



# Cities Hosting Holy Shrines: The Impact of Pilgrimage on Urban Form

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## Abstract

This paper explores pilgrimage in the context of historic holy cities which contain at least one religious complex through which the ritual of pilgrimage takes place. One controversial tension in urban development process of holy cities is the tension between urban growth, on the one hand, and adapting city structure to the needs of pilgrims on the other hand. This paper investigates this issue by referring to experiences of two major holy cities in of Mecca and Mashhad. Both cities are spiritual centers which host millions of pilgrims throughout year. The aim of this paper is to analyze the process of city center transformation in both cities and monitor different policies and interventions that shaped their morphologies up to now. Through historical analysis of urban form, flow of pilgrims has affected the morphology of both cities in similar ways. Accordingly policies and interventions by local officials have shaped the urban center in three similar ways: enlargement and expansion of shrine, vehicular access to shrine, and real-estate speculation. In the absence of protective and preventive codes and policies both Mecca and Mashhad have lost their historical urban fabric and their cultural patrimonies. Their traditional urban scape and prominence of shrine has been substituted by high rise mega projects. In a similar way their local crafts and small-scale retails have been replaced by global retail chain.

**Keywords:** *Pilgrimage, Holy City, Urban Morphology, Mecca, Mashhad*

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<sup>1</sup>*Oxford English dictionary, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987*

## INTRODUCTION

Pilgrimage according to definition is “a journey made to a sacred place as an act of religious devotion<sup>1</sup>”. Typically it is a journey to a shrine or other sacred locations which is important to one’s faith. Although different faith practice different ritual of pilgrimage, the idea is shared among different religion. For example Jerusalem is visited by pilgrims of three religions – Judaism, Christianity and Islam. In Christianity pilgrimage was practiced in the fourth century when a network of holy places was established across Christendom by Emperor Constantine. Later pilgrimage also was made to Rome and other sites associated with apostles and saints. According to Islam rules each single Muslim – in case of physical and financial ability- must perform the pilgrimage to Mecca at least one time in Life. Moreover it is recommended that Muslims pay visit to shrine of Prophet Muhammad and other Imams in a regular base. In Judaism Jerusalem is the center of Jewish religious life and pilgrimage. The Hebrew bible instructs all Jews to make a pilgrimage to Jerusalem three times a year.

Even today important sacred places host pilgrims of different faith and absorb the crowd in a temporary or constant manner. For example it was estimated in 2000 that approximately 30 million pilgrims visited Rome and 4 million visited the Holy Land (Woodward 2004). Similarly according to Saudi Arabia Ministry of Hajj approximately 2 million Muslim pilgrims visited Mecca in 2014 which brought 8.5 billion for the country. Due to advancement of transportation technology the number of pilgrims to holy places tends to increase which in return brings additional challenges in terms of management, security, environmental impact and urban development.

One important challenge is the pressure which mass flow of pilgrims could exert on the urban fabric of holy cities. Previous studies on holy cities of Mecca and Medina indicate that mass pilgrimage have radically changed the traditional townscape of both cities in favor of increasing transport infrastructure, large-scale commercial establishment and lodging infrastructures for pilgrims (Bianca 2000, Toulon 1993). This picture is similar in many other holy cities which receive large amount of pilgrims in constant or temporary manner. One controversial tension in urban development process of holy cities is the tension between urban growth, on the one hand, and adapting city structure to the needs of pilgrims on the other hand. This paper investigates this issue by referring to the experiences of two major holy cities in Islam-Mecca and Mashhad. Both cities are spiritual centers which receive millions of pilgrims throughout year. The aim of this paper is to analyze the process of city center transformation in both



cities and monitor different policies and interventions that shaped their morphologies up to now. The first part of the paper deals with the definition of holy cities, its typologies and morphologies drawn from different case studies and the second part deals with issues and challenges associated with pilgrimage in different holy cities.

