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## Chapter 16

# Mecca: The 'Blessed Heart' of Islam

Simon Page

### Mecca in History, Tradition and Revelation

Around the early 6th century AD the Arab tribe of Quraysh began their rule over a small area in the Hejaz of Arabia at about 70 km inland from the Red Sea. Over time they adapted from their centuries-old nomadic life and settled in a torrid valley there by a well that went by the name of Zamzam. Beside the well was a little sanctuary known as the Ka'bah ('cube', in virtue of its shape). The Ka'bah had been a sacred site from very ancient times. According to Muslim tradition, the city of Mecca (latitude of approximately 21 degrees to the north and longitude of 39 degrees east, about 300 metres above sea level) was established by the Jurhumite tribe at the time of the Prophet Abraham.<sup>1</sup>

Abraham took his second wife, Hagar, and their son, Ishmael, into exile to the valley known as 'Bakka'<sup>2</sup> in Western Arabia. According to tradition, Abraham left Hagar and Ishmael alone. Eventually they were overcome by thirst. There were two hills in the valley, named Safa and Marwa. Hagar climbed first one, then the other, looking in all directions to find water. She passed seven times between the two hills, until at the end of the seventh passage she sat down for a rest and an angel came to their aid, showing Hagar a spring of water.<sup>3</sup> A very similar story is narrated in Genesis, 21 (17–19):

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1 It is not a matter here of judging the historical grounds of such an account, as in the Islamic world it is not always easy to differentiate a clear boundary between history and tradition. Moreover, in this same Muslim world context economic, political, legal, social, religious or spiritual spheres are considered as coexisting and interacting with each other, and they are dealt with accordingly. The methodological challenge of this paper is not to refute such ambiguity a priori.

2 'The first House (of worship) appointed for men was that at Bakka: full of blessing and of guidance for all the worlds'. The Qur'an, 3: 96, from *The Holy Qur'an, English translation of the meanings and commentary* (The Presidency of Islamic Researches, IFTA, Call and guidance, King Fahad Holy Quran printing complex 1990). The valley is mentioned in the Psalms too, verses 84:4–6: 'Blessed are those who dwell in Your house; They will still be praising You. Selah. Blessed is the man whose strength is in You, whose heart is set on pilgrimage. As they pass through the Valley of Baca, they make it a spring; the rain also covers it with pools'. Psalm 84:4–6 (New King James version).

3 Martin Lings, *Muhammad. His life based on the earliest sources* (Inner Traditions 2006).

And God heard the voice of the lad. Then the angel of God called to Hagar out of heaven, and said to her, 'What ails you, Hagar? Fear not, for God has heard the voice of the lad where he is. Arise, lift up the lad and hold him with your hand, for I will make him a great nation'. Then God opened her eyes, and she saw a well of water. And she went and filled the skin with water, and gave the lad a drink.<sup>4</sup>

The well of Zamzam was situated in an extremely dry valley and the environment was not suitable for a large-scale settlement. However, it was favourable for trade as it was at the crossroads of important routes leading northwards to Syria, north-eastwards to Iraq, southwards to Yemen and westwards to the Red Sea (to Abyssinia and elsewhere). At the end of the 6th century the Quraysh formed the ruling class of Mecca. Other tribes had also poured into Mecca from different parts of the Arabian Peninsula. However, since the times of Abraham the local tribes had abandoned the monotheistic belief and had embraced pagan practices.

The holy sanctuary of the Ka'bah was already a destination for pilgrimage even during pagan times, attracting thousands of people from all over the region and thus bringing wealth to the inhabitants of Mecca. The sanctuary was also known as the House of God (*Baitullah*). Although it has been destroyed and rebuilt several times since its foundation, it has always remained a very simple building made of stone, with a cuboid structure,<sup>5</sup> originally devoted to receiving donations from pilgrims.

At the eastern corner of the Ka'bah was 'the Black Stone' (*Al-Hajar al-Aswad*). It is a dark basaltic stone, believed to be a meteorite found on the nearby hill of Abu Qubays, preserved there until it was brought to Mecca.<sup>6</sup> The stone is still visible today,<sup>7</sup> while the ancient ritual of circumambulation around the Ka'bah (*tawaf*) is practiced in our times by millions of pilgrims from all over the world, and the sanctuary indicates the direction (*kibla*) that all Muslims should face when praying.<sup>8</sup>

4 Genesis 21:17–19 (New King James Version).

5 Its dimensions are approximately 10m by 12m (horizontally) by 16m (vertically). Titus Burckhardt, *Art of Islam. Language and Meaning* (commemorative edition, World Wisdom, 2009).

