

# A Source of Inspiration

By **RT HON BARONESS WARSI**

MEMBER OF THE HOUSE OF LORDS, UK



Sayeeda Warsi was the youngest peer in Parliament when elevated to the House of Lords in 2007, and in 2010 she became the first Muslim to serve as a Cabinet Minister. As Minister without Portfolio, she led the largest ministerial delegation to the Vatican, established the *Remembering Srebrenica* programme and ensured that Britain in 2014 became the first western country to issue a

Sukuk (Islamic bond). Sayeeda studied and practiced the law before entering politics, and is currently Pro Vice Chancellor at the University of Bolton. She is author of *The Enemy Within: A Tale of Muslim Britain* (2017).

Britain is home to over 3 million Muslims. Every year thousands of pilgrims travel to Makkah from the United Kingdom and this figure is growing. In 2012, I helped set up the British government's Hajj Taskforce, to facilitate a safe and smooth experience for British pilgrims.

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I have had the privilege of performing Hajj as well as visiting Makkah on a number of other occasions to perform Umrah. Whilst I have mixed feelings about recent hotel and infrastructure developments in the Holy City, anyone that visits Makkah will agree that the essence of the Kaaba itself is enough to evoke a profound spiritual experience.

Its centuries-old communities and landscape for me are diminishing at

too fast a pace, but despite this, Makkah's place at the heart of Islam still provokes a sense of belonging, purpose and unity.

Within the Haram, men, women and families pray side by side as equals before God, a tradition which is now centuries old and which we must continue to preserve. The strength of the spiritual experience in Makkah is rooted in its diversity of gender, race, nationality, socioeconomic class and opinion and we must ensure we support and build upon this great tradition.

I am always comforted that my multiple identities – Female, British, Parliamentarian and Muslim, find a unity in Makkah, a place where I am not judged by any of these and in fact these variant strands of my identity become irrelevant as I stand before the Kaaba as an individual, no less and no more, to all others standing there.

The lesson of tolerance and equality espoused in the last Khutbah of the Prophet Muhammad in Makkah seems even more relevant today than it did then and a visit to Makkah is a timely reminder of those words.

Makkah evokes a sense of purpose which amazingly appears to be all-encompassing as you enter the Haram and view the Kaaba for the first time. So many friends and family have recounted this experience which for many is the beginning of a life-changing journey. The irrelevant, minutiae and the periphery are left behind as city and spirituality fuse together to herald what Makkah heralded over 1400 years ago – new beginnings.

As a woman, Makkah's significance is not lost. It was home to some of the most powerful and revered women in the history of Islam – namely Khadijah, the Prophet's first wife and a successful businesswoman; Aisha, a warrior-scholar in her own right; and Fatima, the Prophet's daughter and wife of Ali. Their lives and roles at the very inception of Islam provide examples and lessons for society today. As the first British Muslim Cabinet Minister I have often cited the inspiration I have received from these early women in Islam and sought to champion women's rights, where the battle is sadly still not won. Makkah was once a beacon for women's right and it should once more strive to be the same.

Today, too many people have forgotten this fact – and unfortunately that includes many of my co-religionists. The history of Islam, and particularly its origins in Makkah, can provide today's Muslims with a powerful source of inspiration. And this is why the pilgrimage is so very important, so that we may reconnect with the progressive values on which the faith was originally founded, and experience the city where it was born.