The Hajj in Everyday Life

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*Each year, between the eighth and thirteenth days of the twelfth month in the Muslim calendar, (*Dhu al-Hijja*), more than 2 million Muslims from all parts of the world arrive in the Hijaz, the area where the holy cities of Mecca and Medina are located, for the pilgrimage (*hajj*). A lesser pilgrimage (*umra*) can be made at any time of the year and marks the respect that the Prophet Muhammad paid to the city of Mecca. –Eds.*

When I went on the hajj I soon discovered that I had to put aside most of what I had learned about it before hand. Nothing prepared me for what I saw—the maddening confusion and mass exhaustion, the daily brushes with death, and the stunning courage and kindness of countless strangers who held the world together when it was about to fly apart in all directions. I had thought that the hajj was a religious ritual and that like other rituals it was a time and place outside of real life where people sought a fleeting touch of the supernatural and a glimpse of eternity. And then it would be finished. We'd leave the magic behind and get back to business. God would be in His proper place and humans would be in theirs.

Having assumed that the hajj was a ritual, I also expected it to be ritualistic—standardized, lock step, and by the book with everyone going through the same motions whether they made sense or not. Everything pointed to that conclusion. The main goal was to fulfill Islam's most difficult religious obligation, a journey that God commanded of everyone able knowing that less than one percent of any generation had the health and savings to obey. An important side benefit would be forgiveness of all sins and the chance to face Judgment Day

with a clean slate. But neither reward was guaranteed. God would decide to accept or reject every person's pilgrimage on a case-by-case basis depending on the purity of one's intention and the conformity of one's behavior to the multitude of special rules that make the hajj the hajj. Only God can decide if a particular pilgrimage is accepted or not and no human, including the hajji, can ever know for sure what verdict God has given.

In fact, the pilgrims hardly ever follow a set script and they would find it impossible to do so even if they tried. They quickly learn that the only way to survive is to throw away the rule books and improvise their own coping strategies by building close-knit "families" in which everyone looks out for everyone else so they all scrape through safe and sound. Sooner or later, nearly all hajjis realize that the formal institutions of pilgrimage management have failed them. Even before they arrive in Mecca, they can feel the system breaking down under the weight of cronyism, partisanship, and corruption. By the time they return home months later, they each have a special pack of tales about the abuse and neglect they've suffered at the hands of bureaucrats, tour agents, religious officials, hotel operators, police, guides, shopkeepers, thieves, doctors, drivers, shrine attendants, and litter bearers.

These experiences force pilgrims to confront the inherent flaws and biases of the elaborate government-sponsored hajj networks in their home countries and in Saudi Arabia, including the powerful nexus of political, economic, and religious authorities that control them and profit from them. The inevitable result is a ceaseless worldwide debate over every aspect of the pilgrimage, thrusting hajj issues to the forefront of public consciousness every day of the year as the cycle of preparation, mobilization, and criticism makes all months seem like phases

of one seamless hajj season that touches Muslims everywhere whether or not they ever go on pilgrimage themselves.

The globalized hajj debate is producing far-reaching consequences. Instead of the old-fashioned notion that pilgrimage is a simple matter of conforming to unchanging rituals and unquestionable rules, today's Muslims commonly see every person's hajj as a unique experience that even the same pilgrim could not relive at a later time. In this view, the hajj is a deeply personal encounter with mysteries and holy symbols, open to infinite interpretations that can rival or contradict conventional meanings endorsed by clerics, governments, and social scientists.

In addition, Muslims increasingly see the pilgrimage in the contemporary contexts of earthly space and time rather than as a dream land or a suspended state divorced from the realities of this world. This change of perspective is steadily eroding Saudi Arabia's religious prestige and political legitimacy. All Muslims acknowledge that Mecca is the spiritual center of Islam and the site of God's symbolic "house," the ka'aba. But this does not mean that the Saudi state and ruling family automatically drink from the cup of divine grace as God's chosen agents.