6 Martin Lings, *Muhammad*, op. cit., 2006.

7 'It is raised from the ground at about one and a half meters. Its length is half a cubit and its width is one third a cubit'. Mohammed H. Al Mojan, *The Honorable Kabah. Architecture and Kiswa* (Al Kawn Center, 2010).

8 'We see the turning of thy face (for guidance) to the heavens: now shall we turn thee to a Qibla that shall please thee. Turn then thy face in the direction of the Sacred Mosque: wherever ye are, turn your faces in that direction', *The Holy Qur'an*; op. cit.; 2, 144. It is worth noting that until about the 2nd year from the Hijra (the migration to Medina), the direction of prayer had been to the holy temple mount in Jerusalem. After the Quranic revelation Mohammed commanded the Muslims to pray facing Mecca.

As concerns the spiritual meaning of the Ka'bah, it corresponds to myth or to revelation, depending on the point of view. Its role as liturgical centre of the Islamic world is directly related to the fact that it constitutes a crucial bond with the Prophet Abraham, and therefore with the origins of all monotheistic religions.<sup>9</sup> Indeed according to the Qur'an the Ka'bah was built by Abraham and his son Ishmael, and Abraham himself instituted the ritual of the pilgrimage to the holy sanctuary.

In the words of the Qur'an:

And remember Abraham and Ismail raised the foundations of the House (with this prayer): 'Our Lord! Accept (this service) from us: for Thou art the All-Hearing, the All-Knowing'.<sup>10</sup>

Allah made the Ka'ba, the Sacred House, a means of support for men, as also the Sacred months, the animals for offerings, and the garlands to mark them: that ye may know that Allah hath knowledge of what is in the heavens and on earth and that Allah is well acquainted with all things.<sup>11</sup>

Behold! We pointed the site, to Abraham, of the (Sacred) House, (saying): 'Associate not anything (in worship) with Me; and sanctify my House for those who compass it round, or stand up, or bow, or prostrate themselves (therein prayer).<sup>12</sup>

The building is traditionally covered with a garment (*kiswa*), replaced every year, made of black cloth embroidered with gold lettering.

The custom of 'clothing' the sanctuary was apparently introduced by an ancient Himyarite king, and seems to be part of an extremely venerable Semitic tradition which is, in any case, alien in style to the Greco-Roman world: to 'clothe' a house is, in a way, to treat it as a living body or as an ark bearing a spiritual influence, and that is how the Arabs understood it.<sup>13</sup>

At the time when the Prophet Mohammed was born in Mecca, about 570 AD, the city was the most important religious and commercial centre of the Hejaz. But because agriculture was impossible in the city, the Quraysh relied solely on commerce and on the income from pilgrims. In other words, they needed peace in order to prosper, and therefore 'they established the Haram, a zone with a twenty-mile radius, with the Kabah at its center, where all violence was forbidden'.<sup>14</sup>

9 Titus Burckhardt, *Art of Islam*, op. cit.

10 *The Holy Qur'an*; op. cit.; 2,127.

11 Ibid.; 5, 97.

12 Ibid.; 22, 26.

13 Titus Burckhardt, *Art of Islam*, op. cit. Moreover, this author establishes a parallel between the Ka'ba and the Holy of Holies, containing the Ark of the Covenant, in the Temple of Jerusalem (because of their cubic shape).

14 Karen Armstrong, *Mohammad. Prophet for our time* (Harper Perennial, 2007).

Since the time of the Quraysh the landmarks that indicate the borders of the *Haram* (sanctified area) have been renovated by all the rulers that subsequently controlled Mecca. The sacred precincts include the area around Mecca and are marked by special landmarks, on all roads leading to and from Mecca. The most well known are the ones on the roads towards Medina (3 miles from the Ka'bah), Yemen (7 miles), Iraq (7 miles), Taif (11 miles), Jaa'ranah (9 miles), Jeddah (10 miles).<sup>15</sup>

What happens within these borders is governed by special rulings according to traditional Islamic sources. Therefore, non-Muslims are prevented from entering the *Haram* area (in Mecca as well as in Medina). No blood should be spilled within the sacred precincts, and hunting is prohibited as well as uprooting trees and carrying any weapon.

