

# Mass Accommodation for the “Guests of God”: Changing Experiences of Hajj-Pilgrims in Jeddah

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Figure 1: Mass accommodation for pilgrims at the old airport. Photo: Stefan Maneval 2012.

In the 1950s, the pilgrimage to Mecca was an important source of revenue for the inhabitants of Jeddah and the Saudi state.

During this period, new infrastructure was constructed to facilitate travelling for an increasing number of pilgrims, not least because of the allure of increased business. Jeddah’s first airport was built in 1946,

and from 1950 on, mass accommodation was erected to house tens of thousands of pilgrims. Focusing mainly on the architecture of mass accommodation in Jeddah, this paper discusses how the infrastructure constructed for pilgrims in Saudi Arabia from the 1950s onwards affected the experience of the Hajj.

The new mass accommodation in Jeddah, consisting of three large compounds known as pilgrims’ cities (*mudun al-ḥujjāj*), was commissioned and owned by the al-‘Ayn al-‘Azīziyya Foundation, a pious endowment (*waqf*) of King Abdulaziz bin Saud. In the years following their construction, the pilgrims’ cities were expanded several times, allowing more and more

pilgrims to visit Saudi Arabia for the Hajj. ‘Abdullāh Manā’, a physician and author born and raised in Jeddah, describes in his autobiography the effect this had on social life in Jeddah:

The pilgrims spent their days happily and contentedly in Jeddah’s residential quarters (ḥārāt), until, in the late 70s and early 80s of the Hijra [around 1960 CE], the two pilgrims’ cities for pilgrims travelling by sea and by air were constructed. Step by step, the pilgrims were separated from the city of Jeddah, its inhabitants and its life.

Then, all the rules, instructions and worries caused the pilgrims to gallop. They are allowed to stay 24 hours in the city. Buses are waiting for them in order to take those arriving early to Medina and those arriving late directly to Mecca, as if Jeddah did not want them or could not take them in. Although the opposite is the case.

In spite of its impressive size, the mass accommodation was only capable of lodging approximately 10–20 per cent of the growing number of pilgrims travelling to Mecca, ranging between 140,000 to 180,000 pilgrims between 1957 and 1962,

and climbing to an average of approximately 300,000 in the 1960s, and 700,000 in the 1970s.

Other pilgrims stayed in one of the numerous new hotels, accommodation provided by pilgrimage guides, or slept out on the streets. However, the new facilities were indeed capable of bringing together a significant proportion of the pilgrims in three locations, which at that time were the fringes of the city. This not only affected the way the inhabitants of Jeddah, such as ‘Abdullāh Manā’, perceived the annual arrival of pilgrims, which had constituted the city’s main source of income for many centuries; but the pilgrims who stayed in the so called pilgrims’ cities also experienced their journey to Mecca differently.

Taking a first-hand account written by a famous Muslim convert of the pilgrims’ city at the airport as its starting point, this article argues, first, that the unique architecture of the pilgrims’ cities, constructed in a distinctly modernist style, contributed to a perception of the Hajj as a ritual that transcends national identities. It was constructed to emphasise the idea that all pilgrims are united and equal. At the same time, as I will show in the following section, the Saudi state increasingly used the modernisation and expansion of Hajj-related facilities as a way of controlling pilgrimage practices. Reshaping the cities in the Hijaz according to its own interpretation of monotheism, the Saudi government invested in the development of Hajj infrastructure also in order to promote their role as self-declared “Custodians of the Holy Mosques”. A look at the recent urban development of Mecca, in the final section of this article, serves to explore the purposes and political goals the Saudi state pursues today with the construction of accommodation and other facilities for the “Guests of God” (ḡuyūf Allāh) or “guests of the consecrated house of God” (ḡuyūf bayt Allāh al-ḥarām), as the Mecca pilgrims are also called.

### **An Afro-American in Jeddah: A First-hand Account from the Pilgrims’ City at the Airport**

In 1964, an American passport with a Hajj visa must have been an unusual sight for customs officers in Jeddah. When Malcolm X presented his passport upon arrival at the airport in Jeddah, the customs officer in charge wanted the Islamic court to check if he was indeed a Muslim. This being a prerequisite for entering Mecca, Malcolm X was not allowed to travel directly to Mecca as planned, but was brought to the pilgrims’ city at the airport, where he remained for two days. This coincidence caused by the customs officer’s suspicions, produced

a rare and informative first-hand report from the new mass accommodation for pilgrims in Jeddah.

