

Tragedy at Mecca

But can this investment absolve the Saudi government of the recent mishaps? It is only totalitarian regimes that can survive the blunders by the sheer force of bayonets. Could the Italian government survive a stampede killing that many people in the annual Christmas night mass at the Vatican? Could the government of the East Punjab in India survive a stampede or an arson at the Golden Temple in Amritsar? But in Saudi Arabia, even the Minister for Hajj did not feel enough moral responsibility to offer to tender resignation. The resignation of the concerned minister on the basis of principles, even if it has a mere symbolic value, is a decency not yet introduced in the Middle East, except, let us be fair, in Israel.

SAAD S. KHAN

As if the Hajj flights fiasco, where the intending Nigerian pilgrims had to be sent home from mid-air due to the mismanagement of the Nigerian government, and the hotel building collapse where many pilgrims died, were not enough signs of mismanagement, over 362 pilgrims are confirmed dead in a stampede near Mecca. The incident happened at the ground of Mina, three miles off the city of Mecca, where the pilgrims go for a ritual called Ramee or stoning the devil. The pilgrimage, or Hajj, is one of the five pillars of the Muslim faith, and every able-bodied and financially sound Muslim is obligated to perform this ritual at least once in his life. Every year between two to three million Muslims assemble in Mecca to perform the pilgrimage.

The ground of Mina becomes so congested where the pilgrims throw small pebbles at three pillars, called Jamarat, symbolizing devil. The three are situated at places where, the tradition goes, the devil came to seduce Prophet Abraham not to sacrifice his son before God. The idea of throwing pebbles is to express revulsion for Satan who tries to seduce mankind away from the path of God.

This is exactly the fourth time in the past five years when a stampede has resulted in mass casualties. At the same ritual in 2004 Hajj, 251 got trampled to death; 35 died in a similar incident the year before, and 118 lost their lives to such a stampede in 2001. In 1994 another unfortunate incident had

led 270 people to be crushed to death. In the past years, many other causes have also resulted in mass deaths, like the great fire of 1997 that gutted the tented villages of pilgrims in the outskirts of Mecca, taking the lives of 343 pilgrims, and the tunnel collapse of 1990 when the main pedestrian tunnel leading pilgrims to Arafat grounds (most pilgrims go by vehicular transport on road) caved in, burying 1,426 pilgrims. In at least one incident, the pilgrims lost lives due to political fury, when in 1987 the fierce clashes between Iranian pilgrims holding anti-US demonstrations on the eve of Hajj and the Saudi security forces led to the killing of 303 Iranians and 85 Saudi security officers.

After the 2004 stampede fiasco, the ulema council of Al Azhar issued a fatwa (decree) recommending a few innovations in the mode of performing the stoning ritual. It has proposed doubling the time for stoning from noon to dusk. It has also proposed that women, children, and the old must stay away from stoning. Presently, there is an option for the women, children, and the old, whether to allow an able-bodied adult male pilgrim to stone as proxy on their behalf. There are several questions of jurisprudence involved here.

Some people try to complete the ritual early in the morning, not only because of less rush and lower temperature in the early hours, but also to free themselves for other commitments for the rest of the day. Unfortunately, that

fateful morning of February 1, 2004 many million people had thought that way and by half past seven in the morning the crowd had surged to unmanageable levels. Although women, the old, and the weak are exempted from performing the ritual themselves, but most prefer to do it on their own rather than through proxy.

At 8:05 am the surging numbers making the way from behind pushed the ones in the front to the extreme and then there was a general confusion; some lucky ones jumped inside the walls around the pillars and escaped with minor injuries since there were foams spread all around inside. However, the panic caused the stampede and many hundreds died under the feet of the running crowds or due to suffocation. There were a few, of course, who died due to cardiac arrest. By the time the situation was brought under control, 251 men and women representing a broad cross-section of age and gender, nationalities, and ethnic backgrounds, had lost their lives.

