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## **Factors influencing the transformation of Iraqi holy cities: the case of Al-Najaf**

**Key words:** urban transformation factors, traditional urban pattern, heritage, Al-Najaf, Iraqi holy cities, Islamic culture

### **Introduction**

According to Hendrigan (2019), cities develop and change, and the fundamental role of changing cities is space. This is, or should be, usually aimed at improving residents' life conditions, but it could also be due to external factors such as social aspects, politics, war, etc. Paraphrasing Correia and Taher (2015), modern development, with its urban geometrical regularity, contrasts with the Islamic urban culture, which is signifi-

cantly more related to social aspects of private life and religious practice.

For that reason, despite the diverse circumstances of each region, this research takes the Iraqi city of Al-Najaf as a case study to analyse the factors involved in the urban transformation of the historic centres of holy cities in the country. These changes, if forced and intrusive, may be associated with political and economic decisions instead of protecting the cities' great legacy and spiritual and urban significance (Farhan, Jasim & Al-Mamoori, 2019).

As stated by Abdelmonem (2017), whilst we cannot live in history or preserve the past, engaging with historic buildings or walking through traditional

urban fabric and alleyways becomes an essential asset of the contemporary urban experience. In this sense, understanding the human experiences, history and narratives is the aim of the archaeology of the built heritage, which analyses the historic fabric, structures and remains (Smith, 2006). Thereby, in order to understand the current situation of the city of Al-Najaf, it is worth describing first its geographical and historical context. Next, the methodological approach is explained to later depict the main traits and the conditions that led to the transformation of the city. The results of this study are presented and discussed, and the conclusions drawn.

## **Case study: the city of Al-Najaf**

### **Geographical and historical context**

The city of Al-Najaf is located on the southern border of western Iraq, 10 km west from the Euphrates river, 160 km south-west from Baghdad and 78 km east from Karbala (Al-Hakim, 2006). The coordinates of the Old City, Najaf's historic city centre, are approximately 31°59'45"N, 44°18'52"E, and the elevation is in the region of 65 m above sea level. In this way, the city overlooks the southwest on the lowlands of the Najaf Sea, which is a large area occupied by the Wadi-Al-Salam Cemetery (Valley of Peace) in the north-northwest, bordered by barren lands known as the Western Desert (Al-Maliki, 2011), and covers agricultural land in the east towards the city of Kofa (Ahmed, 1945; Matar, 2013). The harsh desert climate in this region (Fig. 1) had an impact on the style of the

city's demarcation and reconstruction (Zubaidi, Al-Bugharbee, Muhsin, Hashim & Alkhaddar, 2020).

The city was far from geographical barriers and vulnerable to attacks, forcing its dwellers to fence it round through its changing historical stages (Al-Hakim, 2006; Fig. 2).

Consequently, Al-Najaf Old City could be considered a marginal site only connected to roads from the east, thus losing the advantages and characteristics of cities in central locations (Merzah, 2006).

Al-Najaf is one of the cities built, founded and expanded around a holy shrine of a well-known Islamic figure, Ali bin Abi-Talib (Abid, 2015). Ali bin Abi-Talib was the cousin and the son-in-law of Prophet Mohammed; he was born in Mecca (Makkah) in 598 BC inside the Kaa'bah, the holiest place for Muslims, and killed in 661 AD in Kufa, 10 km away from his grave. Shia Muslims know him as a Caliph or Imam, after the Prophet Mohammed (he ruled from 632 to 661 AD). However, Sunni Muslims account him as the fourth Caliph (656–661 AD) (Allan, 2012). This made Al-Najaf be considered an Islamic heritage city from its creation.

