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# Precautions Taken Against the COVID-19 by Presidency of Religious Affairs in terms of Hajj and Umrah pilgrimage: The case of Turkey

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The gathering of people in a concentrated manner within particular spaces / places has become a serious issue during the COVID-19 pandemic period. Mass gatherings of individuals seem to be investigated intensively by researchers both in these days and will be further in the forthcoming years. Religion-oriented gatherings are of great importance because they have spiritual motivation for the ones who practice them. For many participants, these gatherings are essential at least once in their life. As is seen from its very nature, religious motivation is one of the most potent subjects to be considered in terms of mass gatherings. Thus, as a useful example, the pilgrimage in Islam to Hajj and Umrah in Saudi Arabia are the focus of this study. The international movements and gatherings stemming from religious motivation are a point of discussion in terms of the precautions which should be taken. Therefore, in this study, general information about these particular pilgrimages is provided, and the specific case of Turkey in relation to the COVID-19 pandemic is investigated within the scope of the precautions taken by the Turkish authorities. The study was designed to present the publicly announced precautions organised by the official response to Turkish pilgrims by the Presidency of Religious Affairs.

**Key Words:** Pilgrimage, Islam, Hajj, Umrah, COVID-19

## Introduction

Worshipping in Islam aims to pacify society psychologically and sociologically. Zakat, Almsgiving and Sacrifice are performed by sharing a person's wealth to encapsulate the sense of unity. Reformation predominates Salaah and Fasting, which are performed corporeally. Hajj brings together a combination of worshipping, which requires a certain wealth and a range of corporeal elements (Erul & Keles, 2012:5), but it is a pillar of faith in Islam, and it is mandatory at least once, for all Muslims who are financially and physically capable of making the pilgrimage (Haq & Jackson, 2009). Implicit in the act of making the Hajj pilgrimage is an instinctive testament to Islam.

The Prophet Muhammad, May the Peace and Blessing of Allah Be Upon Him (PBUH) made the first pilgrimage to demonstrate the fundamentals of Hajj to Muslims (Turkish Religious Committee Presidency, 2020). The rules of Hajj are central to the holy book of Islam

- the Qur'an. The practices of Prophet Muhammad commemorate certain events in the lives of other prophets such as the Prophet Abraham, his wife Hagar and their son, the Prophet Ishmael (Ismael) (Ahmed, 1992:36). Among various events that are commemorated is the last pilgrimage of Prophet Muhammad referred to as the Hajat Al-Wada (Farewell Pilgrimage).

Since the advent of comfortable transportation processes and the means of technology, modernity, and development, access is much easier to distant places; the realisation of a religious target in terms of specific rituals becomes more feasible for the members of religions. That's why, after the 1950s, vast numbers have had the occasion to travel to religion-oriented pilgrimage centres (Ahmed, 1992: 37-38). Hajj hosts more than 2 million pilgrims from over 180 countries every year. Starting as a form of early pilgrimage, it is one of the biggest cultural, ethnic, and geographically global religious gatherings in the world (Yezli *et al.*, 2017:868).

Islam promotes Hajj and Umrah pilgrimages for favourable objectives for Muslim society, such as education, business, trade, etc. (Sanad *et al.*, 2010:22). The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA) received 15,293,000 international tourist arrivals in 2018 (UNWTO, 2019:22). In 2019 2,489,406 Muslims travelled to KSA for the Hajj pilgrimage. While 643,379 of these pilgrims were domestic pilgrims (211,003 Saudis and 423,376 Non-Saudis), 1,855,027 were foreign pilgrims (General Authority for Statistics-Hajj Statistics, 2020:10). The KSA is planning to cater for 30 million Umrah visitors in its vision plans for 2030 (2016: 5). Considering these huge numbers, it is clear to see why Hajj and Umrah pilgrimages are regarded as mass gatherings.

A mass gathering is described as an event that is organised and has more than one thousand participants, attending in a particular place(s), with distinct aims for a specified period. De Lorenzo discussing the limits of this definition mentions that it only considers the size of the crowd, which is but a single descriptor of a rather diverse gathering of human beings within a mass-gathering situation (As cited in Locoh-Donou *et al.*, 2013:843). This type of gatherings might be simply categorised as planned or unplanned in nature. Spontaneous or unplanned gatherings may be seen in the funeral of a famous artist or political figure. However, planned ones may be subcategorised as frequent in the same location, such as the Cannes Film Festival or realised in diverse places as the FIFA World Cup (WHO, 2011: 5). When reactions to the rapid transmission of COVID-19 is considered, WHO's mass gathering definition has been considered by many agencies, and this is taken into account in determining the scope of this paper.

