Preserving Najaf’s heritage

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Abstract

The holy city of Najaf and its neighboring holy cities of Karbala and Kufa have tremendous significance for the Shi’i. These cities with tombs of Imam Ali, Imam Hussein, Imam Abbas, and Muslim Bin Akil are significant stewards and learning centers for Shi’i. The Shrines of these great men, immediate family of The Prophet Mohammad draw Shi’i from many countries in the region. With a majority of Shi’i in Iraq and Iran, and a significant number in Pakistan and India the number of visitors expected in any given year exceed several million. In May 2003 alone, over 1.5 million visitors came to the shrine of Imam Hussein in Karbala[1]. While visitors come throughout the year, the city of Najaf has 38 official religious holidays. In Egypt, a major tourism attraction in the region, the Ministry of Tourism boasted 5 million visitors in its peak year 2002[2]. Najaf as a center of religious pilgrimage competes with these figures. With the development of local governments throughout Iraq, and specifically the growth of the cities, the heritage of Najaf must be a priority in considering its future.

Keywords: Najaf, Heritage, Shi’a, Shi’I, urban development, heritage, tourism, pilgrim.

1 Background

This religious and cultural heritage of Najaf is replenishable and unlike the pyramids will not erode over time or from more visitors. As such, it is the most sustainable form of tourism. However, the city in its present state is unable to capitalize from this rich resource. Moreover, with the large number of visitors the existing resources of the city are being strained to limit. Traffic congestion and circulation is choking the city, pollution has exponentially increased, sewerage and water treatment plants are short of capacity.

The city planning office has not produced a master plan since 1982, and even then, it was created by the Ministry of Planning in Baghdad, the existing map of
the city was made by the Soviet Union in 1976. The city has since grown in an ad-hoc manner at best.

The need for the program is prompted by increasing numbers of Pilgrim visitors from all over the world to Najaf, especially as the borders become more porous and the country stabilizes. The dedication of pilgrims in viewing the shrines is a threat. Their very presence is becoming detrimental to the quality and preservation of the Shrines and other religious facilities. In the city and in the shrine, their increasing number and the virtual lack of any effective crowd management creates an uncontrollable environment. At the same time, the virtual absence of facilities for other pilgrim activities means very short stays in the area, skewed economies, lessening the long term benefits to the local infrastructure and economy, and less flexibility in scheduling visits for religious festivals. Even so, the increasing number of Pilgrims visiting Najaf has provided the impetus for accelerated growth in Najaf and its surrounding areas. Growth pressures in turn have resulted in encroachments and urban sprawl, thereby jeopardizing the religious heritage and impairing their value. Additionally, regional growth pressures now risk loss of potentially productive agricultural lands, as an expanding population seeks space for living in a constrained environment.

In developing a Master Plan for the city of Najaf, it is proposed to create a Program that is inclusive of existing and future grants. The Comprehensive Development Plan for the city of Najaf Program (CDCN) proposes a strategy for Najaf that would address, in a coordinated manner:

Preservation and protection of the unique antiquity settings, cultural resources, and heritage of Najaf region, while expanding opportunities for pilgrim and visitor activities;

Planned city and subsequently, regional growth strategy that would promote sustainable economic development, by preventing further urban sprawl and the deleterious effects of unplanned development on Najaf’s cultural heritage and on the living conditions; and

A regional development strategy that would create new economic opportunities for the citizens of the region.

The CDCN Program is conceived to have four distinct types of products that would combine both long-range planning and immediate actions:

- Institutional capacity building
- Structure Plan
- Investment Projects
- Heritage Plan

2 Institutional capacity building

The city needs to be able to plan for the growth of Najaf. This will mean developing the capacity of key departments in the governorate and municipality including the department of planning, water and sewerage, construction, environmental protection, tourism, while assisting in the strengthening of the of relevant civil society organizations, such the chamber of tourism, the hotel
associations, marketing and tour operators association, engineers unions and other professional associations (syndicates). Multinational grants can be utilized to:

- Train relevant government departments in budgeting and strategic planning
- Assist with organizational structure and parliamentary process in the professional associations
- Provide study tour/s to regional tourism centers.