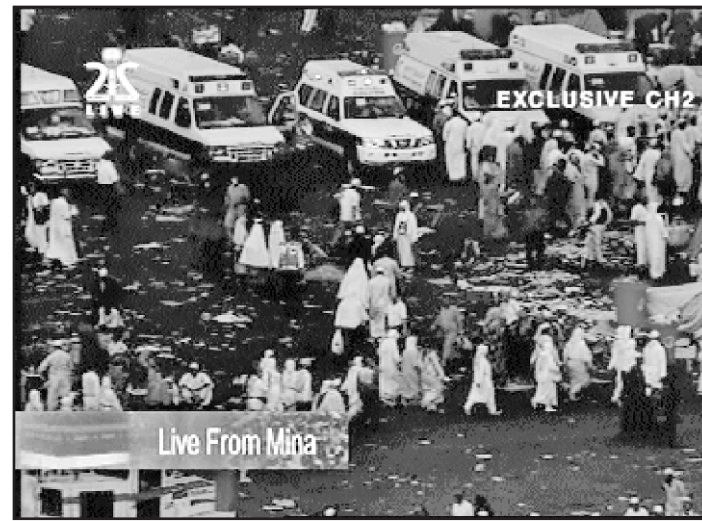
This year the causes were slightly different. Pieces of luggage had spilled over from some of the moving buses in front of one of the entrances of the bridge. The pilgrims had to trip over the luggage and thus a bottleneck was created in front of the surging crowds from behind. A minor confusion led to stampede and then it was mayhem. The 22,000 officers on stand-by could do nothing as a sudden movement by them into the crowds could have increased the casualties. By the time the situation was brought to

control, hundreds of pilgrims had been crushed, among them people from India, Pakistan, China, Turkey, Egypt, Indonesia, and the United Kingdom.

The space in Makkah is what it is, and the number of intending pilgrims in the coming years is likely to grow manifold, owing to a multiplicity of factors, including the rising standards of living and economic status in many parts of the world, and the faster and cheaper modes of communication and travel. Not the least contributor is the fact that Islam is the fastest growing religion on the globe because of higher natural growth rate and the rapid conversions as a result of missionary activities.

There is no gainsaying the fact that the present Saudi dynasty has the credit of accomplishing enormous development in the two holy cities of Makkah and Medina in the last three decades. Both the cities are now gleaming with broad roads and underpasses, tall buildings, modern shopping malls, international food chains like Pizza Hut and KFC, and also universities, offices, and banks. The renovation and expansion of the Masjid-al-Haram complex alone has cost a whopping 70 billion Saudi riyals in the last 20 years.

But can this investment absolve the Saudi government of the recent mishaps? It is only totalitarian regimes that can survive the blunders by the sheer force of bayonets. Could the Italian government survive a stampede killing that many people in the annual Christmas night mass at



the Vatican? Could the government of the East Punjab in India survive a stampede or an arson at the Golden Temple in Amritsar? But in Saudi Arabia, even the Minister for Hajj did not feel enough moral responsibility to offer to tender resignation. The resignation of the concerned minister on the basis of principles, even if it has a mere symbolic value, is a decency not yet introduced in the Middle East, except, let us be fair, in Israel.

After the last incident, the Saudi government announced a 20-year plan for modernization of Mecca and its surrounding areas where the Hajj rituals take place. It has also been decided to construct a

nine-storey structure around the Jamarat that will include four level bridges for the pilgrims. The pedestrian walkways in Mecca will be expanded from the present 60,000 sq. meters to 120,000 sq. meters, while the parking space would be enhanced to cater for 45,000 vehicles. The accidents have also underlined the need for trees and green areas and it was decided that parks would be developed on over 30,000 sq. meters of area.