Such an aforementioned concentration of people in a specific location possesses some features in its very nature. These features position them as highly risky occasions, which might trigger adverse health events (WHO, 2015:82). Potential risk in such situations may include issues such as infections, non-communicable diseases, trauma and injuries, dehydration, hypothermia, terrorist attacks, drug and alcohol-related diseases (Yezli *et al.*, 2017).

Undoubtedly, with its fixed route and growing volume of participants, Hajj is one of the most spectacular and

significant co-existences of humanity. Each year, millions of people from every corner of the globe come to the same place at the same time to visit 'God's house'—the holy Ka'ba in Mecca—and participate in an emotional week of rituals that Muslims have been re-enacting for fourteen centuries (Bianchi, 2004:3). The growing number of believers of Islam, as a consequence, creates mass gatherings of travellers in particular religious places. Primarily in KSA, one may simply conclude in the light of these numbers that decision-makers must take charge of regulating dangerous risks, specifically in the congested Hajj season (Henderson, 2010:541).

For many centuries and in many regions in the world, epidemics took place in over, and over again repeating previous outbreaks; the current pandemic however, is even more widespread than its predecessors. Subsequently, there are various reactions from diverse countries where there are diverse social practices. One such social practice of an international nature, is a pilgrimage. When struggling against the pandemic, different approaches emerge in each situation, both in terms of countries and in terms of the specific management of specific subjects. In this respect, religious travels are a remarkable area to investigate. Accordingly, this paper aims to focus on the response of Turkey to the COVID-19 pandemic as a case study for an understanding of policy toward religious travel, particularly in terms of Hajj and Umrah pilgrimages in the days of the pandemic.

### **COVID-19 Pandemic and Mass Gatherings of Islam**

The first recorded COVID-19 case outside China was officially confirmed in Thailand on 13 January 2020 (WHO, 2020). Since that day, confirmed cases by country/region/sovereignty reached to 12,772,755 on 12 July 2020 (John Hopkins University, 2020). In only a couple of months, COVID-19 became widespread around the world (Blocken *et al.*, 2020:1). The records show the explosive growth of COVID-19 cases worldwide. People in public places should stay 2 meters apart from each other to decrease transmission. Decision-makers in public health policies suggested this distance as a secure limit. The other advanced measures encompass lockdowns and curfews to varying extents. The fundamental purpose of these precautions is to separate people and prevent

Table 1: Mass Gatherings in Islam		
2 <sup>nd</sup> Pillar Salaah	3 <sup>rd</sup> Pillar Sawm	5 <sup>th</sup> Pillar Hajj
Five days a time prayer (Salaah)	Tarawih prayer	Hajj pilgrimage
Friday prayer (Jumu'ah)	Iftar meal	Umrah pilgrimage
Eid-el-Fitr prayer		
Eid-el-Adha prayer		
Funeral prayer (Janazah)		

Source: Authors

their levels of daily physical contact (Abel & McQueen, 2020:231). These precautions have potential effects on religious travels or other religious practices, too.

Prayers are an essential part of the Islamic religion, and they are also a form of mass gathering for Muslims. When the high transmission rates of COVID-19 are considered, mass gatherings pose a dangerous risk for pandemic spread. For instance, in KSA, before the arrival of the virus to the country, all of the religious travellers are obligated to take particular vaccines. These are mainly against meningitis, yellow fever, tuberculosis, influenza and Ebola and the previous Coronavirus (which killed 300 people in Saudi Arabia). Therefore, at an early stage of COVID-19, gatherings and particularly mass gatherings of Islam were examined.