Ibn Abbas reported that on the day of the conquest of Makkah (Mecca), the Prophet (peace be upon him) said, 'Verily this is a Sacred City, its thorns and its plants must not be cut, its wild game must not be frightened, and none is allowed to pick up lost articles unless one knows its owner (in order to return it to him)'.<sup>16</sup>

Many other ahadith<sup>17</sup> contain clear references to the inviolability of Mecca. For example, it was related that Abd Allah ibn Zaid Assem (may God be pleased with him) said that the Messenger of God (prayers and peace upon him) said: 'Abraham avowed Makkah to be inviolable and invoked blessings upon those who dwell in it. I avow Makkah to be inviolable as Abraham avowed it to be inviolable, and I invoke twofold measure of blessings upon those who dwell in it'.<sup>18</sup>

At the time of the Prophet, 360 idols were surrounding the Ka'bah, while the most revered deity was probably the Moabite idol Hubal, which had been set up within the Ka'bah itself. But there were other temples throughout the region, the most important being those of the so-called 'daughters of God' (*banat Allah*): al-Lat in the town of Taif, al-Uzzah in the valley of Nakhla and Manat at Qudayd, on the Red Sea. 'Even though they had no shrine in Mecca, the Quraysh loved those goddesses and begged them to mediate on their behalf with the inaccessible Allah'.<sup>19</sup>

It is only with the conquest of Mecca by Mohammad and the Muslim forces in 630 AD that all the idols in and around the Ka'bah were destroyed. The Prophet himself contributed to the destruction of the idols, while reciting the Quranic verse: 'Truth has come; vanity has vanished; in truth vanity is evanescent'.<sup>20</sup> The Prophet, in other words, had succeeded in restoring 'the position of the Ka'ba and the haram around it to its original Abrahamic role as centre of a monotheistic cult'.<sup>21</sup>

15 Mohammed H. Al Mojan, *The Honorable Kabah*, op. cit.

16 Cit. in As-Sayyid Sabiq, *Fiqh us-Sunna* (American Trust Publications 1991).

17 Sing.: hadith, maxim or saying attributed to the Prophet.

18 *Mokhtaser Sahih Muslim* (collection of sayings of the Prophet), revised and translated by A. & D. Zidan, Islamic Inc.

19 Karen Armstrong, *Muhammad*, op. cit.

20 *The Holy Qur-an*, 17,81, cit. in T. Burckhardt, *Art of Islam*, op. cit.

21 Hugh Kennedy, 'Journey to Mecca, A History', in Venetia Porter (ed.), *Hajj, journey to the heart of Islam* (The British Museum Press, 2012).

## The Grand Mosque

In the last few decades the number of visitors to the Grand Mosque of Mecca and the Mosque of the Prophet in Medina has been growing rapidly, reaching several million every year. This constant flow of pilgrims brought about the decision of the authorities to extend considerably the two Holy Mosques. This was done at the cost of destroying several historical neighbourhoods and ancient buildings around them.<sup>22</sup> As concerns the Grand Mosque in Mecca, the main extensions, since the Quraysh time, have been the ones under Umar ibn al-Khattab (638 AD), Uthman ibn Affan (646 AD), Abdullah ibn al-Zubayr (684 AD), al-Walid al-Malik (709 AD), Abu Jafar al-Mansur (754 AD), Mohammed al-Mehdi (777–80 AD), Mutadid al-Abbasi (897 AD), Muqtadir al-Abbasi (918 AD), Farj ibn Barqouq (1399–1400 AD), Ottoman Sultans Salim II and Murad III (1571–86 AD), Ottoman Sultan Murad IV (1629 AD), Saudi King Abdulaziz Al Saud (1955–76 AD), Saudi King Fahd bin Abdulaziz (1988–95), Saudi King Abdullah bin Abdulaziz (2011–onwards).

The renovation decided by Sultan Salim II was commissioned from the great Turkish architect Sinan who carried out large-scale renewal of the entire Mosque. The colonnade surrounding the Ka'bah was extended with new columns in marble and stone in order to support the arches and domes. About 500 Ottoman-style domes, decorated with calligraphic designs, replaced the roof that had previously been flat. The courtyard was extended to 164 by 168 metres. During the reign of Murad IV three more minarets were added, to reach the number of seven. The Ka'bah itself underwent extensive renovations.