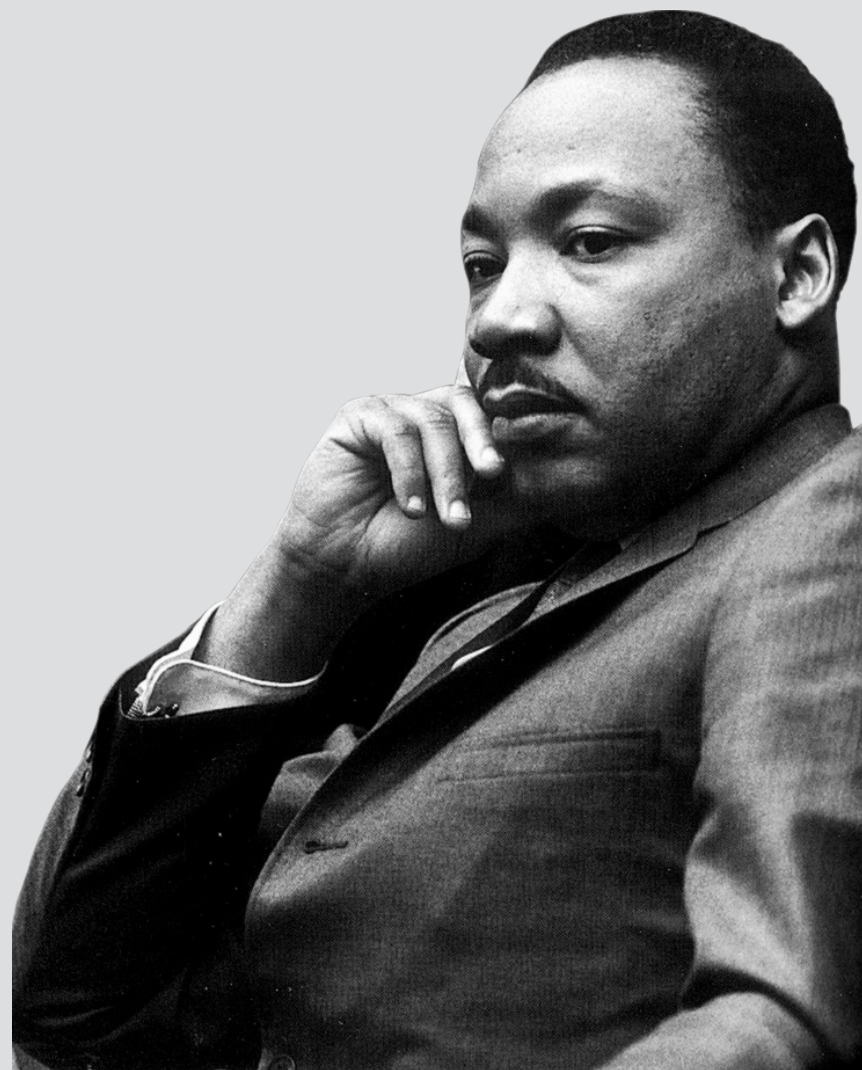
The Senior Scholars Council has also convened an emergency meeting to be held shortly to discuss the Shariah related issues pertaining to these rituals. The Ulema shall deliberate on the

ways that will minimize such accidents. Many proposals are coming up in the media of the Muslim world. Besides the ones proposed by the Al-Azhar, one way is to allow a select group of religious leaders representing the pilgrims from each country to do the stoning on behalf of all pilgrims from their country. And a more narrowed version suggests that King Abdulah of Saudi Arabia, as the custodian of the two holy shrines, may do it in a simple symbolic ceremony, on behalf of all the pilgrims at the end of Hajj each year. Another might be to enable one third of the pilgrims to perform the ritual for all three days on any one day from the 10th,

11th and 12th of Zil'haj. That is to say that instead of throwing seven pebbles each at the three pillars for three days, the pilgrims would be obliged to throw 21 pebbles in one go at each pillar in a single day. The next day would be reserved for the next third and the last day for the last third batch. Whether it would be permissible under the Shariah and if at all it would be technically possible are the issues to be dealt with by the Ulema and the engineers, respectively.

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King's final years



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Forty years ago this winter, I was an 8-year-old boy growing up on the North Side of Chicago. The Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. had moved into a slum in the impoverished West Side neighbourhood of North Lawndale to dramatize the conditions of what were then known as "Northern Negroes." King was scheduled to visit the home of a local politician to raise money for his cash-strapped movement from white "lakerfront liberals." But the politician, caught between his personal sympathies for King and his allegiance to Mayor Richard J. Daley, who was no fan of the civil-rights leader, felt uncomfortable hosting the party. So he called up my parents and, to my delight, the event was moved to our house at the last minute. The fund-raising was "disappointing," according to my father's diary, and King spent most of the evening on our telephone. But I got the great man's autograph and we heard him deliver an eloquent talk while standing in front of several dozen guests in our living room. At such events that year, King would sometimes scrawl a reminder to himself: "Ad lib 'We Shall Overcome.'"

This all came to mind while reading "At Canaan's Edge: America in the King Years, 1965-68," the third and final volume of Taylor Branch's magisterial account of the most important social movement of the 20th century, which lasted only 13 years from the Montgomery bus boycott of 1955 to King's death at age 39 in 1968. It made me think anew about how much has changed for African-Americans living in places like Chicago, and how little. In the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, the unfinished agenda of the 1960s is under discussion again, if not in Washington then at least among the legions of local leaders still trying to better their communities.