On the contrary, nowadays hajjis are more critical than ever of what they see in Saudi Arabia and more impressed by the greater power and vitality of non-Arab peoples who make up 80 percent of the pilgrims and an identical share of the global Muslim population. In terms of modern achievements in economic, democratic, and cultural development, Saudi Arabia is a backwater rather than a model or a center. Pilgrims from more open and cosmopolitan societies are convinced that *they* occupy and define the modern center of the Islamic world regardless of lingering stereotypes that they are historically or geographically peripheral.

A similar shift is occurring in popular views of the hajj's temporal context. Traditional pilgrimage manuals often portray the hajj as a reenactment of the legendary deeds of ancient prophets and spiritual ancestors from Muhammad, to Abraham and Adam, and even to the angels before Creation. Equally common is the future-looking focus on death and eternity—pilgrimage as a rehearsal for the Day of Judgment when all souls learn their fate in the afterlife. Such older preoccupations with the ancient and the eternal find less and less favor among today's pilgrims who are increasingly young, well-educated, urban, middle class, and female. These modern hajjis are more attracted to the works of independent and reformist writers who stress pilgrimage's connections with contemporary social and political problems, particularly celebrated author's like Muhammad Iqbal and 'Ali Shari'ati who describe the hajj as a spontaneous global conclave where Muslims from every land can share information and ideas about the current predicaments of Islam and its future contributions to human history. Throughout the Islamic world, nearly every bookstall or sidewalk kiosk has dust-laden copies of the old-fashioned official guide books and prayer manuals sitting side-by-side with local translations of the newer genre that connects the hajj to real life and real time. Prospective pilgrims preparing for their sacred journeys eagerly scoop up both types according to their ages and tastes, but demographic changes are pushing the business steadily to more interpretive and socially relevant titles.

The Triumph of Experience over Ritual

Governments around the world have poured billions of dollars into efforts to make the hajj convenient, affordable, safe, and orderly. Improved organization and infrastructure make it

possible for larger crowds to flock to Mecca, overwhelming the city's narrow confines and ravaging the delicate desert ecology. Every time hajj managers succeed in expanding the carrying capacity and surface area of the sacred precincts, they attract even greater numbers of pilgrims who quickly force the planners to undertake ever more costly and extravagant renovations. No matter how much money and technology governments throw at the problem, they find themselves on a quickening treadmill where they have to run harder and harder just to stay in the same place.

Pervasive hardship and confusion force pilgrims to improvise in order to compensate for the inevitable breakdowns in basic services and planning that dog them day in and day out. Most hajjis eventually gravitate to small informal groups of about four to ten people who do virtually everything together for two or three weeks. They watch out for one another, alert to any danger from unruly crowds to speeding buses, tending to one another's needs for snacks and drinks, and watching for the slightest signs of sunstroke or dehydration that might require emergency treatment.

Soon the bonding and close quarters loosen tongues and spark imaginations. Family problems, politics, teasing, and grumbling help the time race by. The most animated discussions revolve around the hajj—its mysteries, benefits, intricacies, and multiple meanings. "Are we doing the pilgrimage properly?" "Will our hajjs be accepted?" "Why are other people doing things in different ways and different sequences?" "Have we done anything to spoil our pilgrimages and make them invalid?" "If we make mistakes and lapses, how do we compensate—by fasting, by offering an extra animal sacrifice, by giving alms?"

The hardest questions are about shortcuts in performing the main rituals. Sooner or later, nearly all pilgrims realize they cannot fully accomplish one rite or another they regard as mandatory. Nothing evokes greater pain in a hajji's conscience than the prospect that all her efforts might be in vain, particularly when she sees that her sincere intentions can be defeated by circumstances beyond her control. The feelings of injustice and personal inadequacy can be overwhelming for the elderly and frail who have saved and sacrificed an entire lifetime to fulfill Islam's most sacred obligation.

