

From Jerusalem to Mecca

As of the last century, in which the Ottoman Empire lost control over the three holiest places of Islam, aka Mecca, Medina, and Jerusalem, the problems that we witness today started to arise under the Saudis and the Zionists as the new claimers of sovereignty. Today the Muslim world is lamenting the loss of Muslim sovereignty in Jerusalem, but almost no one talks about the situation in Mecca. In Jerusalem, the intruder and occupation are obvious, while in Mecca they are not. The Zionists in Jerusalem control every piece of land with armed-soldiers looking in the eyes of the civilian Palestinians, but scared to touch any sanctuary since the irritated angry Muslims' eyes are over them. But in Mecca, probably because the rulers, namely the Saudis, are Muslims, the Muslims throughout the world do not react what has been going on there at the expense of Mecca, its history, and the values of the religion that it symbolizes.

Regarding the problems that the Muslims going through especially in the three holiest places, even 1% of the Muslims does not mention that there is a problem in Mecca, a problem or a kind of occupation that we are not used to.

It started with King Abdul Aziz ibn Saud who introduced noticeable trappings of modernity in Mecca which he continued until he died in 1953. It happened especially after the discovery of oil in Saudi Arabia in 1938. The motor of the process in which Mecca turned into a metropolis has been the relation between the Saud family transforming the city through the new-found wealth and the Wahhabi clerics that provided legitimacy for the former. Ziauddin Sardar explains this process in his book Mecca with these words: “.. the Wahhabi clerics that helped to confer legitimacy on the ruling family. At the outset, despite the assurances of Abdul Aziz and protests from other Muslim countries, all the mausoleums in the city, including those of the Prophet's family, were demolished. Sufi shrines, for which the Wahhabis had a particular hatred, were bulldozed. The curriculum in schools was radically changed: only the books of Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahhab and some traditional literature could be taught.”

As time goes by, due to the Saudi influx and the arrival of air travel automatically increased the population of and the number of pilgrims in Mecca, which compelled the administrators to open more place to cater for the numbers. King Abdul Aziz appointed his son Faisal to be responsible for this task that started as of 1956. The extension program resulted in sixfold-expansion, four-lane highways to transport the pilgrims from Jeddah to Mecca. There were few high-rise constructions to violate the sanctity of Kaaba. Since there were regulations limiting the height of the buildings to keep the heritage of the holy city. They tried to control the development of the city for the sake of compatibility with the tradition, and the city began to look both ancient and modern. But Faisal and his reforms were buried with his assassination. His successor was Khalid who was not interested in modernization and reform. After Khalid's death in 1982, the Crown Prince Fahd extremely modernized the holy city. He personally disliked the things that looked old and traditional. With Sardar's words: “Conservation was an idea as alien to the new king as paganism. He wanted Mecca to look ultramodern, like a typical American city – Houston, Texas, for example. In the same way, Mecca began to change rapidly. Ugly high-rise buildings, spaghetti junctions and high-mast lighting appeared overnight.”

From this date on, anything historical in the city was bulldozed. In accordance with the new king's reformist aspirations about the city, planning restrictions were eased while there accordingly emerged urban decay. With Sardar's words: “The holiest city of Islam was now ugly, noisy, dirty, smelly, and crowded with modern architecture that was as appalling as it was out of human scale.” And he continues with narrating a moment in his personal life: “I heard Mecca calling one morning in September 2010. I was performing my usual rituals of drinking coffee and reading the Guardian. As I turned the pages of the newspaper, I came across a full-page advertisement. ‘Live a few steps away from the holy heart of the universe’ it said, underneath a large photograph of the Sacred Mosque. ‘When you look for a residence in Makkah, the first thing you seek is how close you'll be to the holy mosque’, the advertisement said, inviting the reader to buy a property at the ‘Emaar Residences at the Fairmont Makkah’. These residences are located within the Royal Makkah Clock Tower, which at 1,972 feet is the world's second-tallest building after Dubai's Burj Khalifa. It is part of a mammoth development of skyscrapers and includes shopping malls devoted to luxury goods and seven-star hotels catering exclusively to the obscenely rich. The Clock Tower, as the photograph accompanying the advertisement made clear, dwarfs the Kaaba and soars above the Sacred Mosque. The skyline above the Sacred Mosque is no longer dominated by the rugged outline of encircling mountains. It is surrounded by the brutalism of hideously ugly rectangular steel and concrete buildings, built with the proceeds of enormous oil wealth that showcase the Saudi vision for Mecca. They look like downtown office blocks in any mid-American city. The advertisement invites you not