3 Structure plan

Clearly, all of the products of the CDCN are closely intertwined and should be reviewed jointly for a full understanding of their total scope. The Structure Plan provides the overall framework to which the other elements relate.

The Structure Plan will present an overall strategy for the twenty-year growth of the Najaf region, focusing upon planned growth within Najaf city and several target development areas across the region.

![City Center Najaf](image)

Figure 1: City Center Najaf.

The plan must recognize that Najaf is a changing, dynamic city. Historic resources must be protected in a way which allows growth and change of the city and its surroundings. The challenge is to accommodate contemporary development in a living, historic city and to achieve a qualitative understanding of the important values and priorities which should guide such development. Equally, the Plan should define a clear implementation agenda of actions which
can enable the development and refinement of the Plan; their sequence, approximate scale, and required resource commitments. In this manner, appropriate priorities can be developed to scope and identify the required public and private investment programs that will be the ultimate product of the work.

This Plan will encompass strategies for how the region should grow, where population should be concentrated, and how growth opportunities can be addressed to meet the CDCN Program objectives. Multinational grants can be utilized to:

- Develop baseline studies to document existing physical condition of city, including topography, built environment, road networks, city and district boundaries, municipal services
- Develop a mapping facility in the Planning office
- Organize international competition for preservation and restoration projects
- Prepare an international competition for a Democracy Monument to proclaim the rebirth of a great city
- Design and implement a program for urban renewal and beautification
- Restore basic services and upgrading circulations
- Landscape the city center
- Reforest the denuded green zones and forests in and around the city
- Design and build transportation termini
- Develop a master plan with a 20-year horizon with review and recommendations on primary circulation, intercity transportation termini, pilgrimage facilities, zoning and land use for city and residential communities.

The structure plan will necessitate an active program advisory committee to decide on short and long term objectives. Its engagement will reinforce through an iterative process organization, parliamentary process, debate and dialogue, consensus building and most importantly an end result that can showcase transparency in governance.

4 Investment projects

The structure plan to be completed under the CDCN with priorities set by the governing council, civil society organizations and Program Advisory Committee, will provide a framework for identifying the investment projects to be developed into full proposals for donor and private sector funding. The investment project could cover a wide-range of development needs. A listing of some of the prospective investment projects is indicative of the range of needs in Najaf.

4.1 Transportation

- Airport to accommodate growing international air travel and a management/financing plan for operations and maintenance.
• A greatly expanded road network to relieve congestion and make the sites accessible, and a major highway to connect Najaf to the major cities and the holy corridor of Najaf-Kufa and Karbala.
• Bus depot for inter and intra city transportation.
• Linking Najaf to national rail network.
• A pedestrian crossings at key intersections.

4.2 Utilities

• Water/sewerage treatment and solid waste disposal; expand serviced land to provide for unserviced areas and new planned settlements; possible public/private partnership to build and operate water and wastewater treatment plants, and solid waste management. Use of secondary treated wastewater can be considered for irrigating greenbelts and new golf courses and other recreational areas to be developed.
• Develop water and other resource conservation programs in hotels and resident areas to include such measures as water saving devices and recycling of grey water for toilet use and landscape irrigation and beautification.
• Expand electric and telephone service and placement of electric and telephone cable underground to correct service interruptions.
• Develop large open area cooling systems to make tourism more comfortable in tourist areas outside the monuments, e.g., the old market areas and proposed new theme villages, and thus expand opportunities for tourist outside activities.

4.3 Economic development

• Develop a Heritage Plan for better management of tourism and make Najaf a world-class managed tourism destination, comparable to Mecca, Medina, and the Vatican.
• Complete antiquities museum and cultural tourism management.
• Develop Centers for research and education for both scholars and tourists.
• Develop new recreational opportunities to increase stop-over touristic nights; new recreation includes golf courses, thematic parks, horseback and camel riding trails, exhibition and tournament areas, sport stadiums, game halls and theaters.
• Develop new hotel zones nearer shrine to replace informal settlements and with the financial proceeds from hotel land sales pay for relocation of the informal settlements.
• Develop theme hotels to serve different cultural requirements of tourists from many nations.
• Develop financing and technical assistance for small and micro-enterprise expansion to improve economy and expand job opportunities.
• Develop the dormant and ad-hoc cottage industries for religious tourism products and tours to see how products are made.
• Expand agricultural lands to replace lands taken for urban growth and to create new economic enterprises; especially for import substitution to service tourism needs for fresh foods.

