of Ibrahim (Abraham) with the Kaaba as its anchor. When the urban fabric had to expand, it did so by stretching horizontally along the valley or gradually climbing the surrounding mountain slopes. This process continued for centuries until it took an acute turn in modern times. Return on investment per development unit became the new determinant of how the city is shaped. Hence, the outrageously over-scaled developments such as the infamous clock tower that hovers like a giant over the Kaaba, or the upcoming state-sponsored hotel, the largest in the world with some ten thousand rooms.

Not only has most of the built heritage disappeared, but the surrounding natural landscape has been drastically altered. Entire mountains were crushed to build high-end commercial and residential towers, offering "rooms with a view" towards the Kaaba. The city skyline has completely changed from the quaint and harmonious constellation of traditional Meccan houses to sporadic developments scattered across the mountainous topography, creating a labyrinthine "urban



Formerly, Medina was an agrarian settlement. The city's distinctive historical hallmark was as a charitable, educational, and scholarly center. But current development is the antithesis of Medina's historical legacy with business enterprises replacing nonprofit endowments.

archipelago." The towers create isolated, vertical, and detached spaces with their own gates, lobbies, and receptions. This is an inversion of the longstanding urban order, which is horizontal, connected, accessible, and welcoming.

Medina: City vs. Mosque

Islamic tradition holds that the prophet Muhammad founded Medina in the seventh century following his migration from Mecca. Formerly, Medina was an agrarian settlement known at the time as Yathrib. The present core area around the Prophet's Mosque (*al-Masjid an-Nabawi*) constitutes the entire historic walled city of Medina, approximately 1.3 square kilometers in area. Despite its small size, Medina's most distinctive historical urban hallmark is its status as an intellectual powerhouse with many endowed institutions (*awqaf*), including schools, libraries, and charitable residences (*ribat*) for travelers, students, and scholars.

³ ["The National Transformation Program 2020,"](#) Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, Riyadh.

Awqaf documents indicate that twenty-eight schools existed in Medina by the end of the Ottoman reign in January 1919, though the actual number is likely higher. Medina

Ottoman court records of the period (1790-1813) registered eighty-two residences for travelers. The city wall functioned as an urban fortification, which kept the physical and social character of the old part distinct from subsequent expansions outside the old wall. This trend continued throughout Medina's life until the old city wall was demolished in the mid-1950s to allow for automobile access and urban expansion.

In the past, the area developed over the centuries to serve charitable, educational, and scholarly purposes. With extensive recent demolition activities, the identity of the core shifted from a historically accessible space for a wide spectrum of community groups to an exclusive destination primarily for seasonal visiting clientele. The current situation is the total inversion of the traditional regime with business enterprises taking the place of nonprofit endowments and causing outrageous surges in property costs, limited public accessibility, and a core separated from its own city.⁴ The result has been the antithesis of Medina's historical legacy and a complete destruction of its built heritage.

The economic and physical schisms between the core and the rest of the city prompted urban sprawl in the direction of the newly planned arterial roads, eroding the historical structure that evolved throughout the centuries. In particular, the introduction of the ring road systems isolated the historic core—

With recent demolition, Medina's core shifted to an exclusive destination primarily for seasonal visiting clientele.

with the Prophet's Mosque at the center—and shifted the urban mobility experience from pedestrian-focused to automobile-focused. In the absence of public

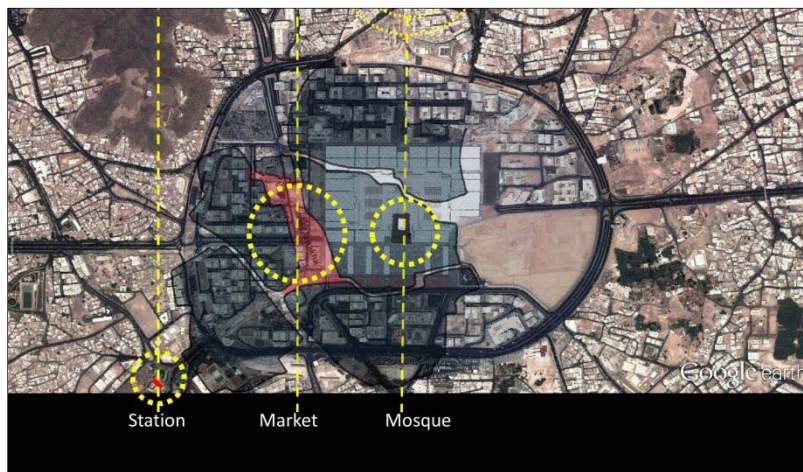
transportation alternatives, traffic into the city center intensified in the proximity of the sacred sanctuary, increasing congestion and negatively affecting experience of the Prophet's Mosque.

Historic continuity of the city's urban fabric, with its intricacy and mixed-use functions of commerce, education, philanthropy, and residence, was replaced by over-scaled vacant squares all around the Prophet's Mosque, flanked by hotels and commercial blocks on all sides.⁵ As a result, the inner character of the core area around the Prophet's Mosque diminished along with the opportunity for rich, sensory experience for walkers or onlookers who, instead, simply experience the Prophet's Mosque standing monumentally, totally detached from the city's urban fabric that used to be integral to it.

