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Original Research Article

The Role of the Street in Generating the Collective Identity of the Authentic Islamic City
(A Reflection on the Formation of Medina and Kufa in Early Islam)*

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Abstract

Studies concerning the Islamic City typically represent the concept of the street as a secondary component alongside other urban elements. Yet it is, in fact, a defining feature of the Islamic urban landscape, structuring an active network of collective life, economic practices, and social interactions. Through a conceptual and historical–morphological analysis, this article reexamines the position of the street within the urban organization of Medina at the time of the Hijra and early Kufa. It demonstrates that the street, on par with the mosque, plays a decisive role in articulating collective identity and shaping social order. The research shows that in the authentic Islamic city, the street not only enables accessibility but also provides a setting for social interactions, economic activities, and religious practices. Juridical and social traditions further reinforce the legitimacy and importance of the street, emphasizing cleanliness, illumination of pathways, and support for the free interactions of people in public spaces. The findings indicate that the street, as an autonomous organizing element, forms a living and coherent network that transforms the notion of the ummah1 from an abstract concept into the actualized reality of a community. By linking neighborhoods, markets, and religious nuclei, this network guides and regulates urban life, displaying human, cultural, and economic interactions within an integrated structure whose analysis offers a renewed understanding of the dynamism of the Islamic City and the relations among space, culture, and society.

Keywords: *Street, Authentic Islamic City, Community, Medina, Kufa.*

Introduction

In the historiography of the Islamic city, the mosque has consistently been considered the spiritual core and the principal organizing structure of the urban fabric. Numerous studies—by both Muslim historians and Orientalists—have emphasized the central role of the mosque in the emergence and continuity of urban life. Yet this exclusive focus has overshadowed another foundational component of Islamic urban organization, an element from which the city's social, economic, and even ritual life both originates and flows.

The street[1] in the Islamic city is not merely a passageway or an interval between spaces; it is the very ground upon which the continuity of the ummah[2] unfolds and the sphere in which the social and moral order of the community of believers becomes manifest. The structure of the city expands from the mosque to the street and from the street to the neighborhood, and this articulation generates a living network of relations between society and the urban fabric.

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The fact that even juridical rulings—despite the sanctity of the mosque and the prohibition against its demolition—have shown flexibility when confronted with the infrastructural necessities of the street indicates the legitimacy and vital importance of this urban element. As stated in a legal opinion: "A piece of land that was part of the covered section of a mosque and, due to the mosque's location within an urban development project, has fallen within a street and has been partially demolished out of necessity, shall no longer possess the legal status of a mosque if the likelihood of restoring it to its original state is minimal" (Khamenei, 2014).

Thus, revisiting the street not merely as a physical element but as a conceptual and cultural structure can open a new horizon for understanding the organization of the authentic Islamic city[3]. In this perspective, the street and the mosque form two complementary poles: one gives meaning to the bond between the human being and God, and the other to the bond between the human being and society.

This article adopts an analytical–conceptual approach to reinterpret the street within the authentic Islamic city, not as a secondary element alongside the mosque, but as a foundational medium that plays a decisive role in the formation and continuity of urban organization. From this perspective, the street serves as the arena in which collective life manifests and as the connector of the city's principal institutions; it is a space where religious order is translated into social order. The aim of this research is, through historical and juridical sources, to reassess the position of the street in the emergence and perpetuation of the authentic Islamic city's urban structure.

Literature Review

Many Muslim researchers and Orientalists have held the view that the Islamic city developed around the mosque and the market, and that streets were merely pathways providing access to these religious and commercial centers. This reductive perspective among Orientalists led to the denial of the concept of the authentic Islamic city. Planhol[4] (1968), Hourani & Stern[5] (1970), Cahen[6] (1955; 1997) considered streets to be derived from imitations of Roman and ancient Persian models, and they interpreted the apparent disorder of the street network as evidence of weak urban organization. According to this group, the Islamic city lacked an independent system or design logic, and its streets were formed randomly and without rules.