The general conditions of both the Grand Mosque and the Ka'bah were unchanged for about 400 years until the renovation work carried out by the Saudi dynasty began in 1955. The work continued for about 20 years. The pathway between the two hills of Safa and Marwa, 420 metres long, was fully paved and covered by a passageway that allows the flow of pilgrims on two separate levels. Once the outer structure of the new complex was completed, the area for the circumambulation of the Ka'bah (*mataf*) was expanded and the staircase leading to the well of Zamzam was constructed. The works were also aimed at integrating part of the Ottoman structure into the new complex, although several of the architectural features of Ottoman times were demolished.

Under King Fahd a new impressive wing and outdoor prayer area were built, two minarets added, a King's residence overlooking the Mosque was erected and many other adjustments were made, including the adoption of new technologies (climatic floors, air conditioning, automatic escalators and drainage infrastructure).

In 2011 King Abdullah laid the first stone of the new expansion of the Mecca Haram. It is expected to enlarge the area of the site by an additional 400,000 sq. metres in order to accommodate approximately 1.2 million additional worshippers

<sup>22</sup> Seyyed H. Nasr and Ali K. Nomachi, *Mecca the Blessed, Medina the Radiant. The Holiest Cities of Islam* (Aperture 2004).

(increasing the total capacity of the Grand Mosque to more than 2.5 million). The project expects to add two minarets, bringing the total number to 11, and to increase the area of the *mataf*.

These extensions were made necessary in order to accommodate the ever-increasing numbers of pilgrims, especially during the Hajj<sup>23</sup> season. The authorities try to contain the numbers of pilgrims by imposing quotas. However, disapprobation has been growing at the apparent unwillingness to conserve and protect the historical and archaeological heritage of Islam's two holy cities. It is estimated by the Washington-based 'Gulf Institute' that 95 per cent of the 1,000-year-old buildings in the two cities have been destroyed in the past 20 years:<sup>24</sup>

In Mecca, the Masjid al-Haram (Grand Mosque), the holiest site in Islam and a place where all Muslims are supposed to be equal, is now overshadowed by the Jabal Omar complex, a development of skyscraper apartments, hotels and an enormous clock tower. To build it, the Saudi authorities destroyed the Ottoman era Ajyad Fortress and the hill it stood on.<sup>25</sup>

Other historic sites destroyed included the houses of the Prophet Mohammed, his first wife Khadija, Caliph Abu Bakr and several mosques built on the graveyards of companions and relatives of the Prophet.<sup>26</sup> This can be explained also by considering the Wahabi interpretation of Islam that opposes anything which may embolden the faithful towards idol worship. People are strongly discouraged from visiting locations connected to the birth of Islam and powerful clerics encourage their destruction.<sup>27</sup>

Anything that departs from the oneness of God as defined by the Wahhabis is considered as 'shirk' (idolatry), and implies 'kufr' (disbelief). From its earliest appearance, Wahhabism has thus viewed many Hijazi customs and rituals – especially those that involve honouring the Prophet Mohammed or his companions, particularly celebrations of the Prophet's birthday, visiting of shrines, reverence of the dead, dreams and visions, the sanctity of sites or shrines and especially Sufi practices – as superstitious, if not heretical.<sup>28</sup>

23 The annual pilgrimage to Mecca that is incumbent on every Muslim at least once in his lifetime, if he has the means to carry it out. It is one of the five pillars of Islam (arkan al Islam).

24 Jerome Taylor, 'Medina: Saudis take a bulldozer to Islam's history', *The Independent* (London 26 October 2012) <[www.independent.co.uk/news/world/middle-east/medina-saudis-take-a-bulldozer-to-islams-history-8228795.html?printService=print](http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/middle-east/medina-saudis-take-a-bulldozer-to-islams-history-8228795.html?printService=print)> accessed 27 October 2012.