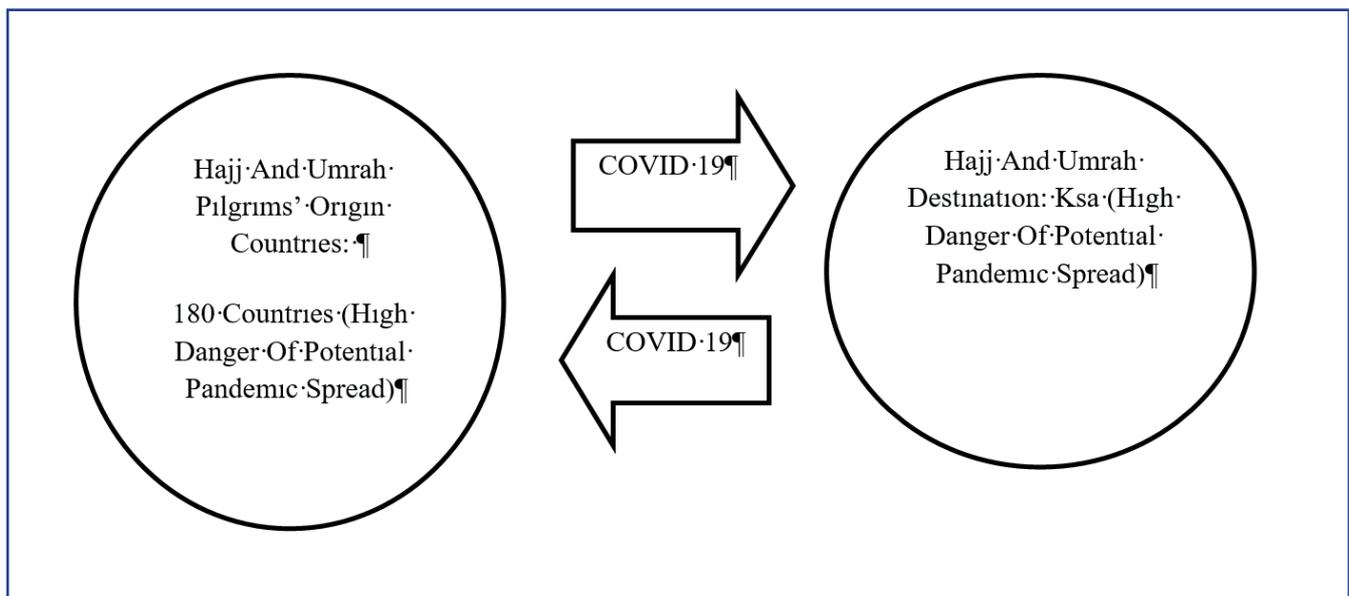
It is important to understand the Foundations of Islam, to appreciate the place of mass gatherings in the religion. Islam has five pillars, and these can be listed as follows:

1. Shahadah: declaring there is no god except God, and Muhammad is God's messenger.
2. Salaah: ritual prayer five times a day.
3. Zakat: giving 2.5% of one's savings to the poor and needy.
4. Sawm: fasting and self-control during the holy month of Ramadan.
5. Hajj: The pilgrimage to Mecca at least once in a lifetime if one is able (Oxford Islamic Studies Online, 2020).

Mass gatherings of Islam are shown in Table 1. They are listed corresponding to the pillars of Islam.

Salaah are the five daily obligatory prayers. Salaah can be performed either in the mosque or at home. Nevertheless, traditionally Friday prayer (Jumu'ah), Eid el-Fitr and Eid el-Adha prayers, are performed at the mosque mostly as mass gatherings. Funeral prayer are performed as a group during the burial of the dead. Tarawih prayers, and Iftar, the meal after sunset, both during the holy month

Figure 1: Adapted Tourism System in terms of Hajj and Umrah Pilgrimage and COVID 19 Pandemic Spread



Source: Adapted from Leiper's Tourism System (1991)