Iranian researchers (Bahraini et al., 2019; Pourmohammadi et al., 2022; Naqizadeh, 2010; Bemanian, 2014; Sajadzadeh & Pirbabaei, 2012; Sajadzadeh, 2014; Noghrekar & Raeisi, 2012) have also primarily analyzed the Islamic city through the lens of religious nuclei and ritual spaces. Notably, these studies pay little attention to the concept of the street as an urban element. This perspective has led to an underestimation of the street's significance and its role in the city's social life. Consequently, the dominant reading in Iranian scholarship tends to envision the city centered on the mosque and its access network, while the complexities and social functions of streets in shaping neighborhoods and urban order remain largely overlooked.

In contrast, Lombard[7] (2003), Abu-Lughod[8] (1987), Benet[9] (1963), Bammate[10] (2014), Djaït[11] (1988), and Uthmān[12] (1983; 1997), through analyses of historical and juridical sources, regard the street as an organizing element in the authentic Islamic city. According to Najm Oud-din Bammate, the street reflects social order and collective life, while alleys and passageways function as corridors of family life within the city, so that the entire city operates like a large house:

"The city is not merely an architectural art; the word 'city' evokes a society that must be cohesive, warm, and united. In this sense, streets and alleys function as corridors, houses as rooms used by families, and the entire city is considered a large house" (Bammate, 2014, 88). Qazvini (1987, 7–8) and Firouzabadi (1910, 159), emphasizing that Medina and every authentic Islamic city manifest the ummah, stress the fact that urban organization emerges from social relationships, and also that the mosque and streets are complementary within this framework.

Drawing on the perspective of the latter group of researchers, characterized by inquiry free from

preconceived notions and bias, this article seeks to clarify the concept of the street in the authentic Islamic city as an active space. It demonstrates that the street, far from being merely a complementary element, operates on an equal footing with the mosque in shaping the spatial, social, and cultural organization of the authentic Islamic city.

Research Method

This study adopts a conceptual and historical–morphological approach to reassess the role of the street in shaping the organization of the authentic Islamic city, using a set of highly selective sources. The research data were collected from three main domains: (1) historical and juridical texts, (2) Orientalist sources, and (3) morphological analysis of streets in selected case studies, including Medina and Kufa. By reviewing historical documents and sources, the study identifies design principles, land distribution, street hierarchies, and their interactions with mosques and neighborhoods. The examination of juridical texts and traditions related to street boundaries further allows for analysis of indicators of the street's form and urban landscape.

The nature and sensitivity of the subject limit the selection of sources to the earliest available versions of documents. For example, The Emergence of the Islamic City: Kufa by Hisham Djaït (1988), despite having Arabic and Persian translations, was referenced in its original French edition. In this process, reliance on cartographic documents, images, drawings, and notable quotations forms the basis of the analysis. Although maps from the early Islamic period are not fully preserved, the available, reliable reconstructions allow for the examination of the organization of the first Islamic cities.

By integrating historical data with morphological analysis, this study seeks to reveal the connection between urban dynamics and social order in the authentic Islamic city. This approach allows the street to be understood not merely as a physical element but as an active and systematic network shaping the flow of collective life. It should be noted, however, that Medina and Kufa differ in the origins of their street networks, reflecting distinct historical and spatial foundations, and acknowledging these differences is essential to avoid historical generalizations. In Medina, the street structure developed organically within a tribal context, whereas Kufa was organized according to a predetermined plan, influenced by Medina's urban experience and the directives of the Prophet.

Nevertheless, the primary aim of this article is not to examine in detail the functional and historical differences of these networks, but rather to highlight the shared conceptual role of the street in both contexts. Accordingly, the present analysis is conducted at a formative level rather than through typological or functional classification. This philosophical–developmental approach provides a framework for understanding the order of thoroughfares in the Islamic city.