25 Ibid.

26 Ahmed Irfan, 'The destruction of Holy Sites in Mecca and Medina' [2010] *Islamica Magazine*.

27 J. Taylor, *Medina*, op. cit.

28 Mai Yamani, *Cradle of Islam. The Hijaz and the quest for identity in Saudi Arabia* (I. B. Taurus 2009).



Madawi Al Rasheed, Professor of Anthropology of Religion in London, has also tackled this subject, commenting on the religious literature aimed at preventing visits to the holy cities of Islam and thereby committing 'blasphemous acts'.<sup>29</sup>

But the personality who has been more adamant about the fate of Islamic historic sites in Mecca and Medina is no doubt Architect Sami Angawi.<sup>30</sup> Dr Angawi, a well renowned expert of Islamic architecture and art and founder in 1975 of the Hajj Research Center, believes that 'we are witnessing now the last few moments of the history of Mecca' and that 'we are destroying physical links to our past and turning our religion and history into a legend'.<sup>31</sup>

It is not our intention to judge or condemn such a policy or habit, especially in a highly controversial field like religious belief. What can be stated is that such an approach by the official religious establishment of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia can easily be traced in publications related to the matter. For example, the Standing Committee for Scholarly Research and Issuing Fatwas issued a series of fatwas on this subject<sup>32</sup> such as:

Building on graves is an abominable 'bid'ah' (innovation in religion) that involves excessive veneration of those who are buried there. It is also a means that can lead to 'shirk' (associating others with Allah in His Divinity or worship). It is therefore obligatory for a Muslim ruler or his representative to order the removal of these buildings on graves and that they be levelled to the ground, to end this 'bid'ah' and to block the means to 'shirk'.<sup>33</sup>

In case that the land on which the Masjid (mosque) was built is free of graves, performing Salah (prayer) there is permissible otherwise the Masjid should be destroyed.<sup>34</sup>

It is impermissible to construct buildings over graves or to plaster or marble them, as the Prophet (peace be upon him) forbade all of this. Islam does not allow any form of Ibadah to be offered at graves whether it is Salah, recitation of the Qur'an, slaughtering animals, distributing food or Tawaf (circumambulation)

29 Madawi Al Rasheed, *Contesting the Saudi State. Islamic voices from a new generation* (Cambridge University Press 2007).

30 Laith Abou-Ragheb, 'Dr Sami Angawi on Wahhabi Desecration of Makkah. Developers and Purists Erase Mecca's History' (Reuters 12 July 2005) <[www.islamicpluralism.org/467/dr-sami-angawi-on-wahhabi-desecration-of-makkah](http://www.islamicpluralism.org/467/dr-sami-angawi-on-wahhabi-desecration-of-makkah)> accessed 30 April 2013.

31 Ibid.

32 Published on the website of the Saudi General Presidency of Scholarly Research and Ifta, <[www.alifta.com](http://www.alifta.com)>.

33 Fatwas of the Permanent Committee, Group 1, Volume 1: Aqidah (1), Creeds, Exaggeration regarding graves and building Masjids (mosques) over them, Ruling on building over graves (fatwa n. 7210).

34 Ibid., fatwa n. 10422.



(...) There is a Hadith which proves that seeking blessings from graves and those who dwell therein is prohibited and is regarded as major Shirk.<sup>35</sup>

Sheikh Abdulaziz ibn Baz, Grand Mufti – the highest religious figure of the Kingdom – also issued many fatwas on the subject from 1993 until his death in 1999.<sup>36</sup> Some Hejazi scholars commented that this disregard towards the conservation of the heritage of Mecca and Medina by the religious scholars of Wahhabi inspiration can also be explained considering that their origin is mostly the region of Qassim, in central Arabia (in the wider region known as Najd), almost 1,000 kilometres from Mecca and the Hejaz.

This phenomenon reflects also a general attitude towards the sacred which is very different from the one we find in the West or in other parts of the world, where there is a direct and natural connection between antiquities, ancient art, cultural heritage and religious practices and ceremonies. This has to be emphasized, because it would otherwise be difficult to understand the completely different standards of preservation of historic heritage in the holy cities of Islam compared to similar places of worship elsewhere. Similarly, it has been written that ‘the Great Mosque, which for centuries held the role of a university, became solely a place for pilgrimage and prayer under Saudi adherence to Wahhabism’s exclusionary tenets’.<sup>37</sup> It is therefore important to draw our attention now to the significance of the pilgrimage to the holiest city of Islam.