In his autobiography, originally published in 1965, the famous civil rights activist and Muslim convert presents a vivid account of his involuntary stay in the pilgrims' city:

"Right outside the airport was a mosque, and above the airport was a huge, dormitory-like building, four tiers high. It was semi-dark, not long before dawn, and planes were regularly taking off and landing, their landing lights sweeping the runways, or their wing and tail lights blinking in the sky. Pilgrims from Ghana, Indonesia, Japan and Russia, to mention some, were moving to and from the dormitory where I was being taken. I don't believe that motion picture cameras ever have filmed a human spectacle more colorful than my eyes took in. We reached the dormitory and began climbing, up to the fourth, top, tier, passing members of every race on earth. Chinese, Indonesians, Afghanistansians. Many, not yet changed into the Ihram garb, still wore their national dress. It was like pages out of the National Geographic magazine.

My guide, on the fourth tier, gestured me into a compartment that contained about fifteen people. Most lay curled on their rugs, asleep. I could tell that some were women, covered head and foot. An old Russian Muslim and his wife were not asleep. They stared frankly at me. Two Egyptian Muslims and a Persian roused and also stared as my guide moved us over into a corner."

Meeting people from all over the world, an experience that is essential to the Hajj and emphasises solidarity among Muslims and equality before God, was new to Malcolm X. The inhabitants of Jeddah watched the arrival of tens of thousands of Muslim pilgrims from all corners of the globe every year. Their different origins were easily recognisable from their clothes until they changed into the simple ihram, consisting of two white seamless cloths, a requirement for every man performing the Hajj. Whereas women are permitted to wear ordinary dress that does not cover the hands and face.

For over a thousand years, pilgrims had travelled to Jeddah by boat or in overland caravans, spending a few days or weeks in the harbour town before continuing on their journey to the holy cities of Islam, Mecca and al-Medina al-Munawwira, when the season of the Hajj began.

According to popular legend, this had been the case ever since caliph 'Uthmān (644–56 CE) decided that Jeddah would become the port of Mecca.

Until the mid-20th century, most of the Mecca pilgrims lodged in residential houses while in Jeddah, among the city's inhabitants. It was common for homeowners in Jeddah to rent out the ground floors of residential buildings to pilgrims. The family quarters were on the upper floors of the houses, which, by the early twentieth century, often consisted of three to five, sometimes even six, storeys. This separation allowed residents to accommodate guests and serve customers while avoiding any disturbance of their family's privacy.

As the city became increasingly crowded in the weeks preceding the Hajj season, determined by the Islamic calendar, some pilgrims, especially those less affluent, also slept out on the streets.

After World War II, the commercial production of oil in Saudi Arabia increased rapidly, allowing for and also demanding investments in infrastructure. Throughout the 1950s, the harbour of Jeddah was expanded several times. The airport, in operation since 1945, was

enlarged in order to handle an increasing number of pilgrims arriving by air. Also, the total number of pilgrims requiring shelter increased.

The first mass accommodation for 5,000 pilgrims was thus built close to the seaport in 1950. A similar complex for 2,000 pilgrims, where Malcolm X resided, was constructed at the airport in 1958 (figure 1), and a third in 1953/4 was located to the south of the city and could lodge up to 2,000 African pilgrims. The facilities were frequently enlarged over the course of the following years. In 1974, they provided accommodation for approximately 60,000 pilgrims.

The pilgrims' cities consisted not only of dormitories, but also offered a variety of services required by the pilgrims, from offices of pilgrimage guides, health and passport services to shops, restaurants, banks and a mosque. Customs offices, police, government agencies and several ministries connected loosely with the Hajj also had branches on the premises.

Therefore, pilgrims did not have to leave the compounds before they continued on their journey to Mecca. The fact that thousands of pilgrims were essentially in Jeddah, yet did not set foot in the city, as 'Abdullāh Manā' remarks in the passage above, was indeed a novelty.

As one of the approximately 260,000 foreign pilgrims joining the pilgrimage to Mecca in 1964,

Malcolm X also did not seem to have left the pilgrims' city during the two days he was forced to stay there. He spent his time practising the prayer posture in his compartment within the dormitory, conversing with other English-speaking pilgrims, and attending prayer in the adjacent mosque.

He bought his lunch from one of the restaurants in the courtyard. Tearing up his roasted chicken with only his hands, he remarks, surprised, that "Muslims were doing the same thing all around me".