Perhaps the greatest contribution of pilgrims' informal "family" groups is granting themselves permission to take shortcuts in dangerous situations where insisting on strict ritual compliance would invite physical injury or the risk of death. Often these are snap decisions the group must make on the spot. Inevitably, there is a dissenter who holds out in the name of doctrinal purity. "You're trying to spoil my hajj," he'll say. "God has commanded this act and you have no authority to disobey." Of course, the dissenter is usually correct, but the rest of the group closes ranks to persuade him. "God does not expect pilgrims to commit suicide," they will say. "Islam is a religion of reason and God gives us reason because He loves us and wants us to prosper." And when all else fails, they can add, "We take full responsibility for your actions. If God wants to blame someone, He will blame us and not you."

Gradually, hajjis become more confident. They stop looking for instructions and take control of their own movements and schedules, creating personalized pilgrimage experiences better than anything they had imagined. If a companion goes missing, his group phones the lost pilgrim camps to track him down and bring him back. If the water canisters in the Great Mosque are too far apart to serve all of the worshippers, small cups move hand to hand over hundreds of

meters without spilling a drop. When a panicked crowd breaks into a human stampede, someone points the way to safety and people shield one another with their own bodies. Each day brings them in contact with a wider circle of pilgrims from other nations, races, classes, and cultures who might not share a common tongue. They learn to pool their language skills, translating between two or three languages at a time to exchange views about religion, work, and current events—and snapping endless photos until their batteries run down.

As the public hajj of the rule books gives way to the private hajjs of three million individuals, pilgrims grow more eager to reflect on their experiences, particularly as their time in the Holy Land winds down and they prepare for the return to normal life. During these last days—but most of all, at night—the magic of the hajj is on full display. In the valleys outside of Mecca, the desert sky contains so many shooting stars it's impossible to keep count. From the roof top of the Grand Mosque, there is an unobstructed midnight view of the courtyard below—bathed in power lights and colored beams—where pin wheels of human specks swirl around the ka'aba for the last time.

Between Mecca and outlying shrines, a perpetual traffic jam in both directions forces exasperated hajjis to abandon their taxis and walk to the last-minute rites. But now there is no rhyme to their dress. Most have cast off the seamless white towels required in the earlier phases, reverting to street clothes of a thousand climes and styles. Others decide to "go native," sporting crisp new Arabian robes and head dresses like the ones they're packed as souvenirs for friends back home. Some haphazardly mix and match all three genres—hajj gear, national colors, and Bedouin fashion.

These last days in Mecca create a third type of pilgrimage alongside the public and private hajjs that have paved its way. I would call it the "secret hajj" because it unleashes profound introspection and unfettered speculation about every aspect of Islam, creation, and the human condition. One of the most common insights is that the ka'aba is meaningless. It is not really God's house because God lives in everyone's heart and soul no matter who they are or where they are. Why go to Mecca? To obey a divine command and in the process to learn what God probably intended us to know all along—that He guides every part of His creation, including the 99 percent of humanity that never makes a pilgrimage anywhere. Equally important, hajjis now realize that their journey has succeeded because they made it succeed through their own ingenuity, patience, courage, and selflessness. Governments, companies, and clerics have done the best they could given their inherent shortcomings, but in the end they let everyone down—as usual. With this new confidence and wisdom in their heart of hearts, hajjis frequently return home to positions of enhanced status and influence which they turn to good advantage in criticizing and rebuilding their communities in all corners of the Islamic world.

Dethroning Arabian Pretensions

For decades, Saudi Arabia has invested lavishly in hajj projects, yet no nation has earned less gratitude from those who accept its generosity. Indeed, the longer pilgrims remain in the country the more negative their impressions become. Many people see no reason to praise governments for discharging their sacred duties to allow Muslims to obey God's commands. In this view, all sovereigns carry such a responsibility and the Saudis are no different except that fortuitous wealth has given them an added burden of having to use it for the common good.

