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Introduction

The present study is an attempt to describe the situation of the Twelver Shiite community of Medina and the adjacent area to the south of the town primarily in modern times (i.e. from the early 19th Century onwards), but with due reference also to its earlier history. The narrative is based on a wide range of very heterogeneous primary and secondary sources, ranging from medieval Arabic and modern European travel books to writings of the contemporary Saudi opposition, from old as well as recent Arabic chronicles to reports written by Iranian, Lebanese Shiite and other pilgrims on their visits to Medina. The picture that emerges is, of course, rather vague on many points, especially since the author of the present study has not been able—and most probably never will be—to do research on the spot.

To begin with, a few remarks concerning the general importance of Medina in the history of the Shia as well as in Shiite religious thought are certainly appropriate. We should bear in mind that Medina is distinguished from the other shrine towns of (Twelver-) Shiite Islam\(^1\) by a number of factors:

Its history and religious importance are closely related to those of Mecca. Though not part of the ḥajj, a visit (ziyāra) to Medina before or after the performance of the ḥajj ceremonies is considered highly commendable by all Muslims, and indeed for Shiites it is almost a sacred duty.\(^2\) While some of the Shiite shrine towns—e.g. Kerbela and Najaf—sprung up around the tomb of an Imam,

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\(^2\) Najaf: Hidāyat al-nāṣikin, passim.