Branch's book, to be published this month, shows us King not as a plaster saint but an intuitive, conflicted and harried human being running late to everything, refereeing among squabbling lieutenants, straying from his wife to the end, even slipping out to

catch what one of his traveling aides said was his favorite movie, "The Sound of Music."

But we also see that even after he became world-famous, King had reason to call his movement a civil-rights struggle. Branch conveys in powerful detail the dramatic, chaotic, inspiring and incendiary era, from the triumphant Selma-to-Montgomery march to the passage in 1965 of the landmark Voting Rights Act and little-noticed end to discrimination against the Third World in immigration (which reshaped the face of America); from the pathos of Lyndon Johnson caught between his breathtaking commitment to fighting injustice and the worsening Vietnam War to the backlash against liberalism represented by Ronald Reagan's election as governor of California, and finally to King's eerie "I might not get there with you" premonition at the Mason Temple in Memphis on the night before his assassination.

For me, though, the central story of the last act of King's life takes place in Chicago. He lived there on and off for much of 1966, trying to take his movement of nonviolent civil disobedience to the next level. He failed. "It is in Chicago that the grapes of wrath are stored," King said as he launched what he called the "action phase" of his agenda. But the wrath at loose in American society derailed the civil-rights movement and left a generation politically adrift. Branch's research suggests that 1966 was the year the liberal dream began to disintegrate.

King's organization, the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, came to Chicago at the suggestion of Al Raby, a teacher and community activist who had led demonstrations against the severely segregated school system. The SCLC saw Chicago as "the first significant Northern freedom movement" and the first focused on economic discrimination more than voting rights or public access: "This economic exploitation is crystallized in the slum... not unlike the exploitation of the Congo by Belgium." The movement to "end slums" and create an "open city" ran straight into middle-class Chicagoans, all-white trade unions and real-estate agents as racist as anything found in the South.

On January 26, 1966, King, his wife, Coretta, and their four children moved into a third-floor walk-up at 1550 South Hamlin in North Lawndale, by then known as "Slumdale." Once a middle-class Jewish neighbourhood, the area had filled up with blacks streaming north after World War II. The entryway of the building on Hamlin was used as a toilet by the neighbourhood, and the apartment was tiny. "You had to go through the bedrooms to get to the kitchen," Coretta remembered. The landlord had quickly slapped a coat of paint on the apartment when he learned the identity of his new tenants (originally signed up under a false name), but it didn't help much.

The Northern campaign went into high gear with a rally at Soldier Field and a march to city hall, where King, like Martin Luther before him, nailed his 14 demands (for things like open housing and jobs in all-white industries) to the door. At first, Daley was conciliatory. He claimed that the problems all predated him and that he had already repaired more than 100,000 apartments. When a summer riot broke out in North Lawndale (Coretta told the children to back away from the windows), the mayor sought a truce with token concessions like fire-hydrant nozzles so black kids could cool off. King held all-night talks with gang leaders and Justice Department officials in the same room, but his commitment to nonviolence was belittled by newer "Black Power" leaders like Stokely Carmichael as "too Sunday-school."

The point of the Chicago campaign was to show race as a national problem, and it did so with a bang when King led an integrated group of marchers into the racist enclave of Marquette Park. "I have never in my life seen such hate," said King, who was hit by a rock there. "Not in Mississippi or Alabama." But unlike the battle with Alabama state troopers the year before at the Edmund Pettus Bridge, marches into Marquette Park (and later into the white suburb of Cicero) led to no national catharsis or landmark legislation. Congress defeated a new civil-rights bill that would have banned housing discrimination (it finally passed in 1968). Although Northern authorities the National Guard and Daley's police defended the marchers rather than attack them, a backlash against the movement was setting in. "Don't you find," Mike Wallace asked King on CBS News, "that the American people are getting a little bit tired, truly, of the whole civil-rights struggle?"

In 1965, King had shed a tear while watching LBJ proclaim "We shall overcome" on national television. But by mid-1966, Daley skillfully drove a wedge between King and Johnson, who would never meet again. "He (King) is not your friend," the mayor told the president. "He's against you on Vietnam. He's a goddamn faker." Even though he was privately against the war, too, Daley pledged his support for Johnson's escalation. In Chicago he outmaneuvered King by talking moderately but doing little. "Daley cut Martin Luther King's ass off," said Bayard Rustin, a more senior movement leader.