When the royal family gives itself glorious religious titles and poses as exemplary Muslims, it all seems quite over the top to anyone familiar with the brutality of their rule and the intolerance of their religious attitudes.

Each year, more and more pilgrims come to see Saudi control of the hajj a classic case of mismanagement that should be corrected through greater internationalization of all decisions concerning the Holy Cities. Most of the grievances cluster around three very raw issues—destruction of the historical and ecological foundations of Mecca, heavy-handed suppression of hajj practices that are popular among Muslims from many lands in Asia and Africa, and politically motivated manipulation of the quota system that allocates pilgrimage visas to every country in the world.

In the last sixty years, the annual number of overseas pilgrims to Mecca has soared from about 50,000 to 2 million. Several mutually reinforcing factors have driven this meteoric rise—the revolution in cheap commercial air travel, the steady growth throughout Asia and Africa of more prosperous middle class and working class communities with greater disposable income, the gradual demise of colonial rule in favor of independent nations whose governments actively promote hajj participation instead of suppressing it, and the deliberate strategy of Saudi monarchs since King Faysal to cultivate the hajj as a pillar of religious legitimacy at home and an instrument of diplomacy everywhere in the Islamic world. All of these changes are irreversible and in combination they virtually insure that Mecca's overburdened infrastructure and environment will come under even greater pressure every year.

A swelling tide of architects, planners, historians, preservationists, environmentalists, foreign governments, and common pilgrims deplores Saudi decisions to demolish revered

landmarks, to encircle the Grand Mosque with shopping centers and high-rises, and to flood the valleys with diesel smoke from tour buses frozen in place by endless gridlock. The indictment is not that Saudi Arabia has planned poorly, but that it has planned destructively by willfully despoiling an irreplaceable resource that—unlike their oil wealth—belongs not to them, but to all Muslims and to all humanity, including generations not yet born.

Much of the problem stems from a fatal mismatch between Saudi Arabia's universal custodial duties, which make it responsible to all of Islam, and its idiosyncratic Wahhabi theology, which is contemptuous of many sentiments and customs that are dear to the 1.4 billion believers it must serve. Saudi clerics and officials harbor a deep suspicion of anything suggesting the veneration of humans, objects, or places because they fear that it undermines the direct and exclusive worship of God. From this perspective, some of the most popular practices of Sunnis, Sufis, and Shi'ites are borderline examples of idolatry and polytheism. Praying at tombs and cemeteries, retracing the footsteps of legendary Muslims, touching blessed objects, invoking miraculous powers, experiencing ecstatic states—all of these are regarded as ever-present vestiges of paganism and animism requiring constant police vigilance and public displays of physical force.

Sometimes, the sectarian bias of these measures is transparent—for example, when mainly Iranian Shi'ites are beaten for trying to enter the closely guarded cemetery in Medina where several of their holiest leaders are buried. More often, however, the policeman's lash falls on the backs of regular Sunnis and Sufis, including visitors to the tombs of the Prophet and early Caliphs who are so overcome by emotion that they try to pray at choke points and inadvertently crush the flow of pilgrims behind them.

The most provocative behavior of Saudi officials during the hajj appears in punitive and callous acts that seem motivated by racism and ethnic discrimination. During the most tragic disaster in recent hajj history, more than 1,400 pilgrims died in a 1990 human stampede in the mountain tunnel connecting Mecca and Mina. The victims were mainly Indonesians, Malaysians, Bangladeshis, and Indians. By the time their bodies were sent back home, they had been so dismembered and mutilated by earthmoving equipment that most were unidentifiable. Outraged publics in all of these countries saw a direct connection between disrespect for their martyred pilgrims and the daily mistreatment of their brothers and sisters who had migrated to Saudi Arabia to work for local firms and families. Resentment over Saudi racism against Asian Muslims during the hajj and in the workplace have poisoned relations between these nations for more than two decades on both official and personal levels.