The Genesis of Streets in Medina and Kufa

The emergence and genesis of streets in the Authentic Islamic Cities first became evident with the planning of Medina following the Prophet's migration. Prior to this transformation, Yathrib consisted of residential neighborhoods belonging to individual tribes, each including houses, farms, and independent fortifications to protect their members. Markets were also scattered, organized according to the resources and strength of each tribe, so that the city appeared as a labyrinth of semi-independent, isolated spaces (Uthmān, 1997, 50).

The Prophet's first initiative in Medina was to create unity among the tribes and link them through fraternal relations, emphasizing communal values. In distributing land and determining residential areas, the Prophet settled relatives within the same neighborhood and allocated lands around the mosque in a way that residential quarters formed around the central core—the mosque. This design not only allowed optimal use of the available land but also enabled the creation of a network of social and economic interactions (Ibn Salam, 1975, 358).

It is noteworthy that Yathrib's urban fabric in the pre-Islamic and early Islamic periods combined tribal neighborhoods with multiple religious communities, including neighborhoods associated with the three well-

known Jewish tribes: Banu Qaynuqa, Banu Nadir, and Banu Qurayza. While the Prophet's Mosque served as the central hub of the emerging Islamic community's social and political organization, it was not necessarily at the geometric center of Yathrib; its role was primarily symbolic and institutional (Fig. 1).

In this process, streets were divided into two main types: primary or public streets and secondary streets. Primary streets, referred to in Islamic sources as al-Tariq al-Sabileh, Tariq al-Muslimin, or Tariq al-'Ammah, served as public spaces for the community, and the government protected their boundaries. Their widths ranged from 30 to 100 cubits, and they were mainly connected to the congregational mosque. Secondary streets were under the control of neighborhoods and their residents, and due to the specific needs of each neighborhood and spatial constraints, they were usually cul-de-sacs and developed according to endogenous patterns (Uthmān, 1997, 51–58). This distinction in the role and ownership of streets reflects the difference between the rules governing private and public spaces in authentic Islamic cities (Fig. 2).

After Medina, Kufa was another Islamic city of special significance in urban history due to the involvement of Imam Ali in its foundation in 17 AH as a military base. During the first five years following its establishment, Kufa consisted of little more than a community of simple reed huts, temporarily erected between military campaigns. By 30 AH, the rows of tents were stabilized with walls of clay and dried mud, and finally, in 50 AH, large plots of land were distributed among the tribes for the construction of the city.

The mosque was initially built at the city center, from which five streets extended northward, four streets southward, three streets eastward, and three streets westward (Figs. 3 & 4). The widths of the main streets were set at 40 cubits, secondary streets branching from them at 30 cubits, and tertiary streets at 20 cubits. Alleyways and smaller passages were set at 7 cubits in width in accordance with the Prophet's recommendations and traditions (Djaït, 1988, 91–95). A comparison with other contemporary cities, such as Basra, Kairouan, Damascus, Fes, Baghdad, and Samarra, shows that their early streets

Fig. 1. Topographic map and geographic location of Yathrib's tribes after the Prophet's migration. Source: Mu'nis, 1987, 42.

Fig. 2. Street leading to the Prophet's Bath in Medina before 1990; an early example of a public space in authentic Islamic cities. Source: Al-Malik, 2012

Fig. 3. In this passage, Al-Tabari, referring to the streets of Kufa, calls them Manahij Ahl al-'Azm, meaning the main, wide, straight streets with a military character, and Manahij al-Dahna', referring to the secondary streets that run parallel or perpendicular to the main ones. This classification serves as a solid proof of the internal order of the spatial organization and the road network connecting the components of Kufa's urban landscape. Source: Tabari, 1967, 45.

Fig. 4. The share of Kufa's tribes is shown as strips of land separated by their wide streets, with each strip occupied by a single tribe or a combination of two sections of a tribe under the supervision of the tribal chief. The streets, spacious and hierarchical, all oriented toward the center and interconnected, form the main structure of the city. Reconstruction of Kufa's urban layout based on Hisham Djaït's map (left) and Louis Massignon's map (right). The combination of streets and the central area represents one of the main organizing components in Kufa, reflecting the authenticity of this approach in the organization of the authentic Islamic city. Source: Attilio, 2007, 225.

were similar: all relied on a neighborhood-based urban division system and enhanced the functionality of streets as an integrated system.