He sums up his impression of the pilgrims' city with the words: "All ate as One, and slept as One. Everything about the pilgrimage atmosphere accented the Oneness of Man under One God".

Malcolm X highlights the egalitarian character of the Hajj several times. Here, in the pilgrims' city, the idea that all Muslims and, in principle, all people are equal became a palpable reality for him.

### **An Egalitarian Utopia?**

A closer look at the architecture of the dormitories suggests that the design of these structures played an important role in shaping Malcolm's perception. Thousands of pilgrims bound for Mecca were gathered together in one place, with approximately 10–36 people sharing a room, and a communal bathroom on each floor, one for men and one for women.

Moreover, each of the large four-storey dormitory buildings was constructed as one large entity limiting any kind of social distinction. The interior walls between the rooms had large latticed openings beneath the ceiling, to allow air to circulate (figure 2). As a consequence, all rooms were interconnected, and the sounds and smells could flow freely from one compartment to another. The stairwells were not separated from the corridors by doors, so the different floors of the building were also connected with one another without any barriers.



Figure 2: Interior of the pilgrims' city at the old airport. Photo: Stefan Maneval 2012.

In addition, several compartments on each floor shared a long, undivided balcony, which enabled Malcolm to meet pilgrims other than his roommates, who passed by while he stood at the railing. Access to the balconies was provided by large double doors, which were presumably left open most of the day, as the constant coming and going described by Malcolm suggests.

Doors and windows had latticed wooden shutters instead of panes, thus allowing air and sound easily in and out. The use of latticework, a historical tradition in Jeddah, created a high degree of spatial continuity between the inside and the outside of the building, as well as between the compartments. Finally, the “yard full of activity below” where Malcolm, on his way to the mosque, passed “pilgrims by the thousands, babbling languages, everything but English”

, strongly reinforced the sense of a mass of people united spiritually by their religion and spatially by their shared accommodation.

The architecture of the mass accommodation fulfilled the basic needs of every lodger, nothing more, nothing less, and without distinguishing between nationalities, skin colours, rich or poor. The “guests of God” were treated as one enormous group rather than as individuals with varying interests or as parties of different social status. Even the aesthetics of the architecture supported this impression: the seven units built along the airport road, as well as those at the seaport, had facades that are structured by horizontal and vertical elements, evenly distributed in unvarying intervals. They were accentuated by bright blue paint, matching the colour of the window shutters and doors to the balconies. The architecture of the three pilgrims' cities varied in style, but the building principles were the same in terms of spatial arrangement, openness to air and sounds as well as connections between compartments (figure 3).



The repetitive pattern of the facades and the equal ceiling height, made visible on the outside by the balconies, indicate that there are no hierarchies among the pilgrims lodging there. The visual impression of the architecture indeed matches the images of the ocean of people dressed in white circulating around the Ka'ba in Mecca.



Figure 3: Dormitory in the pilgrims' city at the seaport. Photo: Stefan Maneval 2012.

Malcolm X's journey to the Holy Sites of Islam, which began in Jeddah and included a personal audience with Prince Faysal,

led him to consider Islam as a means of overcoming racial inequality and segregation, as he states in his autobiography.

He was apparently unaware of the fact that slavery had been officially abolished in Saudi Arabia only two years prior to his visit. In view of his experience of racism and segregation in the US, it is understandable that he saw in the Hajj a utopia come true, or at least an alternative to the discrimination he and all people of colour face in America to this day.

It is difficult to assess if the unifying effect of the pilgrims' cities was intended by the landlord, the Waqf (pious endowment) of al-'Ayn al-'Azīziyya, or the architects, as information on the mass accommodation is scarce. Not even the name of the architectural firm is mentioned in the few available sources, such as a History of Aziziah Water Supply, Juddah written by Abdul Qaddous Al Ansari and a booklet published by the Waqf al-'Ayn al-'Azīziyya administration documenting the history of the endowment.

It was, however, in line with the general transformation of the Hajj under Saudi rule, that also resulted in significant changes in the urban fabric of Jeddah, Mecca and al-Medina al-Munawwira, as I will show in the remainder of this article.

## **Saudisation of the Hajj: Wahhabism, Nationalism, and Luxury Islam**

In the oil-era, the opportunity for the Saudi rulers to present themselves as “Custodians of the Holy Mosques” (Arabic sing. *khādim al-ḥaramayn*) became as important as the revenues from Hajj tourism. They gained legitimacy by displaying their ability to organise the annual mass event and provide accommodation and services for an ever increasing number of pilgrims. The modern architecture of these mass accommodations epitomised the sanitised image of the Hajj the government sought to create, which contrasted with the old buildings and unpaved, overcrowded streets of the old town.

