

COVID-19 in Religion, Gender & Conflict

Hajj and the Muslim World:

How Coronavirus has Brought Devastation to this Billion Member Community

By Iman Syed

The delicate white cloth worn by hundreds of thousands juxtaposes the black, veiled Kaaba under the imposing Mecca sun. Masjid Al-Haram engulfs these Muslim pilgrims; their clothes are an equalizing force, breaking down economic, racial, and gender barriers. Moving as one community around the cubed Kaaba seven times, the worshippers complete the first of their shared five-day spiritual journey, the Hajj.

Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, Mecca was largely vacant this July, with only around 1,000 worshippers instead of the two million pilgrims who typically flocked to the holy city in years past.¹ The Saudi Ministry of Hajj and Umrah announced in June that the annual ritual will be closed to foreigners, only allowing Saudi Arabian residents to participate.²

This is the only cancellation in Saudi Arabian history since the country's establishment in 1932. The fallout of the decision is a symbol of the shared grief within the Muslim world.³ The most vital aspects of Islam are dependent on

physical presence to facilitate faith and unity, but they are now on the back burner as our social distancing is essential to combat the virus.

History of the Hajj

The Hajj, established in 628 A.D. by the Prophet Muhammad, is a five to six-day journey that begins and ends at the Kaaba in Mecca. As one of the five Pillars of Islam, the pilgrimage involves several rituals meant to emphasize the worship of one God, to pray for forgiveness, and to remember the plight of past prophets.

These practices also illustrate the closeness of the Muslim diaspora; regardless of background, all pilgrims wear modest clothes, men and women pray beside one another, and everyone moves through the processions as one community.⁴ The once-in-a-lifetime pilgrimage draws millions to Mecca annually, with some saving money for years to pay for the journey. It is a profoundly spiritual experience for individuals across the Muslim world.

Health and Hajj

Massive gatherings, like those the size of the Hajj, are breeding grounds for gastronomical and respiratory diseases. Within the Sacred Mosque in Mecca, there can be six pilgrims per square meter, and a single tent accommodation fits anywhere from 50 to 100 people. This environment is a critical part of the Hajj's shared and individual experience—the sense of being physically close to fellow brothers and sisters from around the world. However, when combined with excessive heat and gross overcrowding, this closeness becomes a cradle for disease.¹

To prevent the potential spread of diseases, the Hajj Visa Application already requires proof that applicants receive vaccinations for yellow fever, oral polio/inactivated poliovirus, meningococcal meningitis, and the seasonal influenza.⁵ The Ministry also implements electronic surveillance systems to track the spread of diseases and provide mobile isolation units on the ground for social distancing measures.⁶

To combat previous outbreaks of infectious diseases—like SARS or MERS (Middle Eastern Respiratory Syndrome)—the Saudi government enforced more cautious policies. During the SARS outbreak (2002-2003), they limited immigration from some affected areas in East Asia. During the MERS outbreak in 2012 and 2013, the Saudi Arabian government discouraged pilgrims considered high-risk, including those who were over 65, from participating in the Hajj.⁷

In this case, however, regulatory policies used to contain previous infectious diseases would not suffice. With the lack of understanding around the novel virus, the Saudi Arabian government was forced to take the most cautious of all options: cancellation. Although the decision was necessary, the disruption of spiritual collaboration among Muslims brings immense pain to the community.

The Self and Hajj

Imam Mokhi Turk sits in sorrow on his farm in the Kunduz Province of Afghanistan. Four years have gone by, and he is the only member of his family who has made registry to participate in the 2020 Hajj. His neighbors even sold their land to afford to pay for the voyage to see Mecca for themselves. His dreams are shattered.

"This makes me very sad, because every Muslim hopes to go to Hajj once in his whole life, and when it was my turn, it was cancelled[...] I'm very upset because I'm not sure if I'll be alive in the next few days, let alone next year."

Imam Turk's pain is shared worldwide. School administrator Zeinab Ibrahim of Egypt, unable to contain her pain, speaks through her tears:

"It was my only wish," Ms. Ibrahim said. "To cancel it completely is such a shame. May God relieve us of this burden."⁸

Many Muslims spend years saving before embarking on the milestone journey,⁹ with pilgrimage packages costing anywhere from 3,000 to 10,000 dollars.

United in pain, Yashir Qadhi, the Dean of the Islamic Seminary of America set to lead a group of pilgrims, emulated the religious implications of the cancellation to the individual:

"The Hajj is a transformative, emotional and spiritually moving experience—the spiritual pinnacle of a devout Muslim's life."⁸

Core aspects of Islam have continually faced disruption because of the pandemic. To prevent gatherings during Ramadan earlier this year, countries across the MENA region implemented curfews and closed mosques.^{3,10} Now, the Hajj—the climax of spiritual awakening for the individual within Islam—follows the trend of physical upheaval in Muslim life.

Praying alongside fellow followers, all equal in the eyes of Allah. Seeking forgiveness and atonement while gazing at the Kaaba. Collecting rocks on the fourth night for the fifth day's pebble throwing ritual and climbing Mount Arafat. These have become broken promises of spiritual enlightenment.¹¹

Physical presence and social gatherings are fundamental to the function of Islam. The cancellation of Islam's most critical example of physical space and faith, the Hajj, is the epitome of the devastation weighing on Muslims everywhere.

The pilgrimage to Mecca—a transitory departure from this world—is a much-needed respite from today's current state. Without it, hope declines, and devastation and grief triumph.



P.C. Khaled Abdullah via Reuters

A Gendered Look at COVID-19 in the MENA Region

By Donya Zarrinagar

In the Middle East, COVID-19 is shedding light on gender inequality and shattering illusions of progress in women's rights.

Economic Instability

Economic evaluations predict that COVID-19 will cause a loss of 42 billion dollars in the GDP of the Middle East and North Africa (MENA).¹ These losses will impact most citizens; however, compared to men, women are more likely to suffer long-term effects.

Women's labor participation rates in the region hover around 20 percent—among the world's lowest rates. Although the labor participation gap has been steadily closing in the past few years, this progress may be set back by the estimated 700,000 jobs that women will lose due to the pandemic.¹