## **HOLY CITIES**

Holy city is a term applied to historical cities centered to a specific faith or religion. Therefore, holy city is a functional term applied to those cities which are centers of worship, pilgrimage or religious learning (Hourani and Stern 1970). Such cities are often major destination of pilgrims and contain at least one religious complex. The importance of holy cities is measured by the number of pilgrims visiting the shrine (or similar sacred complex) at religious events. The most significant holy cities are Mecca, Jerusalem and Vatican which receive high number of pilgrims throughout year.

### **Formation and Morphology**

Shrine is a holy sacred place which is dedicated to various religious figures of respect. In Shi'i Islam the imams (and some of their family members) have emerged as the most highly venerated saints among Shi'i believers, and their tombs have become the sites of shrines that serve as symbolic spaces for culture, religion, politics, and national identities, due to their sacred and holy status to believers (Riggs 2015). In most holy cities the shrine constituted the initial establishment of cities and coined their future development. Once a shrine is founded its holiness absorbs population to settle and to worship and also to be buried in vicinity of the sanctuary. Due to importance of religion in socio-political functions of a society, many clerics and influential figures come to live adjacent to the shrine. The sanctity of the complex compels local governments and also the residents to preserve and maintain it through charity and endowments. As the city grows and absorbs more population the need for more worship space is needed. Therefore, enlargement of the sanctuary becomes an important initiative of the governments. The sanctuary gradually becomes an important spiritual center and gathering point in regional and other supra-local scales. Flow of pilgrims from different parts of region often in forms of groups and caravans required investment on infrastructures (roads, caravanserais...). Therefore, a holy city obtained a strategic position in the network of mobility with many important routes converging to it.

Flow of pilgrims also resulted in prosperity of commerce in holy cities. Since many pilgrims brought precious objects from their

place to sell or exchange them with other objects. The integration of pilgrimage with commerce contributed to economic prosperity of holy cities and agglomeration of commercial activities along the main arteries that end to the sanctuary. Therefore the morphology of a holy city includes a most inner ring with religious functions and uses accompanied by commercial land-use along the main arteries all embraced by residential areas. The convergence of main urban thoroughfares toward the center of the sanctuary creates a radio-centric urban grid. The geographical center and spiritual center overlap in order to establish a sense of place. Peters discussing Jerusalem and Mecca explains metaphorically this centrality: "If the Haram, the sacred place, was the heart of the holy city, pilgrimages were its life-giving blood and the network of economic and political arrangements that carried them to and from the shrine were its veins and arteries." (Peters 1986) s. In many cases the shrine also serves as religious educational center where leading clerics live and teach students topics such as Islamic jurisprudence, theology, philosophy, and history. Therefore, cities of holy shrines are at the same time a place of exchange and learning for a member of specific faith. In some cases, political leaders have patronized shrine cities, even utilizing them as national symbols and sources of revenue (Riggs 2015).

One of the main characteristic of shrine cities is a major path for the movements of pilgrims and performance of pilgrimage rites. Pilgrimage is more than visiting a holy shrine; it indeed contains rituals through which pilgrims gets spiritually purified in order to enter the sacred area. Inherent in the meaning of pilgrimage is the idea of travelling from one place to another place sometimes in a form of mass movement of crowds. Therefore, path and routes become important elements for performance of rituals.

So, the structure of shrine cities is essentially determined by two factors: centrality and axuality. Centrality contains dual intertwined meaning. On the one hand, most holy cities are points of "spiritual convergence of millions of worshipers throughout the world" therefore they are symbolic centers for believers of a faith or religious. On the other hand, holy cities are center of gathering and ritual performance where most of religious structures are accumulated (Saliba 2013). Therefore, center becomes a strong magnet that absorbs population, activities and functions toward itself. Center should be highly accessible from surrounding and establish a network with other centers in a hierarchical or non-hierarchical order. Therefore, routes connecting a main centre to other centers become an important part of holy cities structure. As mentioned before routs are also important for performance of rituals therefore, they constitute part of the rites of pilgrimage.



Hussein distinguishes Arabo-Islamic holy cities from typical Arab city by focusing on “passes of religious rites” which symbolically and functionally construct the city structure (Hussein 2013).

