Makkah

Jawaher Al-Sudairy

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Over the past century, Makkah has transformed from a small seasonal pit stop for traders and pilgrims to a prime destination attracting visitors year-round. Through the travel journals of pilgrims who visited in the past 100 years, one can trace the evolution of Makkah’s urban form. These collective memories detail the city, the Hajj and the Sacred Mosque. They also document moments where Makkah underwent significant change, from the expansion projects of the Mosque to the recent regeneration program for the entire city.

Jawaher Al-Sudairy

Curator of the National Pavilion, Jawaher is currently Director for the Al Nahda Center for Research and Senior Program Manager at Evidence for Policy Design, Harvard Kennedy School. She is a member of the organizing committee for the annual Rahmania Seminar and holds a Master’s degree from Columbia and a Bachelor’s from Smith College. Her research focuses on mobility, housing and social integration, concentrating on the cities of Riyadh and Makkah.
Figure 1: Bird’s-Eye View of Makkah by Samuel Zwemer - Source: National Geographic, August 2017

الصورة 1: دكان عام مرتفع لمكة، من فوق بدر، المصدر: شوهد مجسم، أغسطس 1917.
One of the earliest journals documenting Makkah in the start of the twentieth century was that of Dr. Samuel Zwemer, an American missionary and author of *Arabia, the Cradle of Islam*, published in 1900. The book includes photographs and helpful descriptions of the city's scale at the time:

The Sacred Mosque, Mesjid el Haram, with the Ka’aba at its center, is located in the middle of the city. Makkah lies in a hot, sandy valley, absolutely without verdure and surrounded by rocky, barren hills, destitute of trees or even shrubs. The valley is about 300 feet wide and 4,000 feet long, and slopes toward the south. The Ka’aba, or House of God (Beit Allah), is located in the bed of the valley. All the streets slope toward it as it were, if in the pit of a theater.

Until 1916, Makkah had been under Ottoman rule for four centuries. That year, Al Sharif Hussein led the Arab Revolt and claimed the title of King of Hejaz. Within five years, the city would fall under the rule of King Abdulaziz Al Saud, who at the time was the Sultan of Nejd. Makkah was already a multicultural center; Zwemer writes, "Of all the provinces of Arabia, El Hejaz... undoubtedly has most frequent contact with the outside world, yet is the least known." Through Ottoman intercontinental dominance and improvements in road and sea travel, Makkah had peaked as an intellectual magnet for students of science from around the world if only because of the annual Hajj. It attracted scholars and activists who came in pursuit of opportunity and wealth in the sciences from around the world. They saw the city as a center of Islamic scholarship and activism.

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The Muslim scholar Muhammad Asad (Leopold Weiss) performed his pilgrimage in 1927. He first came to Arabia as a journalist covering the Middle East after the fall of the Ottoman Empire, and subsequently converted to Islam and remained for six years. In his memoir, *The Road to Makkah*, he tells of his life’s work, travels and the years he spent in Makkah. When describing his visit to Makkah, like many visitors then, his account primarily focuses on the Sacred Mosque and the pilgrimage.

This, then, was the Ka’aba, the goal of longing for so many millions of people for so many centuries. To reach this goal, countless pilgrims had made heavy sacrifices. Many had died on the way; many had reached it only after great privations; and to all of them this small, square building was the apex of their desires, and to reach it meant fulfillment.

There it stood, almost a perfect cube (as its Arabic name connotes) entirely covered with black brocade, a quiet island in the middle of the vast quadrangle of the mosque: much quieter than any other work of architecture anywhere in the world. It would almost appear that he who first built the Ka’aba – for since the time of Abraham the original structure has been rebuilt several times in the same shape – wanted to create a parable of man’s humility before God.
In his first year in Makkah, King Abdulaziz was keen to ensure a successful pilgrimage and prove his ability not only to Makkah’s elites but to all Muslim countries. He accomplished this by designating the tribes in Hejaz as the primary responsibility of securing the roads leading to Makkah, hence protecting pilgrims from the main threat — road attacks and robbery. This was especially effective considering that until then the only modern transportation infrastructure available on land was the Hejaz Railway, constructed under the Ottoman Empire, which stopped in the city of Medina.