On the other hand, the city underwent difficult circumstances and challenges because of its surroundings and changes, thus bringing destruction and neglect due to unplanned and unstudied urban transformations (Farhan, Abdelmonem & Nasar, 2018). The current status of Al-Najaf Old City does not reflect the sanctity and holiness of the grave of Ali bin Abi-Talib or the many Islamic landmarks, nor the history of the science and culture in the city narration (Abid, 2016). Therefore,



FIGURE 1. Location of Najaf. Elevation map (Urutseg, 2011)



FIGURE 2. Aerial view of Al-Najaf Old City (Nasar, 2015)

it is imperative to preserve the heritage assets of the city and the integrity and vitality of the sacred centre (Directorate of Urban Planning of Najaf Governorate, 2006).

### **Al-Najaf historic city centre**

Al-Najaf was located near the city of Kufa (Al-Daraji, 2014) in a high desert plateau, where some tribes lived close

to springs (this was outside the current city), likewise nomads practiced grazing and agriculture (Batuta & Lee, 1829). Imam Ali was buried in this region after his martyrdom, but his sacred tomb remained hidden from the public for decades, as his will, to avoid desecration by his enemies. It remained secret until Imam Jaafar Al-Sadiq, sixth Imam of Shia and one of Imam Ali's grandsons, revealed it during the Abbasid Caliphate around mid-7th century BC (Shah-Kazemi, 2006).

Due the migration of some Islamic groups (Bosworth, 2007) to the city, it began to expand around the holy grave of Imam Ali to reach 2,500 m of perimeter. It was because of the increasing number

of visitors (pilgrims) to the holy shrine that numerous houses were built around it. This marked the beginning of the civil and religious architecture in the region (Al-Ansari, 2007). Multiple factors such as those of religious, civilizational and political nature influenced the city's growth and development, thus leaving its features and identity on the urban fabric of the Al-Najaf (Al-Hakim, 2006). The most prominent factor was the religion, which added the religious character inherent in the city. Therefore, the phases of morphological development of the Old City (Fig. 3) can be summarised in two stages (Tabbaa, Mervin & Bonnier, 2014): (1) Phase I, from the establishment of the city until 1765 AD, with the

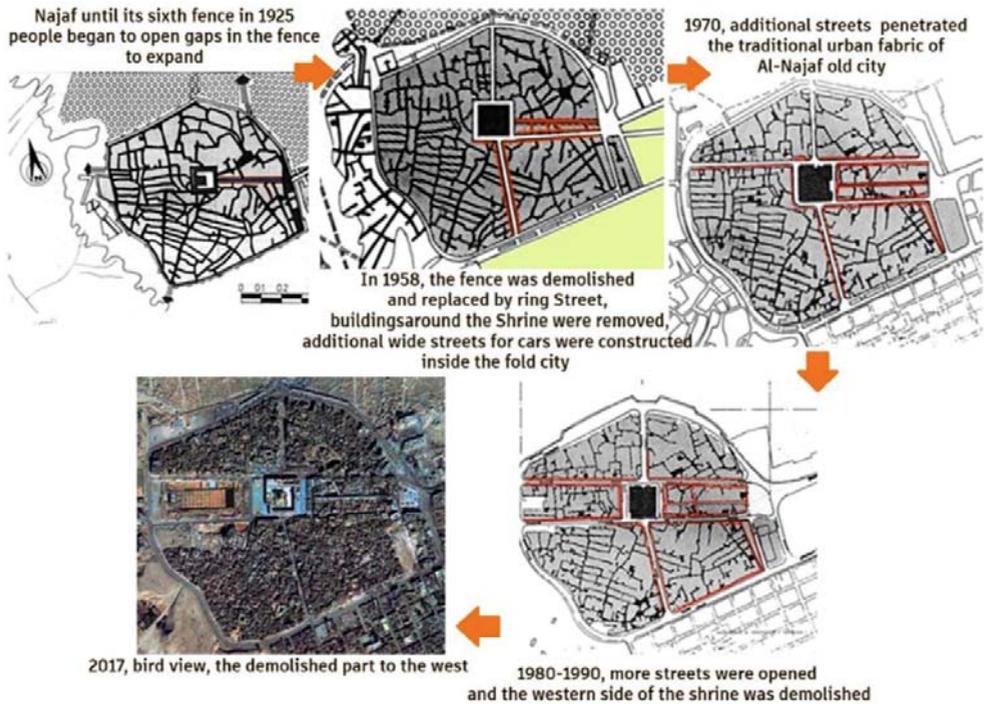


FIGURE 3. Phases of morphological development of Al-Najaf Old City (Farhan, Akef & Nasar, 2020, based on Al-Hakim, 2006)