Table 2: Religious precautions taken against the COVID 19 pandemic by the Turkish Government <sup>W</sup>		
Date	Precaution	Daily Covid-19 Cases
10 JAN 2020	The Ministry of Health set up the Coronavirus Scientific Advisory Board, consisting of 26 members specialised in Chest Diseases, Infectious Diseases, and Clinical Microbiology. The number of board members increased later to 31 with the inclusion of expert academics in Virology, Internal medicine, and Intensive care medicine. The board works out guidelines for the treatment by medicals and measures to be followed by the public and updates them in the context of the disease's course in the country.	Total case: 0 Total death: 0 Discharged: 0
27 JAN 2020	Turkish citizens coming from Saudi Arabia did not experience any measures other than travellers from Europe (simply thermal camera check).	Total case: 0 Total death: 0 Discharged: 0
28 JAN 2020	The list of returning Umrah travellers (both organised by Presidency and the private travel agencies) was reported to the Ministry of Health. The process is co-monitored by the Ministry of Health and the Presidency) – brochures summarising what to do against COVID-19 were distributed to the participants. Disinfectant liquids were delivered to hotels.	Total case: 0 Total death: 0 Discharged: 0
05 FEB 2020	Official letter stressing the importance of the struggle against COVID-19 was written. This issue was also directed to the Religious Services Attaché's Office in KSA.	Total case: 0 Total death: 0 Discharged: 0
27 FEB 2020	Umrah departures from Turkey were prohibited unless indicated otherwise.	Total case: 0 Total death: 0 Discharged: 0
02 MAR 2020	The first recorded COVID 19 case in KSA. From this day forward, the Ministry of Health started hosting health personnel on returning Umrah flights. Medical examinations of passengers was realized. In suspicious situations, such passengers were taken to short-stay units and 14 days of quarantine was strongly recommended to the returners.	Total case: 0 Total death: 0 Discharged: 0
03 MAR 2020	Ministry of Health was informed about Umrah participants still in KSA.	Total case: 0 Total death: 0 Discharged: 0
04 MAR 2020	KSA ambassador visited the Presidency. Return flights were organised at an earlier date.	Total case: 0 Total death: 0 Discharged: 0
06 MAR 2020	The list of returning Umrah travellers (both organized by Presidency and the private travel agencies) was reported again to the Ministry of Health.	Total case: 0 Total death: 0 Discharged: 0
10 MAR 2020	First in-country case, traveller returning from Europe. The first coronavirus case in Turkey. The patient was placed in isolation at an undisclosed hospital, and family members of the patient were put under observation.	Total case: 1 Total death: 0 Discharged: 0
14 MAR 2020	The number of confirmed cases rose to six, with a pilgrim who recently returned from Umrah testing positive.	Total case: 6 Total death: 0 Discharged: 0
15 MAR 2020	5,392 out of 10,300 citizens who returned from Umrah were quarantined in state dormitories in Ankara, and 4,938 were quarantined in Konya. Tweet of the Minister of Health states that <i>'Those who returned from Umrah in previous dates, just like those who now return, underwent medical screening. Suspects were tested. Umrah visitors took their measures against the virus with the training given by our health teams during their travels. We follow those who have not yet completed the first 14 days in the country.'</i>	Total case: 18 Total death: 0 Discharged: 0
16 MAR 2020	A nationwide ban on prayer gatherings in mosques, including Friday prayers, due to the pandemic.	Total case: 47 Total death: 0 Discharged: 0
16 MAR 2020	Flight ban to the KSA.	Total case: 47 Total death: 0 Discharged: 0

17 MAR 2020	First death from the Coronavirus.	Total case: 98 Total death: 1 Discharged: 0
19 MAR 2020	Statement from The Directorate of Religious Affairs. Mosques to be kept closed on Friday.	Total case: 359 Total death: 4 Discharged: 0
27 MAR 2020	Friday prayers allowed in Bestepe National Mosque with a limited number of people determined by the Directorate of Religious Affairs.	Total case: 5698 Total death: 92 Discharged: 42
08 APR 2020	President of Religious Affairs, Ali Erbas, announced that Tarawih prayers to be performed during Ramadan would not take place in mosques during the pandemic.	Total case: 38226 Total death: 812 Discharged: 1846
29 MAY 2020	Mosques are open again.	Total case: 162120 Total death: 4489 Discharged: 125963
22 JUN 2020	KSA Hajj Ministry announced, <i>'It was decided to hold the pilgrimage this year with very limited numbers ... with different nationalities in the kingdom.'</i>	Total case: 188897 Total death: 4974 Discharged: 161563
07 JUL 2020	Suspension and refund will start 13 July 2020 for 2020 Turkish Hajj pilgrims.	Total case: 207897 Total death: 5260 Discharged: 185292
Source: Adapted from Presidency of Religious Affairs 2020a, 2020b; Ministry of Health, 2020; Ministry of Interior, 2020; Saudi Press Agency, 2020		

of Ramadan are important religious observances and are often realised as a community, with Muslim people gathering to pray and break their fast together. Hajj and Umrah pilgrimages are one of the largest mass gatherings in the world.