to live 'a few steps' from the Sacred Mosque but to live over and above it. What the advertisement does not tell you is that this grotesque metropolis is built on the graves of houses and cultural sites of immense beauty and long history."

With a seemingly casual disregard for history, an estimated 95 percent of the city's millennium-old buildings, consisting of over 400 sites of cultural and historical significance, were demolished to build this eruption of architectural bling. ^[1] The house of Khadijah, wife of Prophet (s.a.w.) turned into a block of toilets. Makkah Hilton rise over the house of Abu Bakr, the closest companion and the first caliph. The Royal Makkah Clock Tower and more than a hundred five-star hotels and high-rise buildings tower above the Sacred Mosque. There are feverish works to execute the extension program to accommodate more than 5 million worshippers simultaneously. All of the Sacred Mosque is to be replaced by an 'ultramodern doughnut-shaped building'. Sardar says the following words about the Saudi attitude toward the house where Prophet Muhammad (s.a.w.) was born in: "The house where Prophet Muhammad was born, located opposite the imposing Royal Palace, is razed to the ground, and turned, probably, into a car park. During most of the Saudi era it was used as a cattle market; the Hijazi citizens fought to turn it into a library. However, even to enter the library is apparently to commit an unpardonable sin – hence no one is allowed in -hence no one is allowed in. But even this is too much for the radical clerics who have repeatedly called for its demolition."

The Ottoman-era town houses and buildings including the fort protecting the city were also demolished overnight.

Although the Saudi government is so sensitive regarding the transliterated name of Mecca, which means a center that attracts people in English, and started to use the name 'Makkah' instead, they left nothing sacred in the reprocessed figuration of 'Makkah'. Sardar narrates the ideas of the inhabitants of Mecca about the holy city: "What is evident to them is a city of proliferating bling, a haven of consumerism and opulent tourism that have usurped spirituality as the city's *raison d'être*. They call it 'Saudi Las Vegas'... Like the American city famed for its gambling casinos and gaudy architecture, Mecca has become a playground for the rich". ^[2] He asks the question: "Where in Mecca today is the dream of peace, tolerance and humane, respectful, mutual understanding? It can be found in the hearts of pilgrims, but where else does it reside in the Holy City?"

Mecca symbolizes monotheism more than everything. And the Wahhabis demolished everything with historical and traditional value claiming that they promote shirk, polytheism. Yet Mecca is knee-deep in shirk and it is manifest not just in the worship of money, wealth and consumerism. ^[3] The obsession of the Saudis in general and the Najdis, in particular, resulted in the material destruction of the sanctuary and the spiritual devastation of the soul of Islam in Mecca. And the expression of Ahmad Kamal explains the situation in Mecca in the best way possible: "Pilgrims will discover in Mecca only what they take to Mecca."^[4]

Recently we have witnessed an affiliation between the obvious intruder, the Zionist regime of Israel gradually occupying Jerusalem, and the latent occupier of Mecca, the Saudis. The close relationship between the US, Israel, and the Saudi Kingdom, has recently costed the relocation of US Embassy from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem. This was the last but not least result of irresponsible policies of the money-power loving Saudi Royal family. What is worse is that this veiled occupation not only demolishes the most precious material heritage of Muslim civilization in Mecca, such as the houses and tombs of the Prophet and its companions, but also devastates the soul of Islam at the heart of it.

^[1] Ziauddin Sardar, *Mecca: The Sacred City* (Bloomsbury, 2014) p. 736. (E-pub version)

^[2] Sardar, p. 741.

^[3] Sardar, p. 757.

^[4] Ahmad Kamal, *The Sacred Journey* (Allen & Unwin, London, 1961), p. 6.