construction of residential housing in the northern part adjacent to the holy shrine in 1787 AD (Al-Hakim, 2006), which is known as the Mishraq; and (2) Phase II, from 1765 to 1925 AD: Najaf developed and settled at the border of the sixth wall, which was built after the demolition of the fifth wall in 1811 AD (Farhan et al., 2018).

The historic city centre of Al-Najaf is characterised as a compact urban shape, with roads which delimited four neighbourhoods with irregular shapes (Fig. 4): Al Amara, Al-Ula, known as Mishraq; Al-Hawaysh, the smallest one; and Al-Buraq, the latest neighbourhood (Orbasli, 2007; Nasar, 2015).

## Methodology

This paper examines the transformations happened in Al-Najaf, as well as their causes and implications, which require gathering specific data on the history, characteristics, circumstances and changing urban planning situation of the sacred city, concretely focusing on its historic city centre. In this sense, the Najaf archives do not contain enough information; therefore, this research had to resort to diverse sources to collect the data, e.g. governmental reports, official information, scientific publications, and analytical conversation with regional authorities, engineers and architects, urban

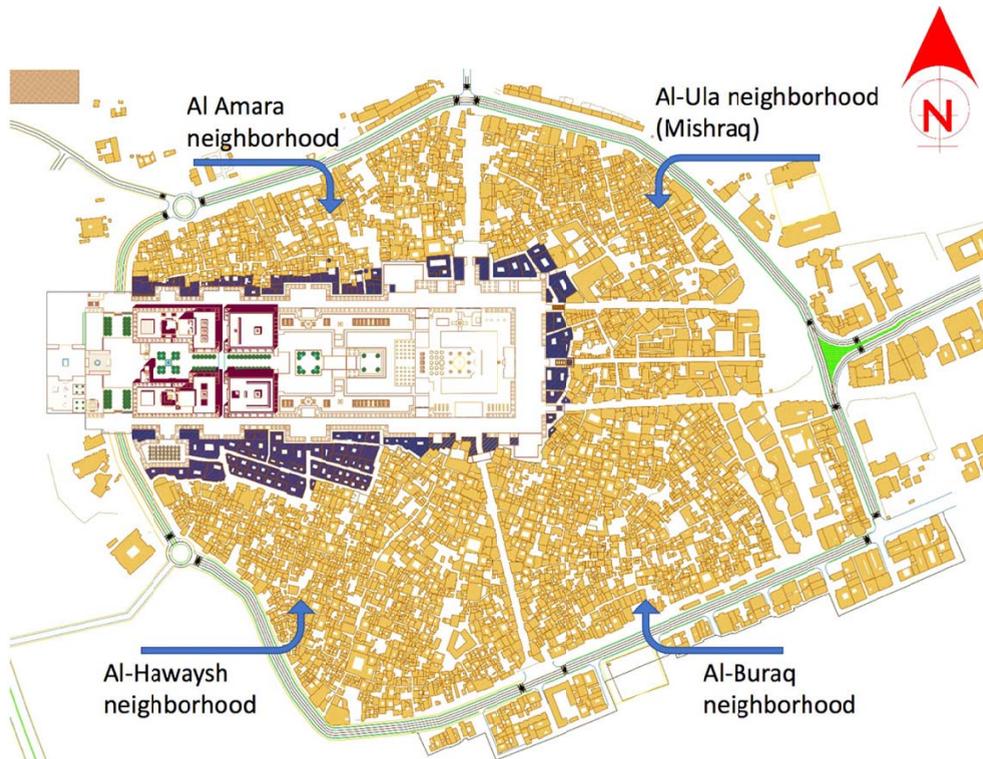


FIGURE 4. Neighbourhoods of Al-Najaf Old City (Department of Planning – Municipality of Najaf, 2020)

and regional planners, NGO members, Muslim seminarians, local citizens, and regular guests in the Old City.

