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Spell it as 'Makkah' when referring to Islam's holy city

By [Dr Md. Mahmudul Hasan](#) - January 20, 2023 @ 12:42am



Regrettably, Makkah is often wrongly transliterated into English as Mecca. I first became aware of this issue when reading the great Ismail Raji al-Faruqi's book *Toward Islamic English* (1986) in which he regards such orthographic disparity between source and target words as distortion (of Islamic terms and Muslim names) through transliteration. -REUTERS file pic

During my time in the United Kingdom, I first lived in the East Midlands city of Leicester for about a year. Then in 2002, I moved to Portsmouth, where I completed a PhD in comparative literature.

Within days of my arrival in this port city in Hampshire on England's south coast, I visited its city centre – also known as Commercial Road – not far from the main buildings of the University of Portsmouth.

Commercial Road is the heart of Portsmouth. It accommodates major businesses, including restaurants, retail outlets, megastores and entertainment centres.

On my first day there, a magnificent building on Arundel Street caught my attention. The word "Mecca" was written prominently on the façade of the structure.

It may sound weird but I immediately associated the structure with the unique city of Makkah in Saudi Arabia, home to the holiest site in Islam and which Muslims travel to for the haj (pilgrimage) and umrah (lesser pilgrimage).

I was naïve to think the big edifice in the city centre of Portsmouth must be a hub of Islamic activities. I had concluded that if Portsmouth had such a huge Islamic centre, Muslims in the city must be in a position of influence.

I was wrong. The reason is that I was not aware of the actual, primary meaning of the word "mecca" in the English language.

It became clear to me that the building was not what I had initially imagined. It is a popular leisure and nightlife spot – with a ballroom and a social club – where people indulge in dancing, drinking, gambling and other similar pursuits.

What is more, Mecca Bingo is the name of a big British gambling company with dozens of outlets throughout the UK.

The word "mecca" in English means, among others, "a place that attracts many visitors", "a place that is regarded as the centre of an activity or interest" and "a place regarded as a centre for a specified group, activity, or interest".

Among the dictionary examples of the word mecca are "a mecca for shoppers", "a mecca for tourists" and "a mecca for wine lovers". The word Makkah – the name of the Islamic holy city – sounds similar to mecca, but they are not the same.

Makkah is where Prophet Muhammad was born, where the cube-shaped structure Ka'aba and Masjid al-Haram (the Sacred Masjid) are located and towards which Muslims turn during their prayers.

It is the focal site of the haj and umrah. The word Makkah also occurs in the Quran in verse 24 of Surah Fath (48:24). For these and many other reasons, one should be careful when transliterating the word into English.

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Unfortunately, the spelling of Mecca has long been accepted by Muslims and non-Muslims, including reputed scholars.

For example, one of the towering intellectuals of the 20th century, Muhammad Asad, wrote a masterpiece "combination of memoir and travelogue" titled *The Road to Mecca* (1954).

German television journalist and presenter Kristiane Backer's autobiography bears the title *From MTV to Mecca: How Islam Inspired My Life* (2012). There are innumerable examples of the usage of Mecca instead of Makkah by scholars when referring to the city in Saudi Arabia.

When Makkah is transliterated as Mecca, it risks giving a wrong meaning of the place. As a result, people who are not very knowledgeable about Islam may associate it with contrary activities.

For example, when the wrong transliteration of Mecca is used to refer to the city of the Prophet's birth, a non-Muslim resident of Portsmouth with inadequate information about the significance of Makkah in Islam will likely associate it with the kind of activities that happen in the Mecca building there.

Therefore, to avoid giving wrong connotations of Makkah, it is important that it be spelled correctly in English and the distorted transliteration of Mecca is avoided.

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