

# Administering the Holy City

**INTERVIEW WITH DR OSAMA BIN FADL AL BAR**  
MAYOR OF MAKKAH



Osama Al Bar has a Bachelor's Degree in Physics from KAAU and a Master's in Meteorological Physics from the same institution. He also holds a PhD in Environmental Physics from Nottingham University. Previous positions include Assistant Professor in the Physics Department at the College of Applied Science, UMAU, and Chairman of the Environmental Research Department at the Hajj

Research Centre, UMAU. He went on to serve as the Deputy Director General and then Director General Designate of the same institution, before becoming Dean of the Institute of the Custodian of the Two Holy Mosques for Hajj Researchers. He became Mayor of Makkah in 2007.

*How important is religious tourism to the Saudi Arabian economy, given the recent decline in oil prices and the need for further economic diversification in the coming years?*

For Saudi Arabia, hosting the Two Holy Mosques is a privilege. So monetary gain is not the motivation for the government. Just compare what the government spent on the previous expansion projects of Masjid al Nabawi and Masjid al Haram in Makkah between the late 1980s and early 1990s, to what has been spent on the new expansion of the Holy Mosque in Makkah. Over US\$200 billion has been spent on the latter – with the land acquisition alone accounting for around US\$90 billion. It is difficult to imagine, therefore, that religious tourism can compensate for this huge expenditure.

This is from the government's perspective. But if we talk about the private sector, activities including housing, catering, transportation (including air travel), this will help monetise this expansion and allow for the increase in the number of Hajj and Umrah pilgrims. In this way, the economies of Makkah and Madinah stand to gain considerably.

At present, the number of pilgrims every year is 13 million, consisting of approximately 3 million performing the Hajj, and 10 million performing the Umrah over the rest of the year. Saudi Arabia's vision is to increase the total number of pilgrims performing Hajj and Umrah to 20 million per year by 2020, and 50 million per year by 2030.

The next focus of development will be the "Masha'ir" (areas for the performance of Hajj – Mina, Muzdalifah, and Arafat). With this the number of Hajj pilgrims could increase to 4 million in 2020 and to 7 million in 2030, with corresponding increases for the Umrah pilgrims.

*Please highlight the latest developments regarding the main infrastructure projects in and around Makkah, including the expansion of the Grand Mosque, the Haramain high-speed Makkah-Madinah railway link, and the King Abdulaziz International Airport.*

All types of infrastructure, including transportation, should be developed to allow for the huge increase in visitor numbers to Makkah by 2030. This includes, for example, the road network, the completion of the first and second ring roads, the development of new highways between Jeddah and Makkah, and also the completion of the Haramain High Speed Train between Makkah and Madinah, which is expected to bring more than 25,000 passengers per hour at its peak. Importantly, the new expansion of King Abdulaziz Airport in Jeddah will serve up to 34 million passengers annually. As you mentioned, the Grand Mosque is almost complete and can accommodate almost 2 million people at one time.

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Also, the capacity of the Mataf (the core area around the Kaaba) is almost 130,000 people per hour. The Mas'aa has also been expanded to accommodate the same number, i.e. 130,000 people per hour. I think the focus should now be on increasing the capacity of housing in Mina. That will be the next task for the Saudi government.

*How do you ensure that the cultural and historical identity of Makkah is maintained in the midst of the new development work?*

I believe people coming to Makkah are coming primarily for the Haram, for the Kaaba. The increasing number of people coming for Hajj and Umrah during the last three decades makes the preservation of the historical sites of Makkah very difficult. As you know, since the

era of the Prophet, ﷺ the Grand Mosque has been expanded many times. The first time was at the time of the second Caliph, Umar Bin Al Khattab. At that time some of the housing near the Kaaba was demolished and the land was acquired for the expansion of the Mosque. And the same has happened during the succeeding expansions. What we can do is preserve the Islamic architecture. We can rebuild old Zuggag and streets, we can rebuild some of the Khans, which were famous in Islamic cities. We can rebuild them again in different sites in Makkah, especially near the centre of Makkah, near the Haram.