### **TRANSFORMATION OF HOLY CITIES**

Up until the modern time most holy cities grew organically around the sacred complex. Advancement of transportation technology eased the journey and led to increase in the number of pilgrims. It is clear that the increased flow of pilgrims caused important problems in terms of mass movement, transportation and accommodation. These problems, according to literature, were reflected in transformation of urban areas in three categories.

1. Enlargement of the area around shrine:

as mentioned before, the sanctity of shrine absorbed population and different religious-based functions including religious schools, mosques, praying halls and cemetery. Furthermore, many rulers contributed to development of shrines for personal or religious purpose. Even today the enlargement of shrine is a routine practice by governments. In many shrine cities the shrine complex is used for mass praying and political speech in different national or religious occasions. In these occasions shrine functions as a public plaza and gathering point in urban and scale. In a few cases a shrine represents the state’s political ideology and an arena for ceremonies, public display of piety and political legitimacy – especially in theocratic states.

2. Accessibility (vehicular and pedestrian) to shrine:

The ever increasing number of pilgrims added another dimension to characteristic of shrine cities which was accessibility to shrine. The main issue was how to manage the mass movement of pilgrims from and to shrine. The solution that has been adopted by many shrine cities share similar scheme: street widening and isolation of shrine from city fabric by building a road on perimeter of shrine. Street widening is a typical solution that was applied to main urban thoroughfares leading to the sacred complex. Since widening would have meant more pedestrian and vehicular access to shrine it became the most typical strategy for managing mass movements of pilgrims. It could also provide more commercial space for shops and other pilgrims-related services. In western tradition religious buildings (ex. Cathedrals) are often freestanding monuments facing a public piazza. Therefore, a public open space is a medium through which a sacred complex is connected to the rest of city. This is different in many traditional Muslim cities where a sacred complex (Haram or shrine) is totally integrated in the urban fabric. The walls of shrine were adhesive to the residential areas and the shrine did not have any façade

except for main entrances. According to Sabila one reason for the difference is that: “mosques traditionally incorporated open space within their precincts as *enclosed prayer areas, space for religious and political gathering and havens for contemplation and seclusion from the surrounding urban bustle.*” ( Sabila 2015) However during the 60s the demolition of historical quarters and imposition of modern boulevards on the urban fabric led to separation of shrine from the rest of traditional city. In many holy cities, including Mecca, Medina, Karbala and Mashhad, the shrine was treated as a sacred monument detached from the traditional city. Furthermore, construction of ring road around shrines for more vehicular accessibility accelerated its separation from the rest of urban fabric.

### 3. Sacred sites versus speculation sites:

The obsessive desire of pilgrims and commerce is to stay as close to shrine as possible. It is important for pilgrims to find affordable accommodation within 10 to 15 minutes walking distance from shrine. In Muslim holy cities performing daily prayers in shrine has a significant meaning and it is important for pilgrims to reach shrine before sunrise to perform the Morning Prayer. Therefore, the choice of location and competition between investors for acquiring lands near shrine has had tremendous effect on land value of areas around shrine as well as main avenues that end to shrine. With an ever increasing number of visitors most holy cities have become economically dependent on pilgrimage. Pilgrimage has created many formal, informal and seasonal jobs for residents to which their livelihood depends. This has made authorities to focus on religious tourism and preparing city to host as many pilgrims as possible. Real estate speculation has always been a secure step to absorb capital, visitor and attentions. This is in contrast to the very first concept of holy cities as “spiritual havens that promote a sense of social equality between all believers”(Sabila 2015). Left to market forces, competition for building taller emerged among private developers which soon changed the traditional ambience of holy cities.