Complaints of racial discrimination are even more widespread among pilgrims from sub-Saharan Africa, particularly Nigeria. Nigeria's hajjis are routinely detained and questioned over suspicions about carrying infectious diseases, drug peddling, currency smuggling, prostitution, illegal immigration, terrorism, vagrancy, public disorder, and every type of customs violation. For the ordinary pilgrims with no involvement in any of these things, their only offense would be the Saudi Arabian equivalent of "driving while black"—or, in this case, "making the hajj while black."

Saudi officials have forced Nigerian hajj managers to implement an elaborate nationwide screening process for prospective pilgrims, including criminal background checks, medical exams, inoculations, letters of reference, personal interviews, non-refundable deposits and application fees, mandatory training sessions, and written tests on Islamic ritual obligations. No other country has erected so many barriers to pilgrimage—and so many payment points for

corrupt bureaucrats and religious officials. As desperate security measures, these obstacles could have, at most, a temporary justification if properly targeted and tailored to local circumstances. Nonetheless, even then the system as a whole reflects a pervasive racial bias that violates Islam's core values and contradicts the hajj's special embodiment of equality and universalism.

Despite important steps toward internationalizing hajj management over the last twenty years, Saudi Arabia still wields considerable power because of its ability to increase or decrease each nation's annual contingent of pilgrims. The Organization of the Islamic Conference (OIC)—the so-called Islamic United Nations—has mandated a global system of quotas that allots each nation about 1,000 pilgrimage slots for every 1 million people. The original intent was to stabilize the aggregate level of overseas pilgrims at about 1.4 million per year—roughly the average for the period just before and after 1980.

The Saudis were desperate for quotas because Mecca was being overwhelmed by massive numbers of Iranian pilgrims—over 100,000 per year—during the heyday of the Islamic Revolution. Under Ayatollah Khomeini's direction, Iranian hajjis organized mass marches denouncing Saudi Arabian claims to sovereignty over the Holy Cities and demanding an international regime to administer them on behalf of all Muslims. The Saudis could—and did—slaughter hundreds of Iranian protesters inside the Grand Mosque itself, but they knew they had no authority to prohibit sincere pilgrims from entering the country because Islamic custom and law insist on free access for all Muslims seeking to fulfill their religious obligations.

In panic, Saudi Arabia pleaded for the largest and most powerful Sunni nations to vote in favor of its proposal to grant quota-making authority to the OIC, which would then supervise

Saudi implementation. The Sunni governments eventually agreed, but they extracted an enormous price from the bargain. The quotas would be strictly per capita based, non-discriminatory, and permanent. Overnight, the non-Arab Muslims of Asia and Africa, who comprise about 80 per cent of Islam, leapfrogged ahead of all Arabs combined, who had previously dominated about 60 per cent of the overseas pilgrimage contingents.

But the hajj was just one part of a much larger bargain that shifted power and prestige from the oil rich Arab states—and the Arab countries in general—to the newly developing regional giants of Asia and Africa. Henceforth, OIC leaders would no longer be hand-picked by Saudi Arabia and its neighbors. They would be elected by delegates from every member state and leadership would rotate between three new blocks formed by members in Asia, Africa, and the Arab world. Once again, overnight the Saudis handed over the keys to the international organization they founded and funded in order to push back the Iranian assault that threatened their very existence.

Almost thirty years later, Saudi leaders are trying to claw back a bit of the power they had to trade away. With the quotas firmly established and the Iranian pilgrims back in the fold, Saudi Arabia has begun to tinker with the margins of the system in order to dispense and withhold favors in line with its foreign policy interests. Inherent ambiguities and inconsistencies in quota estimation give Saudi bureaucrats considerable leeway. Should calculations be based on a country's total population or just its Muslim population? Which censuses and surveys are the most accurate measures of either number? Should minority Muslim communities be intentionally over-represented to encourage their solidarity with the global mainstream? When

can Saudi decision-makers grant exceptional, one-time only, please-don't-ever-ask-for-this-again increases?