### The Pilgrimage

The pilgrimage to Mecca (Hajj) is the so-called fifth pillar of Islam,<sup>38</sup> and its obligatory character – for every member of the faithful who can afford it and who is mentally and physically fit – derives directly from the Qur’an (3:97). It comprises a set of rituals taking place in Mecca and in other locations in its

35 Ibid., fatwa n. 5339.

36 For example: ‘The Prophet (peace be upon him) explains that the people who build Masjids (mosques) and domes over graves as well as those who make idols in them are the worst people in the sight of Allah. He cursed them in the Hadith of ‘Aishah and did not differentiate between those who built them for worship and those who took them as memorials. Therefore building (domes and Masjids over graves) is not permissible, because they are a big means to Shirk. It is also a tradition of the Jews and the Christians which we were prohibited to follow’. Fatwas of Ibn Baz, Volume 1, Refuting Mustafa Amin www.alifta.net.

37 Mai Yamani, *Cradle of Islam*, op. cit.

38 The other four being 1) the Shahadah, that is ‘to acknowledge verbally that one accepts the reality of God and the prophecy of Muhammad’; 2) the Salat or ritual prayer; 3) Zakat, commonly translated as ‘alms tax’; and 4) fasting during the month of Ramadan. Cf. Sachiko Murata and William C. Chittick, *The Vision of Islam* (Paragon House, 1994).

surroundings (Mina, Arafat and Muzdalifah),<sup>39</sup> from the 8th to the 13th day of the month of Dhu'l-Hijja (the last month of the Islamic calendar). Hajj is also called the 'major pilgrimage' to distinguish it from the 'minor pilgrimage' (*Umrah*) that can be undertaken at any time of the year, and takes place only in the area of the Grand Mosque in Mecca, performing circumambulation around the Ka'bah and walking back and forth between the hills of Safa and Marwa (a ritual called *Sa'i*).

As Sachiko Murata and William C. Chittick point out, today it is possible to reach Mecca to perform Hajj in a matter of few hours, from any location on the planet. But in the past the journey was made on foot or at best on horseback or on camels. The journey could take months or even years, as in the case of the famous Arab traveller Ibn Battuta whose journey to Mecca from his hometown Tangier (Morocco), in the early 14th century, took about 16 months:

In the past, most Muslims had to fulfil strict conditions in order to make the journey. In effect, they had to be prepared for death. They had to assume that they would never return, and make all the necessary preparations for that eventuality. One of the conditions for making the hajj is that people have to pay off all their debts (...) Traditionally, the hajj was looked upon as a great rite of passage, a move from involvement with this world to occupation with God. In order to make the hajj, people had to finish with everything that kept them occupied on a day-to-day basis.<sup>40</sup>

Nowadays, Hajj is possibly the greatest gathering of people on the planet. Unlike most of the pilgrimages of the other main religions, it has to be performed in a single location, at a specific time and in a prescribed manner. Now more than 3 million men and women from all over the world come to Mecca every year to perform Hajj. It is not only the peak of the spiritual life for millions of pilgrims, but also an event that has important political implications for governments and communities of the Islamic nation (*Ummah*).<sup>41</sup>

It is estimated that in the last three decades almost 3,000 people lost their lives during Hajj, primarily because of overcrowding, stampedes and fires in the pilgrims' camps. This has led the Saudi authorities to adopt new measures to protect the pilgrims, first of all improving Hajj infrastructure and services, and particularly inaugurating in 2005 a massive new structure in Mina for the

39 'The highpoints of the hajj are not in Mecca but on the outskirts in 'Arafat and Mina. On the ninth day of the month of Dhu al'Hijja (...) all two million pilgrims assemble at the Plain of 'Arafat for the Day of Standing – a time of prayer and meditation from about noon until sunset. The congregation at 'Arafat replicates the gathering Muhammad addressed during his "Farewell Pilgrimage", when he revealed the final verses of the Qur'an just months before his death'. Robert R. Bianchi, *Guests of God* (Oxford University Press, 2004).

40 Sachiko Murata and William C. Chittick, *The Vision of Islam*, op. cit.

41 For these aspects, my main reference is: Robert R. Bianchi, *Guests of God*, op. cit.

ritual of the *Jamarat* or ‘stoning of the devil’. Moreover, a quota system that controls *per capita* Hajj participation and pegs national quotas to population size was adopted, essentially freezing such participation at 1990 levels (no more than 1,000 pilgrims for every million people, in the case of Islamic countries; exceptions are made for Muslim minorities in non-Islamic Countries), so that the total number of *Hajjis* (pilgrims performing Hajj) from overseas would not exceed, originally, 1.3 million annually (currently the number allowed is 1.8 million). At the same time the number of internal pilgrims resident in Saudi Arabia was also limited.<sup>42</sup>