Juridical Principles: A Support for Streets in the Authentic Islamic City

Alongside regulations concerning street design, Islamic legal principles such as haqq al-nās (rights of individuals), public welfare, and street boundaries legitimized the free passage of people and facilitated collective perception through shared experience. Abu-Lughod (1987) even considers the sense of "Islamic-ness" of a city to be derived from its streets, emphasizing that upon entering an Islamic city, one can immediately perceive a distinctive atmosphere from that of other cities.

Similarly, cities like Fes, with an emphasis on street landscaping, created a homogeneous network of communal spaces, contributing to urban cohesion. Moreover, street designs, attentive to human scale, provided a favorable environment for social interactions and reinforced a sense of collective belonging and participation:

"In general, Muslim cities, and especially Fes, reflect a specific Islamic metaphysical concept, and share common characteristics with other major Islamic cities, establishing an undeniable unity among them" (Sefrioui, 1978).

Thus, it can be asserted that despite potential formal similarities between streets in the authentic Islamic city and those in other urban contexts, robust juridical principles guided the arrangement of street landscapes, distinguishing them from other urban elements.

One practical manifestation of this importance was citizen participation in street maintenance. A waqf deed from the Jamal al-Din Ustadar facilities in the Jamaliyah neighborhood of Cairo shows that he employed a man to regularly water and sweep the streets around the khanqah and remove the debris to distant locations (Uthmān, 1983). This example clearly demonstrates attention to order, cleanliness, and public use of streets.

Street lighting in Islamic cities also held social and religious significance. Lighting and hanging lanterns, beyond their functional role, carried specific meanings; for instance, Ibn al-Hajj noted that keeping the lamps lit during Ramadan enabled people to carry out their daily activities without hindrance (Uthmān, 1997, 199).

Preserving the boundaries of streets in the authentic Islamic city was another fundamental element of urban structure. A hadith from the Prophet states: "I saw a man in Paradise who, in this world, had cut down a tree that obstructed people's way" (Javanshir, 2000, 93). This narration highlights the importance of respecting public pathways and equal access.

No street was to have precedence over another, and this principle, alongside the sanctity of the mosque and other holy sites, emphasizes the street's significance as a legitimate and vital space for urban life. Islamic legal rulings and the traditions of the Prophet and the Caliphs indicate that streets should serve as public spaces promoting social order and access to justice. The Prophet's tradition of using different routes when returning from the Eid prayer provides a clear example of ensuring equality and fairness in street usage; al-Bukhari reports that on Eid, the Prophet would return via a different route than the one he had taken, a practice continued by the Fatimid caliphs after him (Uthmān, 1997, 230).

Thus, the emergence of streets in Islamic cities can be understood simultaneously as a physical and social phenomenon, generating an active and dynamic urban organization that enabled the realization of social and religious ideals within the city framework. This understanding of streets as elements on par with the mosque provides a foundation for contemporary research in analyzing the organization of the Islamic city, and demonstrates that any study limited to the mosque alone offers an incomplete picture of the authentic Islamic city.

Summary

Streets in the authentic Islamic city were not formed randomly, but according to the principles of systematic networks designed to generate and balance collective life as well as social, economic, and religious activities. Without them, the concept of the ummah would not manifest in the urban fabric. This network, in addition to its connective and transportation functions, ensured flexibility to accommodate both communal and private needs of the residents (Fig. 5).

Furthermore, streets in the authentic Islamic city were always considered living, active spaces on par with the mosque: the mosque served as the spiritual focal point, while the street acted as the network linking the community. This connection transformed the city into a unified and coherent structure, allowing, like an organized system, the continuity of social and cultural order.