3.4 Social development

• Improve the administrative capability of Najaf city government and identify opportunities to privatize selected public services where the private sector can better finance/manage.
• Identify revenue and financing strategies to fund administrative and development requirements of the Najaf city and governorate.
• Relocate informal villages negatively affecting the monuments with provisions for housing, sanitation, health, education and market services to provide incentives for relocation.
• Develop adequate health care facilities for urban and rural residents and tourists.
• Develop higher education institutions to improve opportunities for residents, e.g., completion of universities.
• Develop new primary, secondary, and technical schools to serve growing population.
• Develop scientific waste management and pollution control programs.

3.5 Critical Considerations in Developing Investment Projects for Najaf

Public Finance in Iraq: There are no mechanisms for longer term financing such as bond issues to amortize by user-fees; nor does a financing institution exist which specializes in financing infrastructure costs. Users are often asked to pay for infrastructure costs up front. Consideration should be given to the introduction of mechanisms to finance both public capital costs and user connections fees, ranging from bond financing to specialized municipal banks. Capturing the increases in property values resulting from public investments is also an important consideration. Loan Development Fund financing is available for local units providing financing for private "productive" purposes, although legally these could also be used for infrastructure.

Proactive Environmental Management by implementing ISO 14000: The International Standards Organization (ISO) in Geneva is in process of formulating a generic series of environmental management standards which will become a framework for international approval for products and services. In Najaf, tourism may be impacted by ISO 14000 as European and North American tourism associations begin assessing tourist destinations based on compliance with ISO 14000. Already a number of European states have adopted environmental management standards and the ISO 14000 is but a means to integrate and standardize formats. Compliance with ISO 14000 has positive environmental benefits and will promote Najaf as a desirable tourist destination.
ISO 14000 is implemented by individual companies and does not require a public regulatory structure. It is a voluntary management program that assists companies to become environmentally conscious in their operations. A private certification program in Iraq would be constructive in assisting local industry and tourist facilities to comply with ISO 14000. A proactive ISO 14000 program in Najaf would give the area a competitive advantage over other international destinations that have not adopted a program.

**Small and Micro Enterprises (SME):** Creating large industrial complexes in Najaf, which is geographically remote from the centers of commerce and industry, will be difficult to accomplish. High unemployment and under-employment in both the urban and rural areas is a priority concern. As tourism expands in Najaf, enhancing small business will be a productive means to increase employment and with less investment than required in an attempt to attract a large-scale industrial enterprise. SME programs serve both urban and rural populations and can bring jobs to locations away from the monuments.

**Public/Private Partnership for Area Management:** The local private sector can be involved in augmenting public services and enhancing the management of key areas in Najaf. There is a growing movement in cities for the private sector to organize and establish commercial and residential area management districts, referred to in the U.S. as Business Improvement Districts (now numbering over 2,000 nationwide)[3] and homeowner associations. These private districts raise funds, primarily through a self-adopted assessments and fees-for-services, to provide auxiliary services such as additional street cleaning, garbage removal and security. With sanitation and security issues in Najaf being of primary concern to the residents and tourists alike, those private management districts may be a constructive partnership with government to better finance and manage selected urban services.

**Private Foundations/Direct Giving Campaign:** The uniqueness of Najaf’s historical assets will attract international foundation support, if properly packaged, especially for management of the monument areas and the museum. Najaf’s international visibility may also be the basis to establish its own international foundation for a direct giving campaign especially directed at Shi‘i, Sunni and Ismaeli communities in Europe, North America and Asia. If the Program Working Groups decide that private foundation opportunities are worthy of expanded consideration, this element could be expanded into a private investment project. The religious sites are controlled by the Awqaf Ministry.

**Focusing Opportunities:** As can be discerned from the above descriptions of potential development opportunities for Najaf, there are diverse areas that can be considered. However, focusing its development program on improving the tourism potential of Najaf is the main priority. Initiating an effective Heritage Plan to improve the management and presentation of the historical assets of Najaf as a world-class tourist attraction, and developing investment projects to support that objective, would offer the most effective opportunity to improve the economy in Najaf and protect the antiquities from degradation.

