

A Compass for the Muslim World

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Makkah holds a unique place in the heart of all Muslims. The almost tangible spiritual power of Makkah is undeniable to any Muslim visiting this holiest of cities. It was here that Islam began. It was here that the holy Prophet ﷺ of Islam walked with his companions. It was here, on nearby Mount Hira overlooking the city, that the Prophet received his first Quranic revelations. It is here where the Kaaba, the spiritual epicentre of the Muslim world, built by Abraham and his son Ishmael as the first House of God, is preserved in the Grand Mosque of Makkah. It is here where the compass of the Islamic faith was first aligned.

During one of my earliest pilgrimages to Makkah several decades ago, I took it upon myself to hike up to Hira. Standing at the mouth of the cave, you can see an incredible, encapsulating view of the city of Makkah and the plain surrounding it. I thought to myself, when the Prophet came here to pray and fast, he could have hardly imagined that within a century of his death, his message would spread clear across the world, from Spain in Europe to Sindh in India. His message, the foundation of the faith, was a powerful and universal statement of peace, compassion, wisdom, and pursuit of knowledge. It was the destiny of men and women to seek knowledge and it is no coincidence that *ilm*, the word for knowledge, is cited more than any other word save the name of God in the Quran. It is reflected in one of my favorite sayings of the Prophet, “The ink of the scholar is more sacred than the blood of the martyr.”

The spirit of Makkah offers the Muslim world the key it needs to renew the core values of *ilm*, *adl* (justice), and *ihsan* (compassion and balance) that once made it a beacon. Renewing and restoring the spiritual vision of Makkah beyond this city to the entirety of

the Muslim world offers Muslims the direction needed to navigate this tumultuous and trying era. This is the true spiritual power of Makkah.

Muslims of all ages aspire to fulfill their religious duty and make the pilgrimage to Makkah at least once in their lifetime. Older Muslims hope for the opportunity to visit and pray in the Grand Mosque before they die and young Muslims seek the spiritual exhilaration of renewing their faith in the place where it all began. It is this strong spiritual lure that inspires some two-to-three million pilgrims to make the Hajj each year.

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Having performed the Hajj myself, I can attest that the entire process is a life-changing experience, not least because it is so physically demanding. Beyond the bureaucratic difficulty of receiving permission to visit – a significant hurdle given the numbers wanting to visit each year – there is the physical challenge of performing the rituals alongside hundreds of thousands of people of different nationalities and cultures. While the Hajj lasts only five days, many Muslims dedicate several weeks to their pilgrimage to Makkah. Muslims spend their time in Makkah circling the holy Kaaba chanting the names of God with thousands of other pilgrims, a highly emotional experience. Regardless of how many times a Muslim visits Makkah, each time they will find themselves with renewed awe for the sheer spiritual power of the city. Upon completing the Hajj, pilgrims return home with the title Hajji, which in some areas is as highly regarded as a degree from Oxford or Cambridge.

Makkah's spiritual power has long enticed far beyond the confines of the city. Makkah has been the centre of the Islamic faith since the time of the Prophet, but the fact that the political centre of Islam was long ago shifted away from the area, moving instead to such cities as Damascus under the Umayyad, Baghdad under the Abbasids, and Istanbul under the Ottomans,

allowed the city to maintain its traditions, rituals, and status as the preeminent spiritual centre of Islam. It also allowed Makkah to avoid the dynastic politics of the Muslim world. As a result, it has become a place of renewal for all adherents of the faith, rich and poor, famous and not famous, old and young. We know from history that great scholars like Ibn Khaldun and Sir Syed Ahmed Khan came to pray, reflect, and meet one another in deep spiritual encounters. Presidents and prime ministers visit annually during, before, and after the Hajj in an effort to maintain their connection to their spiritual roots and to the divine.

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Each time I make the pilgrimage to Makkah, often lost in prayer in the courtyard of the Grand Mosque, I have found myself struck by a powerful connection and sense of devotion – an experience shared by every Muslim. This is the holiest of holies, the place where the Prophet and the Righteous Caliphs walked and prayed. As a Muslim scholar, I am also always struck during the pilgrimage by the transcendent unity in Islam, as reflected by the diversity of Muslims around me who have made the pilgrimage. Here, blue-eyed, blonde men and women, black- and brown-skinned worshippers, and Muslims from the Far East all walk side-by-side in deep spiritual reflection. Throughout Makkah, there is a deep sense of tolerance, patience, and mutual acceptance amongst visitors and locals alike – no matter the frictions that can occur when a community must receive millions of annual visitors into their neighborhoods. People constantly smile and welcome each other, conscious that they are sharing a unique, faith-affirming experience.

The Saudi government is well aware of the importance of maintaining this welcoming and unifying environment for the Hajj, which is why it spends so much of its time and resources planning to receive the pilgrims each year, orchestrating what is probably one of the world's most difficult logistical exercises. This is especially true in today's globalised world, when Makkah is in the spotlight more now than ever before. Films, documentaries, and books highlight life in the city for the masses, causing any lapse of administration or accident to quickly become international news.

The Muslim world today faces unprecedented challenges: Educational opportunities are becoming increasingly scarce. Youth unemployment is skyrocketing. Sectarian conflict and the rise of violence, a great deal of which involves Muslims attacking

other Muslims, have come to define the public image of the faith. What would the Prophet think of these policies and practices which fly in the face of his entire message – the message of Islam? These are questions that concern the planet, not just Muslim societies. Now is the time therefore when the Muslim world needs to realign its spiritual compass and renew its commitment to the values of the Prophet and the spirit of Makkah.

Fortunately, there are many non-Muslims who share the Muslim appreciation of Islam's rich culture and art. Professor Nasser Khalili, one of the world's foremost collectors of Islamic art, frequently named the "cultural ambassador of Islam", has assembled the collection, *Hajj and the Art of Pilgrimage*, elements of which have been displayed in such prestigious institutions as the British Museum and praised by the Mayor of Makkah himself. Khalili sets an example of how Muslims and non-Muslims can work together to create a more peaceful and just world through art and culture. **F**

The 13th century Arab polymath Ibn Khaldun, whose pilgrimage to Makkah is often cited by scholars worldwide



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