According to Robert Bianchi,

... the hajj has transformed international relations as much as domestic politics (...). The need for a global pilgrimage policy and a permanent international authority to implement it is a driving force behind the Organization of the Islamic Conference (OIC). Debates over hajj policy frame the struggle for power in international Islamic organizations and affect relations between Muslim states and their world diplomacy.<sup>43</sup>

Robert Bianchi highlights Muslims’ expectations that their rulers make every effort to guarantee their right to visit Mecca in order to fulfil their religious duties. Eventually a compromise was reached between different and conflicting approaches to sovereignty and free access to the Holy Cities. Moreover, Bianchi establishes a pertinent comparison between Hajj management and maritime law:

... like the law of the sea, the hajj is a field where customary law rules that governed for centuries broke down rapidly and where the formation of new rules exposed sharp disagreement over the role of international law. Just as the maritime powers of the West used their navies to enforce a universal code for the high seas, the great land empires of the Islamic world used their armies to provide safe passage for Muslims visiting the Holy Cities. In each instance, a few hegemonic powers laid down the law, but trade and travel everywhere benefited.<sup>44</sup>

However, he probably overestimates the reconciliation between ‘seemingly incompatible principles of universal access and exclusive jurisdiction’ and the role of the OIC in determining the Hajj policies and monitoring their implementation.

Indeed it is difficult to acknowledge the existence of a Hajj regime based on customary international law as Bianchi does. And if anything like an Islamic international law exists, an issue that cannot be discussed here, it certainly does not have much influence on the administration of the Hajj and of the Holy Cities. On the contrary, Saudi Arabia appears to be keeping a firm grip on the sovereign

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42 Ibid.

43 Ibid. In 2011 the name of the organization was changed to Organization for Islamic Cooperation.

44 Ibid.

rule over Mecca and Medina. And above all there seems to be nothing like a Hajj regime ensuring a common heritage preservation of the Islamic holiest sites, as we have seen in this chapter.

### The End of Mecca?

It is sad to think that we are maybe witnessing, as Dr Angawi has said, the last few moments of the history of Mecca. The image of this sacred city as the 'heart' of the Islamic world is well known. According to this metaphor, Hajj therefore represents the circulation of the 'blood' – that is, the faithful – of Islam moving across the Islamic world, with Mecca and the Ka'bah being the heart.<sup>45</sup> The end of Mecca, or of its history, could have severe consequences for Islam as a whole, and particularly for it as a world civilization. In this regard, and in conclusion, it is worth mentioning the words of a renowned British Sufi writer and scholar Martin Lings, who is also known as Sheikh Abu Bakr Siraj Al Din, an author that we have already quoted here. In a beautiful documentary<sup>46</sup> using some extraordinary archive material Dr Lings recollects the experiences of the two Hajj pilgrimages that he performed in 1948 and in 1976. At the end of the interview he cannot refrain from observing that Mecca changed immensely in the almost three decades between his two Hajj experiences. He expresses his regret that even Safa and Marwa, that are among the 'monuments' (or 'symbols') of God,<sup>47</sup> in the meantime have been more or less destroyed. Nonetheless, he adds that after the first Hajj he made a certain spiritual progress, and thus became more sensitive to certain things, and especially to the *Baraka* (blessing, spiritual presence). The Qur'an often mentions this term, whose source is always and only Allah. God's blessing pervades many things, humans and places. It pervades Mecca, as stated in the Qur'an (3,96). Being more spiritually sensitive during the 1976 Hajj, in a certain sense Martin Lings appreciated more his second pilgrimage. Despite all the changes that had occurred in Mecca over the decades, what remains totally unchanged, he concludes, is the *Baraka*.

45 'According to a Sufi interpretation, the Ka'ba corresponds to the heart, as the seat of the Divine "Presence", and the encircling movement of the pilgrims around the Ka'ba recalls the movement of thoughts or meditations turning perpetually around the soul's ungraspable center'. Titus Burckhardt, *Art of Islam*, op. cit.

46 *Circling the House of God: Reflections on Hajj with Martin Lings* (documentary film, Matmedia productions, 2009).

47 'Behold! Safa and Marwa are among the symbols of Allah. So if those who visit the House in the season or at other times, should compass them round, it is no sin in them'. *The Holy Qur-an*; op. cit.; 2, 158.