**Grant Opportunities:** Investment Strategy will have been defined in the course of the work as the most critical elements that should be implemented, and
a report for each project that identifies the scope, scale, cost, and effect of each project will be developed, with the aim of seeking sources of public and private investment. These projects could include the development of:

The development of a new resort area with adequate infrastructure
- Restoration of the Great Souk/ Bazaar.
- Development of the Open Museum and Heritage District in Najaf city-center

5 The Heritage Plan

The Heritage Plan must recognize that the city itself is historic and has an important context that goes beyond individual monument sites. The Plan should define measures to protect and enhance settings and districts which have integrity and can convey a larger sense of quality which is the context for each individual site. The city of Najaf itself, beyond its individual monuments, represents an important historical continuity that needs to be understood, thematically linked, and reinforced in order to take best advantage of its settings and resources.

- Visitors to the city find it difficult to appreciate the setting of the city, the importance of its monuments, and their inter-linkage:
- There is a general lack of interpretive programs for the city and its antiquities. There is no overall interpretive center, modest signage, and scant information regarding the evolution of the overall setting.
- The resources of the city are not well presented or communicated. No clear delineation of preservation districts is apparent and new development is often at odds with adjacent resources.
- Many new hotels have been scattered throughout the community and surrounding area rather than reinforcing the existing urban core and concentrating visitor activities.
- Land use and development at the edges of monument sites are encroaching on important historic settings; this will get worse if clear directions are not established for development.
- Increased visitation will require improved welcoming points of arrival to the city.

As in other locations in Iraq, population expansion pressures and the shortage of arable land create conflicts between settlement pressures and prudent land use. In Najaf, these pressures are felt with the added concern for historic and cultural sites of priceless value. What is required for the Heritage Plan is a clear understanding of the heritage of Najaf and a strategy for encouraging evolution, growth, and development which can reinforce that heritage.

The Heritage Plan for Najaf will include consideration of preservation, interpretation, economic development, visitor infrastructure, and management.

Preservation: Defines the resource and how it should be protected. Clearly, the key monuments and their settings must be preserved. In the case of Najaf, resources are within a larger cultural landscape -- sometimes a natural setting and in other times a man-made setting -- which needs to be understood and respected.
The Plan should broadly define the attributes of these contextual landscapes in the vicinity of each monument and needs to propose actions to insure that these settings enhance and do not detract from them. Beyond that, the Plan should indicate districts of the city where contextual qualities should be maintained, as well as those where significant new development can be encouraged and sustained.

Figure 2: Shrine of Imam Ali, Najaf.

**Interpretation:** Tells the story of resources so visitors can appreciate them and understand how they relate to one another and to their context. The story of Najaf and its centuries of change and discovery has been compelling to potential visitors for generations and it should encompass not only key monuments but also the city which surrounds them. The Plan should indicate where this story should be told, the means to make it accessible and communicable, and how the stories of individual sites and settings relate to one another.

6 Conclusions

The trend in heritage management and tourism development tends to emphasize narrative and interpretation. The cities of Najaf and Kufa need these elements, however, they are in greater need of physical development. The end of the war will see greater numbers of pilgrims coming to visit the shrine, and like Mecca one can benefit from visiting during the year as well as during religious holidays.
The great number of pilgrims that have come to visit Najaf in 2003 are a clear indicator of the numbers to expect in the coming years and decades. The cities need to understand where their needs are going to be in the short and long term. The planning must engage the municipal leadership as well as the clerics. The planning must be done in an iterative manner and with consensus among all the different parties. The planning must also engage the investment community. The investors in Najaf and the surrounding cities/countries are clearly able to see the benefits that can be had, however, the local government must create an enabling environment with appropriate controls.

Najaf is ideally suited for a development both in urbanization and its surrounding rural communities. These elements can be developed to complement one another, indeed to enhance each other. The city grows to accommodate growing numbers of pilgrims, while the farming communities thrive by producing agricultural produce for Najaf and the rest of the nation. In Najaf, understanding lessons learned from regional tourism/heritage centers is essential; the culture and heritage must continue to thrive and be cherished, while economic development continues. These elements are ultimately symbiotic.

References