Even when the stakes are comparatively small, overseas hajj managers usually try to move up the pecking order instead of challenging its arbitrariness head-on. Nigeria, Malaysia, Singapore, and South Africa constantly fret that their quotas might be slashed to between one-half and one-twentieth of their current size. Turkey and Iran are always trying to institutionalize special increments awarded for good behavior in controlling their delegations. It's always helpful to have a fugitive pilgrim problem as a bargaining chip, particularly if both sides agree on the approximate number of violators. National hajj managers reason this way: "If the Saudis cut our quota, then we can turn a blind eye to the illegal traffic and they are stuck with the free riders. If we shift to stricter enforcement, then they owe us more places on the legal side of the ledger because we're saving them the costs of apprehension and deportation." In this fashion, many countries try to ward off the threat of Saudi blackmail by applying a little of their own first.

After navigating the countless chambers of the global hajj mill—from initial application to safe passage home—returned pilgrims have seen it all. The divine mysteries of pilgrimage are more awesome than ever, but there are few illusions about the religiosity of Saudi society or the networks of ambition and greed that connect it to hajj agencies around the world. Saudi Arabia now appears not as the center of Islam, but as a self-sealed cocoon at the end of the earth waiting to drop off at any moment. As for Saudi Arabian models of Islam, they are vivid and unparalleled—but resoundingly negative and unsuitable back home in a modern and pluralistic society.

Bringing the Hajj Home

In retrospect, it seems natural that pilgrims would reverse their initial impressions about the hajj's true location in space and time. When they departed for Mecca, they were convinced that they were going to a real country in the modern world in order to experience universal spiritual wonders that would suspend them in an eternal moment. But while explaining these events to others and to themselves, they learn the opposite—they've gone to a land of make believe in the middle of nowhere in order to develop wisdom and relationships with the most practical and profound value to their daily lives here and now. The hajj is real and relevant whereas Arabia is illusion and isolated.

How could they have been so misled as to have it exactly backwards in the beginning? Hadn't they been proper Muslims all their lives, praying and learning together from the same texts and teachers as Islam had required the world over throughout history? When hajjis ask such questions, they chip away at the 'ulama's already crumbling claim to a monopoly of authority in religious interpretation. They help to expand the global conversation of Islam to include a host of scientists, professionals, journalists, women, youth, associations, academics, artists, and public opinion leaders whose specialized knowledge of modern life and all-embracing social connections vastly outweigh the meager resources of traditional religious scholars.

Debates about the meanings of the hajj and the shortcomings in its current management inevitably spillover to include all of the interconnected institutions—political, economic, social, international, and transnational—that sustain and profit from global pilgrimage. The snowballing hajj conversation becomes not only more critical, but also more democratic, more

interdisciplinary, and more universal. And just like the pilgrimage of personal experience, it develops a life of its own beyond the control of earthly sovereigns and mandarins.

Because debates about the hajj never take a day off, the pilgrimage remains at the forefront of popular imaginations year round. In this sense, today's hajj never stops. It no longer occupies a special season on the margins of everyday life. Instead, it embodies everyday life—both sacred and profane—magnifying all of its contradictions, hypocrisies, and unfulfilled promises.

As the hajj becomes a metaphor that stimulates critical thinking about Islam and society, all Muslims become hajjis whether or not they ever make the physical journey. They realize that because they have a vital stake in real life at home, they also have a stake in pilgrimage on the other side of the world. In this manner, all Muslims are with the hajjis no matter where they are. And like the hajjis, they also learn that the ka'ba is nothing more than a symbol of their own hearts—God's "real home" where, according to the Qur'an, He rests closer than the jugular vein in one's neck.

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