



SOME REMARKS ON THE GEOGRAPHY AND HISTORY OF MECCA AND ITS HOLY PLACES

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For description of Mecca's geography and history, this paper draws some of its points from Architectural Heritage of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia.²⁴ According to this work, Mecca lies in a lowland area that is roughly 300 m above sea-level. The city Mecca is situated between Sarwat and Tihama volcanic mountains that are criss-crossed by dry and thorny valleys. Mecca's urban landscape features significantly shaped its history, urbanisation and spiritual activities.

For instance, Jabal Alnour (Mount of Light) is where Hira cave is located and it is widely believed that it is the spot where Prophet Muhammad received pioneer revelation. Others mountains include Jabal Thor (Mount Thor) whose peak is 759 m and it is a popular spot in Islamic history as it is known as the spot of refuge for the Prophet when he was migrating to Medina. Abu Qubeis is another important mountain in Mecca rising some 272 meters east of the Grand Mosque and its other range raises to 420 meters near Bilal mosque. Also important is the Ajyad Fortress Mount whose peak reaches 406 meters and is overlooking the Grand Mosque from the North. To the West of the Mosque is another peak called Jabal Omar (Mount Omar) and this rises up to 280 meters.

In the south-west direction of the Mosque lies Jabal Ka'aba which rise to 240 meters. Mount Qaiqa'an and its associated steeps such as Jabal Hind (Mount Hind) rise above the eastern, western and southern sides of the Mosque. Mount Arafat which over the plains where the most important Hajj ritual of mass gathering of pilgrims takes place located 18 km away from the Grand Mosque. One of the most important sites of pilgrimage is the Mina valley which covers roughly 6 km²; it is located seven kilometres away from Mecca.

This stony valley is connected to another valley called Wadi Al-Nari (Fire valley) in Muzdalifa area in the outskirts of Mecca. These landscapes constitute both the city of Mecca and allied sacred sites at its edges shown in Figure 1. According to Islamic traditions, the nucleus of Mecca city is the sacred Kaaba which is designated as the first house erected for humankind. The original name of Mecca is Bakka as mentioned in the Quran where it is narrated that Abraham and Ishmael were the people who constructed this house of God. Our source maintains that, since the early days of Islamic state there has been some documentation of the history. It is recorded that Omar bin Khattab (the



second caliph) was the first Muslim leader to rebuild Ka'aba following flooding event called Um Nhishl in the 17th year after Hijra²⁵ (Islamic lunar calendar (638 AC)).

Caliph Omar bought more houses around Kaaba and constructed a dam near the grand mosque to retain flood waters. Similarly, due to the increasing influx of more pilgrims into Mecca, in the 26th Hijra year (647 AC), the third caliph Othman bin Affan, acquired more land through buying adjacent homes which he converted into chambers of the sacred mosque. ²⁴ Ministry of Municipal and Rural Affairs, Architectural Heritage of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. Between Authenticity and Contemporaneity. Second Edition (Riyadh, 2010). ²⁵ Op cit 151 Again, in the 65th Hijra year (684 AC) Caliph Abdullah bin Al-Zubayr expanded the grand mosque following fire incidence in Mecca and this was the first time marble columns were used. In the 75 Hijri (694 AC), Caliph Abdulmalik bin Marwan constructed roof for the Grand mosque and decorated its column with gold slots. In the 91st Hijri year (710 AC), Al Waleed bin Abdulmalik demolished the works of his father and undertook a major reconstruction of the grand mosque. He undertook the first major architectural revolution through major expansion of the boundaries of the Grand Mosque. He imported columns and marbles from Egypt and Syria.

He introduced green and white tiles inside the Kaaba and constructed shaded pavilions and decorated the mosque with mosaic tiles and calligraphy. Between 160-164 Hijri years (777-781 AC), an Abbasid Caliph Al Mahdi expanded eastern and northern parts of the Grand Mosque and the purpose of this expansion project was to make Kaaba to be at the centre of the mosque. This expansion removed the flood infrastructure developed around the mosque. Al Mahdi's architecture almost remained intact for 600 years.

All these expansion programmes have some direct impacts on the urban fabric of Mecca. Another major renewal was witnessed under Sultan Selim in 979 Hijri (1571 AC) and the major changes include reconstruction of corridors and domes. Another major reconstruction was witnessed under King Abdul Aziz in 1375 Hijri (1955 AC) and these renovation works were continued by his son King Khaled bin Abdul Aziz. These works included construction of two level corridors, renovation of walls with local marble and construction of seven minarets, and covering for Safa and Marwa –historic hills that are part of the Hajj rituals. In 1409 Hijri (1988), King Fahd bin Abdul Aziz contributed towards another milestone change to the architecture of the Grand Mosque by adding 257,000 m² to accommodate 140,000 additional worshippers.

He also added two minarets rising to some 89 meters and also added a new main gate and 14 ordinary ones. Around 2011, King Abdallah bin Abdul Aziz also initiated new ambitious extension and renovations of the grand mosque and this was continued



by King Salam bin Abdul Aziz. The renovation and extension by King Abdallah is not restricted to the mosque. A railway was introduced to Mina and the Muzdalifa valleys to facilitate movement of pilgrims during Hajj days. One of the prominent changes under King Abdalla is the major verticalisation of Mecca's built landscape through construction of the World's tallest clock tower. The giant tower is overlooking the Grand Mosque, Kaaba and the city of Mecca. This single project puts Mecca in the list of cities with tallest human created formations.

Indeed, this development denotes the deepening of globalisation that this chapter subscribes to. Instead of the minarets of the Grand Mosque that used to be conspicuous and visible from all directions, Zam Zam towers is now the most visible feature in Mecca.

Similarly, King Abdallah project includes installation of more plaza and expansion of tawaf – circumambulation area. One of the innovations is the installation of the world's largest air-conditioned umbrella which is to cover the introduced benches for worshippers.

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