The process of pre-modern urban change was communal and incremental, in sharp contrast to how the city is shaped now by centralized governmental agencies. There is an opaque, top-down planning process with almost no communal involvement. Most important planning decisions are enforced but not negotiated. In fact, the core area around the Prophet's Mosque has emptied of its local inhabitants who had no other alternative but to relocate. When this author queried a number of local Medina residents about their experience of the city and its heritage, the responses suggested a sense of loss and disenfranchisement.

⁴ Ananya Roy, "The 21st Century Metropolis: New Geographies of Theory," *Regional Studies*, July 2009, pp. 819-30.

⁵ Jamel Akbar, "Gates as signs of autonomy in Muslim towns," *Muqarnas*, Jan. 1993, pp. 141-7.



The map of pre-modern Medina (dark tone) is superimposed on the present re-configured urban core encircled by the ring road. The Prophet's Mosque is in the center with the footprint of the historic market and the train station to the left (yellow circles). The historic continuity of the city's urban fabric has been replaced by over-scaled vacant squares all around the Prophet's Mosque.

Medina's Shifting Structure

These factors have collectively intensified the rupture of the city's basic structure. In particular, the core area has been changed by the interior ring road that circumscribes what used to be the historic city of Medina. The Prophet's Mosque's position was traditionally peripheral in relation to the old city but is now in the center of this new enclave. This shift of the mosque's position to the traffic and movement center of the area resulted in recurrent crises during peak hours of traffic and prayer.

An important urban node of Medina is the location of the marketplace, known as *al-Manakha*. As a public space, it was one of the city's most resilient elements throughout history. As Medina evolved, the marketplace continued to be the main urban space and eventually the geographic center where all major streets and thoroughfares converged. It became the centerpiece in the tripartite spatial

relationship, which included the Prophet's Mosque to the east, and the Ottoman train station to the west, which opened in 1908 as the terminus of the Hejaz railway.

With the current re-configuration of the core area, this once thriving urban market has been reduced to a parking lot and a street for vehicular traffic. Instead of serving multiple purposes, the historic marketplace lost its position and eventually vanished.⁶ The shifts and rupture of historic urban nodes sent the city into a state of flux and disarray. The entire historic urban structure

became prone to reclamation, appropriation, and reconfiguration into a different form, which broke the city's strong ties with centuries of urban legacy and tradition.

Medina's sacred value has never diminished. Revolving around particular material expressions starting from the Prophet's Mosque, its religious importance has been historically manifested through written and material tradition, as well as corresponding interest by community and patrons alike. But now the spiritual significance is challenged by rapid and insensitive physical change, which not only represents discontinuity with the past but also dissociates all these intangible values and memories from their material witness.

⁶ Muhammad Hussein, *al-Madina al-Munawara: Bunyatuha wa-Tarkibuha al-Umrani al-Taqlidi* (Riyadh: at-Turath, 2010), pp. 84-5.

Commercialized, Polarized, and Fragmented

Mecca and Medina's core areas are two of the most expensive real estate markets in the world. As the value of properties in the two cities has risen, local residents have been driven out of the core areas, which have been completely commercialized and occupied by international hotel chains and commercial towers to accommodate paying customers. The colorful and compact variety of uses and urban activities found in traditional cities has been replaced by sterile, sprawling, and disconnected monotony of repetitive commercial tower blocks. The real danger is the erosion not only of the tangible built heritage but also of the intangible social and communal memory of the place.

As a result of this spatial reshuffling, the core areas of Mecca and Medina are now extremely contested spaces. Both cities are religious "sacred precincts" (*haram*) where a spatial boundary exists to distinguish between the interior and exterior of the sacred precinct. This invisible dividing line is similar to a city wall that separates intramural from extramural realms. The anchor of the sacred precinct is the shrine, whether the Kaaba in Mecca or the Prophet's Mosque in Medina. Historically, all urban development processes and activities intensified gradually as they approached the anchor of the sacred precinct.

The pre-modern layers of both cities interacted to create homogenous urban space despite the demarcation of the sacred precinct. In contrast, the contemporary urban situation created a disparity between the core and the periphery of each city. The fierce economic competition to be as close as possible to the anchor of the sacred precinct produced urban enclaves that have very little to do with the rest of the cities. In both,

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this has created highly polarized and fragmented cities.

Conclusion

As places of unique spiritual significance, Mecca and Medina stand as material witness to the growth of Islamic identity, having been contested arenas throughout history. There is a millenarian sense of entitlement to these two cities among Muslims, which transcends modern nation states. The continuity of their urban heritage came into question beginning in the mid-1970s when their urban forms started to undergo unprecedented changes. Recently, these urban changes have drastically increased in scale and extent, in ways that raise questions about the social costs and propriety.

The mindset behind the current urban transformations treats both cities as blank slates where the cumulative historical, social, and physical layers of the urban form are completely neglected or severely threatened. The reasons for this lie primarily within local and regional economic competition as well as developmental challenges in Saudi Arabia. One can only hope that despite this massive development push, both cities' sentimental attraction will prove more sustained and longstanding.

Atef Alshehri is an architect, consultant, and academic. His practice and research agenda is focused on the urban form and development of cities in the Middle East and North Africa region, with a primary focus on the Arabian Peninsula.