In addition, the Saudi government seized the opportunity to have control over the Hajj in order to turn it into a Saudi–Wahhabi experience. The “Saudisation” of the Hajj was achieved through a larger transformation of urban spaces in the Hijaz, including the destruction of many historical sites that were not directly linked to the Hajj, but frequently visited by pilgrims as places of worship and prayer.

Among these were the houses of the prophet Muhammad’s family and companions in Mecca and Medina, and the tomb of Eve in Jeddah. Located outside the city walls to the north of Jeddah, the tomb of “our mother Eve” (*umminā Ḥawā*), also referred to as ‘mother of humanity’, was frequently visited by travellers and pilgrims staying in Jeddah on their way to Mecca.

In 1928, approximately two years after the conquest of the city by the Al Saud, Prince Faysal had it destroyed.

The entire burial ground was later sealed in concrete, the gravestones were removed and replaced by regular rows of graves, numbered, but without the names of the dead.

The destruction was legitimised, or driven, by the teachings of Muḥammad bin ‘Abd al-Wahhāb, especially by his rigid interpretation of the concept of *tawḥīd* (monotheism). According to his belief, no person, dead or alive, and no inanimate object, such as graves, monuments or stones, is supposed to be addressed in prayer as an intermediary mediating between the worshipper and God.

Religious practices involving the worshipping of saints or sanctuaries other than those specified by the prophet Muḥammad and in the Quran were declared to be idolatry or polytheism (*shirk*) that needed to be banned. For the Al Saud, employing these rulings appears not so much as a matter of religious conviction, but rather a political project: the diverse religious traditions in the recently established Saudi kingdom (1932) were prohibited in public, but tolerated in private settings and reception halls of residential houses. These included Sufism in the Hijaz, Shia Islam in the Eastern Provinces, the south west and Medina, and local variants of Sunni popular belief.

The aim of subduing heterodox religious traditions and implementing the religious doctrine of Muḥammad bin ‘Abd al-Wahhāb across the Saudi kingdom was to appease conservative religious scholars and critics of the regime. At the same time, by reshaping urban spaces according to Wahhabi doctrine and restricting regional specificities through the demolition of heterodox places of worship, the Saudi rulers demonstrated their control over these cities and their populace.

The egalitarianism that Malcolm X experienced in Islam and in the mass accommodation for pilgrims, was thus accompanied by a politics of homogenisation that served to promote a very specific branch of Islam, Wahhabism. Malcolm X had been a member of Elijah Muhammad’s

Nation of Islam for over a decade, and it was only when he left the movement and founded his own organisation, the Muslim Mosque Inc. (1964), that he willingly accepted what he experienced and learned in Saudi Arabia as the correct and authoritative way of practicing Islam. He adhered to the practices of ritual prayers he was taught there and followed the journey of predefined places of worship on the pilgrimage. These practices were not conducive to contemplating diversity within Islam, and spatially produced a Wahhabi interpretation that excluded different expressions of piety, such as practices of worship derived from legal schools other than Hanbalism.

Other observers watched the demolition of places of worship in the Hijaz with great concern, and criticised the exclusion of adherents of other Islamic legal schools from performing the Hajj according to their own beliefs. One example is an early criticism voiced in the Lucknow Daily Newspaper in 1926, which appealed to its readers

"to keep people informed of the state of things in Hedjaz and persuade them to express their protest by postponing their pilgrimage... unless and until all sacred buildings and tombs which have been demolished in Hedjaz are permanently restored to their former position and shape and different schools of Islamic faith are allowed to perform Hajj according to their respective traditions, have full liberty to visit Medina and other places [and] to pay their respects to the memory of the Prophet and other heroes of Islam...."

The modernisation of the infrastructure for the Hajj continues to this day, and with it the destruction of heterodox places of worship,

as well as reminders of a history before Saudi rule. In Mecca and al-Medina al-Munawwira, the old towns have been almost completely destroyed to make way for 12–17 million worshippers per year to visit the holy cities, and to expand the Great Mosque (al-Masjid al-Haram) in Mecca and the Prophet's Mosque (al-Masjid an-Nabawi) in Medina to accommodate up to 2 million pilgrims respectively.

The space required for such great numbers of pilgrims is indeed vast. However, many historical sites were also destroyed in order to clear the ground for parking lots, shopping malls and high-rise luxury hotels for the rich, among them the 601 meter tall Makkah Clock Royal Tower Hotel.