#### **Mecca**

The holy city of Mecca is located in the Southwest of Saudi Arabia and it is considered the spiritual capital of one and half billion Muslims worldwide. The religious importance of Mecca is due to the presence of Ka’aba (Sacrificed house of God) which dates back to the time of Abraham. It is ka’aba toward which all Muslims must face in their daily prayers and it is also the destination of Muslims seeking to comply with Islam’s fifth pillar: Hajj (pilgrimage). The ever increase in number of visitors since the time of Prophet

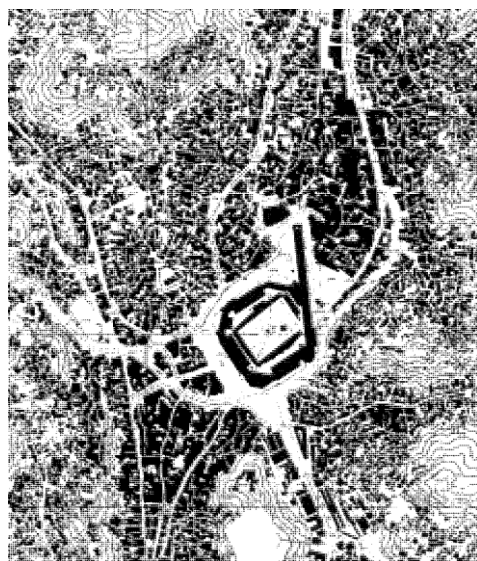
Muhammad has determined not only the economy of the city but also its urban pattern, land uses and architectural typology.

### Evolution and Morphology

The mountainous site of Mecca has contributed to the unique character of the city, but it has also imposed heavy constraints on Mecca's urban growth: "the historic center at the bottom of the valley was laid out around the courtyard of sacred Ka'aba which traces its tradition back to the times of Abraham. In ancient times, and in fact up to the middle of this century [the 20<sup>th</sup> century], the surrounding houses formed the walls, as it were, of the holy mosque and were considered as part of the haram, the inner precinct of which was defined by a modest arcade, attributed to the Turkish master architect Sinan. The gradual expansion of both the precinct and the city forced the residential districts to climb up the steep and rocky hillside, producing the city's typical bowl-shaped townscape." (Bianca 2000)



**Figure 1.** Mecca 1920 (Toulan 1993).



**Figure 2.** The major Extension of Haram in 1970 (Bianca 2000).

Up until the 1920 Mecca developed around the Haram in a very concentrated form. The main urban expansion occurred in a southwest to northeast direction along the main valley. As shown in figure 1 the main transport gates toward the city were the northeastern approach from Mena, the northwestern approach from Medina, the western approach from Jeddah and the southern approach from Yemen (Toulan 1993). In 1923 Mecca became part of a kingdom of Saudi Arabia which accelerated the number of pilgrims due to stability and security developed by the central government.

During the 50s the increase in oil revenue changed radically the economy of the kingdom which meant more investment on large scale infrastructures in regional and urban scale. The 60s and 70s due to increasing number of pilgrims the area of Ka'aba expanded to accommodate more pilgrims and facilitate the accessibility of pilgrims to Ka'aba (Figure2). Large portion of historic urban fabric had to be demolished for extension of worship space and to separate the Haram from the surrounding fabric by constructing large vehicular road around Haram. Further intervention imposed networks of radial highways and tunnels converging on the

Ka'aba to ease vehicular traffic during Hajj season. Moreover, the need to increase pilgrims-related services and competition for space around the shrine complex led to speculation of land in form of large-scale mega projects. This accelerated the demolition of historical fabric in favor of development of large-scale projects with profit-driven strategy in mind (Figure3 and 4). Today the urban pattern of Mecca is composed of a center dominated by pilgrims' activities (commercial and hotels) and the residential areas have expanded outside the pilgrim zone.



**Figure 3.** Demolition of historical fabric in Mecca (<https://www.slideshare.net/brighteyes/mecca-construction-plans-for-the-future-kabah>)





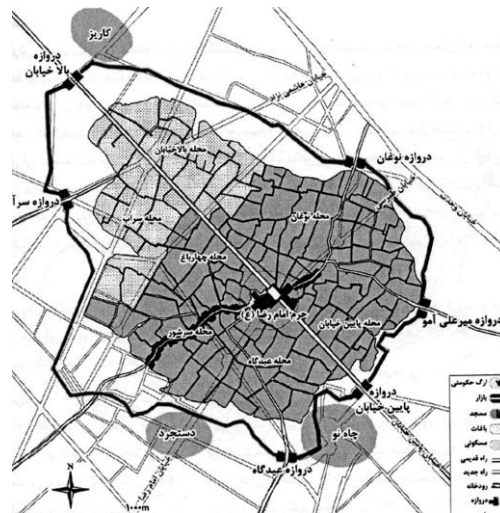
**Figure 4.** Development of Large-scale projects around Haram (<https://www.slideshare.net/brigh teyes/mecca-construction-plans-for-the-future-kabah>)