Streets in the Islamic city also served as instruments for achieving spatial justice and social legitimacy. Preserving boundaries, ensuring free access for citizens, and respecting the hierarchy of movement were aligned with Islamic legal principles, and any obstruction of the public flow of life was prohibited. Street design, attentive to human

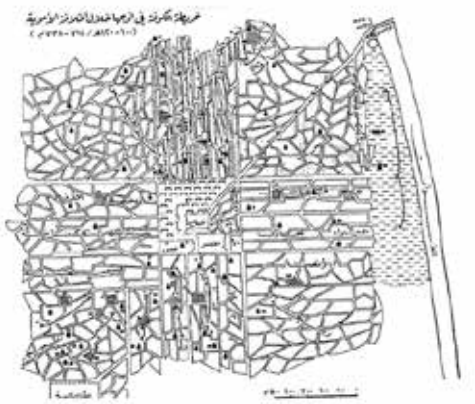

Fig. 5. Map of Kufa at the height of its development during the Umayyad Caliphate. Original title: "خريطة الكوفة في أوجها خلال الخلافة الأموية ١٢٠-١٠٠ هـ/٧٣٨-٧١٨ م.". It depicts a complex and endogenous systemic organization, reflecting a premeditated order governing the city. Source: Djaït, 1988, 318.

scale and proper lighting, made the urban experience multidimensional, reinforcing a sense of belonging, participation, and social cohesion.

Conclusion

A deeper and more realistic understanding of the authentic Islamic city requires revisiting the street as an active network that, in balance with the mosque, shapes the collective identity of the city. Just as the mosque is the spiritual and ritual focal point of the city, with clearly defined rules for its protection and sanctity, the street is also a legitimate space for collective life and social and economic activities. In the authentic Islamic city, streets not only provide physical access but also create spaces for the formation of collective identity and strengthen the sense of belonging and participation. Even small alleys convey social and cultural messages that sustain the life of the ummah within the urban fabric, making the street, like the mosque, a fundamental component of urban organization and collective experience. In this perspective, the street landscape articulates the connection between the spiritual core and daily urban life. Its significance in representing Islamic urban civilization becomes evident as it challenges theories that deny the concept of the authentic Islamic city based on the idea of a random mosaic. While the mosque is the focal point and central core of the authentic Islamic city, it cannot effectively shape the urban landscape without the street. Therefore, the street holds a position on par with the mosque. In the authentic Islamic city, streets function as a medium guiding citizens' experiences of space and reinforcing human and social bonds, demonstrating that the authentic Islamic city is a product of internal order, not chance or imitation of previous models. This new interpretation highlights the street as a vital component in shaping urban organization and the collective experience of the ummah, paving the way for future research on the authentic Islamic city.

Endnotes

1. In this study, the term "street" is not employed as a historical designation or as a precise equivalent of early Islamic terminology, but rather in the broad and inclusive sense of "path" or "way." In this usage, it encompasses a wide range of movement corridors, from shāriʿ and ṭarīq to zuqāq and ribāṭ. The aim of the research is to articulate and comprehend the ontological formation of the path within the authentic Islamic city, rather than to distinguish functional or juridical layers among its various types. Accordingly, the term "street" is adopted solely for the sake of conceptual clarity and ease of understanding for the reader (For further discussion see Atashinbar & Motedayen (2018).
2. The emphasis on the concept of the "authentic Islamic city" in this research is significant insofar as it serves to clearly distinguish between cities of the Islamic world such as Damascus—whose origins are Roman and, prior to that, Akkadian—and Iranian cities, which represent a coexistence of pre-Islamic architectural components with post-Islamic urban principles, on the one hand (For further discussion see Mansouri (2007), and cities that were fundamentally established on the basis of Islamic social prescriptions, on the other. Exemplary cases of the latter include the transformation of Yathrib into Medina following the arrival of the Prophet, as well as the urban transformations of Kufa during the caliphate of Imam Ali, both of which are examined in this study as case examples.
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