The information gathered was analysed and classified into different categories, according to the nature of the urban transformations in Old Al-Najaf they correspond to.

## **Factors influencing the transformation of the city**

Climate change clearly affects countries all over the world, and this impact can be detected in the local environment (Grimm et al., 2008), in residential areas in the cities, depending on the region and its characteristics, as well as on the short-medium and long-term gravity of the climate (Zubaidi, Kot, Alkhaddar, Abdellatif & Al-Bugharbee, 2018; Hashim et al., 2020), the availability of freshwater and its pollution by industries (Al-Marri et al., 2020; Alnaimi et al., 2020; Alyafei et al., 2020). Also, it was not previous urban planning nor spontaneous decision making that shaped the city of Najaf's urban fabric, but human interaction with the cultural and natural environment (Michell, 1978), which plays an essential role in constituting the composition of the city, its urban fabric, including its characteristics and features over time (Bender, 2006). Thus, the urban form and building typologies respond to the urban environment in which the cities expand (Bashir, 1995), which can be divided into two parts: (1) natural environment: it could be considered invariant beyond weather fluctuations, and (2) cultural environment: it changes throughout the years due to

outside factors: the influence of Islamic faith, the impact of social aspects, customs and traditions, economy, politics, technology, and building materials (Kamona, 2010).

On the one hand, concerning the natural environment, the building typologies in Old Al-Najaf are directly determined by the natural environment in the region. This dense, intertwined urban fabric overlaps solid masses with flat surfaces and small openings to the outside (Al-Jibory, 2011) in buildings, thus avoiding direct sunlight on façades. The harsh climate also led to build basements in order to reduce heat transfer and increase humidity. There are various types of basements in Old Al-Najaf: basements located in most houses, with an average depth of approximately 6 m; the basements of the Hess have a depth of 10 m; Al-Qard with around 15 m; and Ras al-Tar, with an average depth of 25 m (this cool type is not usual) (Al-Ansari, 2013). Also, the use of other architectural solutions such as air conditioners, which present decorative and geometric patterns, now define the skyline of the city and have helped increase the hygrothermal comfort inside the buildings by bringing air and coolness into the aforementioned basements (Attia, 2016).

On the other hand, among cultural factors and interacting with environmental aspects, the Islamic religion represents the major factor that determines Old Al-Najaf's urban fabric and spatial composition, and is enhanced by the rest of factors which, in turn, affect the city in varying degrees (Mohammed & Hadi, 2011). The Islamic faith, together with moral values and spiritual principles deriving from it, influences the creation

of religious institutions and schools required to fulfil daily life needs, taking into consideration social aspects and economic efficiency. These are reflected in the city planning of Najaf, in the distribution of land use. The regular use of the transportation system (traffic system, vehicles and pedestrians) also confirms the importance of the locations of these institutions (Mustafa, 2010; Department of Planning – Municipality of Najaf, 2017).