### **Mashhad**

Mashhad has a significant religious importance for Shiite Muslims since the 9<sup>th</sup> century when Imam Riza, the Eighth Shiite Muslim Imam, was buried in a village named Sanabad which later changed to Mashhad, place of martyrdom of Imam Riza. The celebrated shrine of Imam Riza attracted visitors and pilgrims from different parts of Shiite world and gradually became more important than the ancient cities of Nishapur and Tus, the important cities of Great Khurasan in northeastern Iran (Kheirabadi, 1991).

### **Evolution and morphology**

Due to its extraordinary religious-cultural importance, the shrine became a main urban core of Mashhad and also a strong magnet to absorb population, and other urban functions. Many rulers and political leaders paid particular attention to development and improvement of the city. Development of mosques, bazaars and religious schools contributed to the development of the shrine. Especially during Safavid Dynasty (The first national Shiite state after the Arab's conquest of Persia), Mashhad became an important Shiite center in the world of Islam and received many pilgrims since then. The Safavid King, Shah Abbas I (reigned 1587-1629), for example travelled to Mashhad on foot from his court in Isfahan in order to pay respect to the shrine. Upon his arrival he ordered improvements of shrine and built many public facilities. He also commissioned planners to implement the first designed street in East-West direction passing through the shrine courtyard. The designed street furnished by a watercourse and lined trees along the main stream (Figure5). This intervention accelerated the central position of shrine since it became an intersection node of the north-south organic axis of bazaar and east-west designed axis of boulevard.



**Figure 5.** The new east-west axes intersects Bazar at the shrine (17<sup>th</sup> century) (Pakzad 2012)

Under the modernization project of Reza shah (1920-1940) many important cities of Iran underwent physical changes. Street widening, imposition of street networks on urban fabric, construction of transport infrastructure and modern urban facilities were among major interventions. In Mashhad in order to ease vehicular access to shrine a north-south street was cut through the dense urban fabric. This new axis intersected the old east-west axis at shrine complex. Then in order to make the circulation complete, a loop was built around the shrine to connect four urban axes in a traffic node. This intervention for the first time disconnected the shrine from surrounding and also led to demolition of the old bazar (Figure 6). As a result commercial activities were moved along the new streets. As the city attracted more pilgrims, new services, ex. Hotels, restaurants, travel agencies and souvenir shops, flourished around the shrine.



**Figure 6.** Construction of traffic loop around shrine (1930s) (<http://www.aqr.ir/Portal/home/?Image/44370/67596/199781/photo.aqr.ir.jpg>)

During the 70s Mashhad's historical urban fabric underwent large scale urban renewal program. The renewal plan ordered the demolition of 30 hectares around the holy shrine to be replaced by urban green space (Figure 7). New streets were cut into the old neighborhood in order to integrate different part of the city into a traffic network. In an authoritarian measure many commercial

activities around the shrine were moved to a modern bazar (Bazar-e- Riza) and new multi-story hotels were built along the main streets.



**Figure 7.** Separation of shrine from its surrounding by green loop (1970s) <http://www.aqr.ir/Portal/home/?Image/44370/67596/199781/photo.aqr.ir.jpg>

After the Islamic Revolution (1979) the religious ideology of the state brought many criticisms to the previous plan of the center of Mashhad. As a result the new management system followed two interrelated plans (Rezvani 2005): 1. Enlargement and extension of shrine; 2. Urban rehabilitation and renewal plan for the urban fabric around the shrine. The first plan envisioned the enlargement of shrine from 12 hectares in the early 80s to 69 hectares in 20 years plan. The enlargement plan had considered the integration of religious, educational and cultural uses to the shrine, to be completed by addition of more praying courts around the shrine. The second plan with a horizon of 2022 envisioned the large scale urban renewal scheme for over 300 hectares area around the shrine including the most historical neighborhoods of Mashhad(Figure 8). According to the new plan the four main converging streets were widened from 30 meters to 40 meters and a new traffic loop was considered around the shrine complex with many proposed commercial and hotels establishments along. Realising this plan has led to local population exodus from central area.