Inaugurated in 2012 as part of the government-owned Abraj al-Bait, it is a real-estate complex of seven skyscraper hotels providing rooms for up to 30,000 pilgrims, and represents yet another face of accommodating "God's guests". This new development has nothing in common with the egalitarian principles Malcolm X discovered during his involuntary stay in the pilgrims' city in Jeddah. The five-star hotel in the centre of the seven towers consists of 1618 "thoughtfully and elegantly appointed" guest rooms, and its suites offer "breathtaking views of Masjid Al Haram and the Holy Ka'aba", allowing for "peaceful reflection and repose",

but only to those who can afford it. In its overwhelming splendour, the world's most expensive and, currently, fifth-tallest building showcases a wealth that is clearly not accessible to everyone, almost mocking the idea of human equality. Furthermore, the giant clock sitting on top of the central tower, modelled on London's Big Ben, is illuminated by 2 million white and green LED lights, reminiscent of the Saudi flag. It is visible from a distance of 25 km, marking the focal point of the Hajj and of Islam itself as decidedly Saudi.



## Conclusion

The architecture of the mass accommodation for the Hajj constructed in Jeddah and Mecca since the 1950s reflects the way in which the Saudi authorities approached the challenge of accommodating an ever increasing number of pilgrims. While serving the purpose of allowing more pilgrims to conduct the Hajj, the construction, modernisation and continuous expansion of facilities, along with the large-scale transformation of urban space, also aimed to equalise pilgrimage practices by preventing pilgrims from deviating from the religious doctrine of Wahhabi Islam. Visiting graves and worshipping saints at monuments from the time of the prophet, for example, became increasingly difficult, as the Saudi government had more and more historic sites in the Hijaz destroyed. The equality promoted by the Saudi state was thus grounded in a very particular understanding of monotheism, and was rather hostile towards religious diversity. As Malcolm X's account from his pilgrimage in 1964 illustrates, the new Hajj facilities also affected the way pilgrims experienced the pilgrimage. While Malcolm X seems to have been unaware of the broader politics of equalisation and "Saudisation" of the Hajj, he sensed the egalitarian principles embodied in the architecture of the mass accommodation and, being experienced in racial and social inequality in his home country, perceived them as liberating. The intention of this paper was to show that the trends of modernisation, equalisation, and "Saudisation" all went hand in hand, as well as to emphasise the ambiguity of this process, that was endorsed by some, and criticised by others. The Saudi state continues to use the construction of Hajj infrastructure to advance an ever more nationalist agenda, and to promote the acceptance of social inequality, for the benefit of the Saudi royal family, whose claim to power and unfair distribution of the country's enormous wealth is in constant need of normalisation. While the Hajj itself still allows millions of Muslims every year to experience the notion of equality before God, the architecture constructed to accommodate "God's guests" in Mecca suggests that, on earth, inequality persists – and those in power, who own and lodge in five-star hotels, have no desire to change the status quo.

Returning to 'Abdullāh Manā'ʿs earlier lament, Jeddah is largely bypassed by pilgrims today. Most of them arrive at the King Abdulaziz International Airport to the north of Jeddah, one of the largest global terminals, from where they continue on their journey directly to Mecca. The pilgrims' cities in Jeddah have ceased to be used for the accommodation of pilgrims, but instead some serve as temporary homes for the city's unequal residents. For instance, in 2011, the mass accommodation at the seaport served as dormitories for Filipino migrant workers who had escaped from their abusive employers. In Saudi Arabia, the employers of migrant workers are legally entitled to keep their employees' passports. In cases of abuse, such as non-payment of wages or sexual harassment, a migrant worker's only chance to leave the country is therefore to escape their employer, camp in the streets, be picked up by the police and deported. The Filipino embassy rented the seaport facilities after more and more absconders had erected shantytowns under flyovers in the city centre of Jeddah. There, in the former pilgrims' city, they awaited their deportation in groups. The previous pilgrims' city for African pilgrims, on the other hand, has since been turned into permanent homes for African immigrants.

In January 2012, I was generously allowed entry to the mass accommodation at the seaport and the airport by the head of the Waqf al-'Ayn al-'Azīziyya administration, who informed me of the planned destruction of the facilities. By March 2019, the last time I was in Jeddah, the seaport facilities had been demolished, whereas at the old airport, Malcolm X's spatialised egalitarian utopia was still standing.

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