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*Makkah has historically been a hub for trade and commerce. What business opportunities would you currently highlight as the most abundant in Makkah, and how is this affecting the economy?*

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Makkah has been a commercial hub since the time of “Elaf Quraish”. It was the hub of trade and commerce between the Sham (Syria) in the North and the Yemen in the South. The “Elaf” referred to the two journeys for bringing commerce from Yemen to the Makkah market and then exporting it again to Sham; using the city as a commercial hub. Today, commerce continues, albeit differently. Many pilgrims are buying gifts in Makkah and taking them back – effectively exporting products across the world. We

hope that this will benefit both the Islamic World and the people of Makkah. I believe one key business opportunity in Makkah today is tourism. There are of course many historical places in Makkah like the Cave of Hira, where the Quran was revealed to the Prophet, the cave of Thor where the Prophet hid during his famous journey to Madinah, al Hijrah. So tourism and hospitality are the commercial sectors that will see a boom in the years ahead.

In the last ten years, the economy has been impacted by mega expansion projects by the Saudi government. Earlier we talked about what the Saudi government has spent on the expansion of the Grand Mosque, the expansion of infrastructure, and the benefits of that huge expansion have been reflected in the economy of Makkah. Also, with the new vision for 2030, over the next decade there will be other major works which will benefit the Hajj and Umrah.

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*Some two million people arrive in Makkah for the annual Hajj. What is being done to ensure maximum safety and security for pilgrims during this extremely busy period?*

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As you know, with such huge numbers of pilgrims coming to the same place the crowds are very large, and a lot of work has been done over the last decade to make the Hajj safe. With the expertise

*The Masjid Al Haram (The Grand Mosque) has undergone a major expansion to accommodate over 2 million pilgrims at any given time*



of the Saudi government, the mega projects and the expansion, especially in the Jamarat Bridge, we hope there will be no more accidents during the Hajj.

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*What is your strategy to regulate Hajj and Umrah pilgrims in order to have a sustainable and manageable flow of visitors over the course of each year?*

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Makkah is one of the cheapest cities in the region; you can complete your pilgrimage and still live comfortably in Makkah for an average of US\$60 per day. As for the numbers, I think the number of people will regulate themselves. Pilgrims will come all year round to avoid the peaks during the high seasons. I don't think that the Saudi government needs any regulations to control the people. The Hajj and Ramadan will be the high seasons and most people will avoid these times and will choose to come during the other months. For example during January, or Christmas period in the West, you can come to Makkah when there are fewer people, less crowds, and the prices are lower.

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*What is the social strategy regarding the local residents of Makkah?*

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This, I believe, is one of our big challenges: how we can have social interaction between the pilgrims and the people of Makkah. Historically, there have always been very intimate social interactions between the Hujjaj, visitors and the people of Makkah. Mutawwifs and their families used to guide the pilgrims and visitors to holy shrines

and other historical areas. In fact they would visit countries far and wide to invite the potential pilgrims to come to Makkah. And when the Hujjaj came to Makkah they were invited into the houses of the Mutawwifs. And the families of the Mutawwifs would bring the food that they had prepared for the Hujjaj. Also the markets of Makkah were run by Makkah residents and all this created excellent social interaction between both parties. I think one of our challenges is how we can revive this social interaction again in this new era.

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*How would you summarise the experience you would want each pilgrim to have when they visit Makkah?*

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From the pilgrimage no one needs more than "Hajj Maqbool" (completed, accepted) or "Umrah Maqboola". That is the spiritual dimension and the message from Allah ﷻ to those coming. They are asking for forgiveness for all their sins and to become as they were newly born. I think that is the message for the people coming and the experience they want to remember. They are coming to the House of God (Bait Ullah) the holiest House on Earth, they are coming for the journey of life. We want them to be happy with each moment they spend here in this holy city.

My hope for Makkah in the 21st century is that it will continue to be the holiest place in the world for Muslims, as it has been for 1400 years. We, as servants of the city, will provide a top-class service for the pilgrims in the Islamic tradition of good manners and hospitality. E

*A cityscape of Makkah showing the Kaaba enclosed within the Grand Mosque, the world's tallest clock tower, and the mountains of Makkah*