**Figure 8.** Urban renewal plan of the area around shrine (2000) ([http://uupload.ir/files/gpbn\\_haram.jpg](http://uupload.ir/files/gpbn_haram.jpg))

## IMPACTS OF PILGRIMAGE ON MECCA AND MASHHAD

The fact is that gathering thousands of people (in some rituals millions of people) at the same time in a place contributes to a lot of problems for local residents as well as local governments. Below are some issues that many holy cities face due to the presence of large number of pilgrims:

- Pilgrimage and Land-use pattern

Pilgrimage has had a tremendous effect on the way cities' infrastructures and facilities are located and distributed. As discussed in different case studies, in many holy cities the focus of transport infrastructure is toward providing better accessibility to shrine complex and easing the flow of traffic to and from shrine. Pilgrim-based services (hotels, restaurant, shops, and travel agencies) are all concentrated around shrine and along the main streets that end to holy complex. Peters calls these activities "secondary service industries of holy cities whose income derives directly from providing lodging, food, and other non-sacral services to the pilgrims" (Peters 1986). These activities benefit from locating near each other and clustering around sacred complex which has significant impact on land-use pattern of holy cities. The spatial organization of most holy cities is in a way that the center has been dominated by pilgrim-based services and residential function has been pushed to periphery.

- Heritage and local identity in holy cities

Until the 20<sup>th</sup> century shrines were integrated with traditional urban fabric of holy cities. Residential neighborhoods were adjacent to court yard of shrine and "the local pattern of streets and open spaces extended right up to the walls of the sanctuary to service an adjoining, dense residential fabric" (Sabila 2015). However, as shown in examples, in first decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century authorities in holy cities adopted the policy of "freeing" sacred buildings from their surroundings by demolition of areas around the shrine. The importance of pilgrimage to urban economy further accelerated demolition of historic fabric in two ways: first, connecting the sacred complex to main transportation hubs (airport, train station, bus terminals) through networks of roads, highways and tunnels; second, commodifying urban space by changing land-use pattern from residential use to commercial. The increase in land price and competition between different stakeholders to acquire land accelerated the process of freeing land from residential neighborhoods and assigning them commercial use. This meant further demolition of urban neighborhoods and aggregation of small plots in order to obtain



higher floor area (FAR). Furthermore, commercializing pilgrimage, commodification of urban space and real estate speculation has changed the organic morphology and traditional urban scape. Today skyline of many holy cities consists of high rise buildings, commercial signs and advertisement boards which have dominated the original visual prominence of sacred landmark. Local products have been substituted by imported consumer goods and small-scale retails are shrinking in favor of large-scale commercial centers and global retail chains. In this perspective according to Sabila "In the absence of remedial, protective or preventive public policies, and with a new focus on private financing, the central districts of holy cities are turning into joint public/private commercial ventures." (Sabila 2015).

### CONCLUSION

As studied in two cases of Mecca and Mashhad the increase in number of pilgrims accompanied by changes in land-use pattern, are main indicators of urban development in both cities. Furthermore, commercialising pilgrimage and competition to attract investors turned pilgrimage sites to speculative sites. In the absence of protective and preventive codes and policies both Mecca and Mashhad have lost their historical urban fabric and their cultural patrimonies. Their traditional urban scape and prominency of shrine has been substituted by high-rise mega projects. In a similar way their local crafts and small-scale retails have been replaced by global retail chain. The expansion of infrastructure and enlargement of shrine in both cities required large investments which strengthened public and private partnership. The outcome of this approach has been the authoritative demolition of urban fabric, reparcelization of land and development of mega-projects.

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## Resume

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