Branch does not see Chicago as a total loss. While the open-housing settlement reached there didn't end segregation, it began a process of change. Moreover, "Chicago nationalized race," Branch writes. "Without it King would be confined to posterity more as a regional figure." But it also marked the effective end to nonviolence as a potent force in the civil-rights movement.

The 40 years since have been a time in the desert for the movement, bereft of strong leadership and the clarity of the fight against Jim Crow segregation. As the country saw in Katrina's wake, Washington long ago moved on from a serious engagement with the problems of poverty. "There has been a hurricane of neglect for the poor in this country for decades," says Richard Townsend, executive director of the Lawndale Christian Development Corporation. Meanwhile, the consequences of family disintegration, which King well understood, have been, if anything, more severe than Daniel Patrick Moynihan and others in the 1960s predicted.

Yet it is simply inaccurate to say that every period since King has been what he called a "valley moment." The Voting Rights Act transformed American politics, and the growth of the black middle class has changed the lives of millions of families. While New Orleans got worse, Chicago got better. Today it's a much healthier city than it was in Boss Daley's time, thanks in part to his son, Richard M. Daley, who has been mayor since 1989, and his predecessor, Harold Washington, the city's first African-American mayor.

While Chicago's public-school system remains troubled and stubbornly segregated, it now boasts several highly successful schools and realistic hope for more. Housing, too, is still largely segregated by neighborhood and is unaffordable for the poor and working class, with long waiting lists for subsidies. But notorious housing projects like the Robert Taylor Homes and Cabrini-Green have been mostly torn down and replaced by town-house-style public housing units, a third of them owned by the residents.

Equally important have been public-private efforts spearheaded by a little-known but influential national nonprofit called the Local Initiative Support Corporation, chaired by former Treasury secretary Robert Rubin. Since 1980, LISC's Chicago affiliate has quietly invested \$120 million and leveraged an additional \$2.4 billion in inner-city development, which has translated into 21,000 units of affordable housing and 4 million square feet of commercial space. They lack the drama of freedom marches, but stronger ties between the corporate world and dedicated community leaders are now the proven routes to urban revival. A drive down Martin Luther King Boulevard on the South Side, a thoroughfare of despair as recently as the 1980s, now yields glimpses of rehabbed million-dollar mansions and thriving retail stores. Ernest Gates, a community leader on the once burned-out near West Side, told me that "things are a lot better here now, though for the poorest of the poor, it's still pretty much the same."

North Lawndale, where King once lived, doesn't look much different than it did 40 years ago. I saw four young men in hooded parkas spread-eagled by police against a wall on Hamlin Avenue in what looked like a drug bust, directly across the street from the one-time King slum, now an empty lot. Nearly 60 percent of those over 18 have had some kind of involvement with the criminal-justice system, with the number much higher among men. More than 40 percent of North Lawndale households have incomes of less than \$15,000 a year (compared with 20 percent of all city residents). Fewer than a third have bank accounts. Many residents are still unable to "grow from within," in King's words, by resisting self-destructive behaviour and the "gangsta" culture.

But North Lawndale is changing, too. It's still mostly poor and black, but much less densely populated, down two-thirds in size since 1960, to 41,000. The first shopping center in four decades was built in 2000, and nonprofit organizations are building a bit of new housing.

Near King's old haunts, I watched ex-convicts sitting at computer screens inside the LISC-backed North Lawndale Employment Network, printing resumes and looking for work. Many have problems with bad debt. "A job alone is not the answer that was my big 'Aha!'" says Brenda Palms Barber, who runs the nonprofit and is teaching entrepreneurship skills to local residents (including placing beehives on empty lots that yield 4,000 pounds of profitable honey). "It's mental health, general health. The big missing piece is about financial education." A program in Chicago called First Accounts is focusing on a neglected segment of the poor now known as the "unbanked." When they do get accounts, their balances are small, but the vast majority have learned to be creditworthy.

You don't hear much about Martin Luther King in Chicago nowadays. The activists in North Lawndale hope to build a civil-rights museum in his name at 1550 South Hamlin, though they don't have the money for it yet. Few Chicagoans think about the time he spent in their midst, if they remember it at all. In most parts of the country, King is now just a name like Roosevelt or Washington, a holiday on which to do some shopping. And yet books like "At Canaan's Edge" remind us that his challenge to America to "rise up and live out the true meaning of his creed" remains a powerful vision in a troubled world, as resonant today as when an 8-year-old boy watched him stand before his fireplace so many years ago.

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