Lady Evelyn Cobbold, who performed her pilgrimage in 1933, was the first British woman to visit Makkah, and the first person to make the pilgrimage by car. This was possible through the help of John Philby, the first British woman to visit Makkah, and the first person to make the pilgrimage by car. This was possible through the help of John Philby, who was based in the Hejaz and had become friend to King Abdulaziz. When she arrived at Arafat with her car, Lady Cobbold describes the reaction of some pilgrims to her vehicle, “They descend to stare at the car and huddle away terrified; never before have they seen a motor, and it takes a long time to persuade them it is harmless.”

Transportation would provide a recurring theme in determining the size and potential of the Hajj in the decades following. With improved security, followed by the diffusion of safe and affordable travel by road, sea, and air, Hajj would grow to Olympic magnitude. The number of overseas pilgrims jumped sevenfold, from an average of 150,000 in the period 1900-1950 to over a million in 1955. Today, the amount of Hajj (the large pilgrimage performed at any time) pilgrims has reached almost three and six million respectively, with plans to expand to four million by 1990. This was especially effective considering that until then the only modern transportation infrastructure available on land was the Hejaz Railway, constructed under the Ottoman Empire, which stopped in the city of Medina.

A Harvard Business School student, Abdul Ghafur Sheikh, published his journal of the Hajj, *From America to Makka on Airborne Pilgrimage*, in the National Geographic in 1953, as one of the first pilgrims to reach Makkah by air. He flew from New York to Dhahran, and with the help of Aramco, he was shuttled from there to Jeddah. He was also the first to capture color photos of Makkah.
As the journey to Makkah became more accessible, the flow of pilgrims started to grow and plans to upgrade the city quickly became necessary. The focal point of development was always the Sacred Mosque. Starting in 1955, the first extension of the Mosque would increase its capacity sixfold, allowing it to accommodate 400,000 people. The mosque was surfaced and paved with white marble, and received 16 new doorways and a main entrance. The Mas'a (the passage between the hills of Al-Safa and Al-Marwah) was also paved, split into two lanes and doubled into two levels to accommodate a larger number of pilgrims. When Malcolm X performed his pilgrimage in 1964, the renovations and expansion were already visible:

My vocabulary cannot describe the new mosque that was being built around the Ka’baa. I was thrilled to realize that it was only one of the tremendous rebuilding tasks under the direction of young Dr. Azzam, who had just been my host. The Great Mosque of Makkah, when it is finished, will surpass the architectural beauty of India’s Taj Mahal.

Dr. Omar Azzam, an Egyptian planner who had been delegated by the UN to work in Saudi in 1962, was involved in many developments and planning projects in the country. He had moved to Saudi following the departure of Dr. Abdulrahman Makhlouf, also an Egyptian planner, who had arrived as part of the original UN team advising the establishment of Saudi Arabia’s administrative and city planning functions. Although their mandate included designing a master plan for Makkah (as well as Jeddah, Ta’if, Madinah, Yanbu and Al-Ahsa), implementation was not successful. Malcolm’s journal includes a special note of his experience driving in Makkah, and reflects the lack of basic infrastructure:

My car took me to participate in special prayers at Mount Arafat, and at Mina. The roads offered the wildest drives that I had ever known: nightmare traffic, brakes squealing, skidding cars, and horns blowing. (I believe that all of the driving in the Holy Land is done in the name of Allah.)

This planning attempt was followed by several efforts, the most prominent of which were the firms Robert Matthew Johnson Marshall (RMJM) in 1973 and Dar Al-Handasah in 1985. While RMJM’s proposal was largely not implemented, it influenced the plans that followed. RMJM had proposed the construction of ring roads around the city, which were partly built but remain incomplete. The Dar Al-Handasah Plan reinforced the concept of the ring road, incorporated plans for increased hospitality, and was the first to recommend a high-speed rail link connecting Makkah with Jeddah and Madinah.