Meanwhile, a closely interwoven organic tissue characterises the urban fabric surrounding the Holy Shrine, in such a way that the pedestrians walk through its human-scale narrow alleys. This design pattern allows the tension-attraction principle between the visitor and the Shrine, since the domes and lights of the houses between buildings can be seen from the alley. According to Al-Amely (2015), the visitor, once arrived at the Shrine, firstly get surprised by this vast, spacious courtyard before the building, which prepares them to be introduced to the holy place and feel the reverence and piety of it. Nevertheless, significant changes in the urban composition of the spaces surrounding the Holy Shrine have taken place due to design and planning practices. They have been removed to isolate the Shrine from the urban environment, which goes against the principle on which the area was designed. In addition, these interventions have brought about a great loss of both heritage characteristics and historic buildings. Moreover, new issues have arisen, such as more traffic around the Holy Shrine, thus causing visual and environmental pollution against the religious and spiritual status of this Shrine. The removal of these surround-

ing areas has reduced the predominance of the Sahn space on the composition of the city's public space, and has entailed the loss of the surprise element of the Sahn. Furthermore, occidental concepts were implemented in the area to make the Shrine be considered a monumental building. This was carried out by demolishing parts of it in order to create larger spaces to accommodate the new façades more clearly (Tabbaa et al., 2014), which in turn caused the façades of the Shrine to be exposed to the outside world. Also, the exotic architectural styles inserted do not sympathise with the features, traditions and identity of the region, nor they allow to highlight the unique architectural value of the Holy Haidarah Shrine, Imam Ali Shrine. All the above is considered a great loss in the Old City, and the weakening of the hegemony of the Shrine over the city's spatial configuration (Department of Planning – Municipality of Najaf, 2017).

## Conclusions

The deterioration of the historic centre and the disappearance of heritage assets and value happened in Al-Najaf have threatened its cultural heritage and unique characteristics. This research, by gathering data from multiple and diverse sources, identified the factors that have brought about the transformations in the Old City. But it is the forced implementation of foreign concepts in the urban planning without respecting the original urban fabric and characteristics that significantly affects the identity and essence of the areas surrounding the Holy Shrine and tears down its unity. In this

sense, damage has been inflicted by removing large parts of the fabric of Najaf under various pretexts, which has brought about the loss of architectural features of heritage value and the isolation of the Shrine from its surroundings. Nonetheless, there is still an opportunity to preserve the authenticity of the city's composition and distinctive features which are part of the past we revere and cherish, although the desire to preserve the legacy of traditional architecture is not enough. Great efforts and effective measures such as urban planning and legal systems are needed to control the ongoing transformation of the Old City.

The policies for urban transformations should not be a reproduction of the past because this would be a cultural stalemate, nor be based on the traditions of others, since that diminishes the Arab Islamic personality and local character. Instead, modern technology and the rational heritage management should be combined to create a new personality that tells the story of this and future generations. The large transformations in the urban configuration of the historic city centre of Najaf have reduced the interaction between the locals, visitors, pedestrians and the urban environment, thus leading to the dispersion of society. Thus, the city is now overcrowded, and the routes are mostly used by vehicles in a way that neglects the needs of pedestrians.

The unique characteristics of the traditional urban fabric of Old Najaf are the result of the interaction of multiple factors, such as natural and cultural environmental factors, which remain the most determinant so far. However, as explained above, there is no justifica-

tion for the introduction of strange systems or elements that lead to disruption in the balance between the content of the urban environment and its unique components. In other words, the traditional urban patterns cannot assimilate modern development as the traditional patterns were carefully and scientifically planned to preserve the Old City's splendour and identity. In this sense, the development projects should be aimed at preserving both the cohesion of the city's torn urban fabric and the visitor's experience – part of the basic visit to the city is an introduction to traditional city life, including religious schools, the work on textiles' transformation (renovation or restoration) and a visit to the Holy Shrine. This would certainly improve the visitors' appreciation and preserve the integrity of the value of Old Najaf's ancient heritage.

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## Summary

**Factors influencing the transformation of Iraqi holy cities: the case of Al-Najaf.** The historic centre of the Iraqi city of Al-Najaf embraces a seasonal pilgrimage to its holy sites that forces unusual urban conditions. This paper examines the impact of development projects and studies on the heritage integrity of the public (religious). This paper, therefore, recommends raising public awareness to adopt design approaches to face the overflow of visitors and the loss of heritage identity.

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