The second extension for the Sacred Mosque began in the early 1980s and continued until mid-1990, adding a new wing to the western side of the Mosque. The development included the King Fahad Gate, three
The American author, Michael Wolfe performed his pilgrimage in 1990. He describes the Sacred Mosque following the second expansion in his book *The Hadj: An American’s Pilgrimage to Makkah*. The description offers details of the Mosque’s layout, materials and even lighting. His entries indicate a preoccupation with the scale of the expansion:

> Down below, a mosque in the shape of a mammoth door key completely filled the hollow. Lit from above, roofless at the center, it seemed to enclose the valley bowl it covered. The proportions of this eccentric structure were staggering. The head of the key alone comprised a corral of several acres...

Wolfe’s account constantly makes reference to the city in the 1930s, and contrasts this to his experience. His comparison demonstrates the transformation that the city underwent over a period of 40 years:

> I could also appreciate its enlarged proportions. In the Hajj month of 1939, one hundred thousand pilgrims had come to Makkah. This month about the same number arrived each day. The mosque complex had been expanded in every direction to accommodate them...

> The town had been remade for the rubber tire, the wide axle. A massive infrastructure of tunnels, freeways, and overpasses swooping impressively through granite hills physically walled us off from the 1930s, when the Hajj was still an occasion of the camel.

In all accounts, from Zwemer to Wolfe, there were few references made to accommodations and options for hospitality in the city. This quickly changed in recent years, as development became more focused on increasing Makkah’s capacity to accommodate the growing flow of pilgrims. The first international hotel to open in Makkah was the Intercontinental Hotel and Conference Center in 1974, which won the Aga Khan award for architecture. The hotel was designed by Rolf Gutbrod and Frei Otto of Germany, and was located on the city’s periphery.

In the mid-90s, Makkah saw a new set of hotel developments around the Sacred Mosque, starting with the Hilton Hotel in 1994, Dar Al Tawhid Intercontinental Hotel in 2001 and Abraj Al-Bait, currently the fourth tallest free-standing building in the world, which boasts the largest clock in existence, completed in 2011. These developments replaced the modest, and in many cases decaying, urban landscape...
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After two hours of sleep, we set out in a bus for the Grand Mosque, for the first stage of the pilgrimage. Azziah was jammed with traffic. We climbed a highway along the eastern flank of Makkah and entered a mile-long tunnel bored through ancient hills. When we emerged, I pushed closer to the window, to try to get a glimpse of one of the mosque’s seven minarets, but all I could see were gigantic cranes hovering over half-built towers. I had not prepared myself for contemporary Makkah, a city of more than one and a half million people. In my imagination, it was dominated by the Kaaba, the minarets of the Grand Mosque, the stories of Muhammad, and the desert that formed the landscape of the Prophet’s life.

Today, Makkah is witnessing the third extension of the Sacred Mosque and a comprehensive regeneration plan for the city. The extension, due to be completed in 2020, will double the size of the Mosque to accommodate approximately two million people at once. However, the plan doesn’t stop there; rather, it is more ambitious than any other the city has seen to date. Following the Comprehensive Plan published in 2011, completed by MMM Group and Moriyama & Teshima, the city aims to expand the city’s supply of housing, hospitality, transportation infrastructure and other services. This includes the construction of a metro network, the two-mile-long Commercial Boulevard that runs across the city, and a series of residential and hotel developments around the Mosque and along the main highway.

In the span of one hundred years, Makkah has morphed from a small town contained within a valley, with 100,000 residents and 200,000 pilgrims, to a city of 1.6 million people, and over nine million pilgrims (three million for Hajj and six million for Umrah). The influx of pilgrims during the Hajj season in the beginning of the century is equivalent to the flow that the city receives on a weekly basis. These pilgrims have collectively maintained a rich account of Makkah and its transformation over the decades.