Many of these gatherings (although some of them do not fit the mass gathering definition) encapsulate a high risk in relation to the COVID-19 pandemic, its transmission and spread.

### **Cases, Deaths and the Precautions Taken Against COVID-19 by the Presidency of Religious Affairs in Turkey**

According to John Hopkins University Coronavirus Resource Centre (2020), the pandemic caused a total of 566,036 global deaths by 12 July 2020. When Hajj and Umrah pilgrimages are evaluated in Leiper's (1991) Tourism System, it is easy to understand the potential spread of the pandemic in terms of tourism systems' operating dynamics, as shown in Figure 1. The continuous movement from origin countries to the destination – in the case of Hajj and Umrah, the destination is Mecca – leads to a crucial risk both for the origin and for the destination. By its very nature, pilgrimage as a major example of crowd-generating travel, encompasses many forms of mass gatherings. The level of risk became evident as the death rates from COVID-19 began to increase.

The responses against the COVID-19 pandemic involving religious measures taken by the Turkish Government are listed in Table 2. What is clearly evident is the rapid spread of the virus in Turkey, and the impact of the resulting mitigation measures on both religious activities at home and on foreign pilgrimage.

In 2019, 77,772 pilgrims went to Hajj, and 50,455 pilgrims went to Umrah from Turkey (Presidency of Religious Affairs, 2019). This is a recorded total of 128,227 Turkish pilgrims to KSA. Hajj and Umrah pilgrimages are organised by the Presidency of Religious Affairs and the Association of Turkish Travel Agencies (TURS-AB-travel agencies) in Turkey.

The Presidency of Religious Affairs is in charge of the following issues (Turkish Official Newspaper, 2001):

- Monitoring and controlling all of the Hajj and Umrah travel organized by travel agencies in all phases, either national or international. Reporting the results of these operations to the relevant authorities;
- Determining the calendar, candidate application periods and types and other issues about Hajj and Umrah travel;
- Announcing the results of the travel agencies' application procedures to the Ministry of Tourism;
- Evaluating the applications of agencies and organising contracts,

- Selecting the chief of delegation and religious officers from the employees of the Presidency,
- Performing passport procedures of the chief of delegation and religious officers,
- Remunerating the chief of delegation and religious officers from the Foundation of Religious Affairs;
- Organising seminars in cities or townships;
- Performing all corresponding affairs related to Hajj and Umrah travel.

While the Presidency of Religious Affairs is a governmental body, the Association of Turkish Travel Agencies is a professional body. Public and private sector management of Hajj and Umrah pilgrimages had advantages in the fight against COVID-19 pandemic. Moreover, in March 2020, international arrivals to Turkey from the European Union (EU) and the United States of America (USA) is said to be around 357,000. When compared to this record, the arrivals from Umrah are around 21,000 (Presidency of Religious Affairs, 2020b).

## **Conclusion**

In the period since the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, there has been an intense struggle in the world to fight the pandemic. From the identified precautions taken against the COVID-19 pandemic by the Turkish Government, the governing of religious mass gatherings seems a critical measure in the fight against the pandemic, especially when its rapid spread rate is considered. The first conclusion that can be drawn from this initial study is that the management of tourism, especially religious tourism, is an essential issue in the war against the pandemic. Since the first COVID-19 case was recorded in Wuhan China, the motilities of people, generated by travel and tourism, helps the virus spread throughout the world.

Turkey took all necessary precautions in relation to Hajj and Umrah, to protect pilgrims against COVID-19: Thermal camera checks for international arrivals including arrivals from KSA; the list of returning Umrah pilgrimages reported to Ministry of Health; flyers and brochures summarising what to do against COVID-19 were distributed to the pilgrims in KSA; disinfectant liquids were delivered to the hotels where Umrah pilgrims were staying in KSA; Umrah departures from Turkey were prohibited; health personnel were assigned to the Umrah returning flights; 14 day period of quarantine was implemented for pilgrims returning from Umrah pilgrimage; a flight ban was applied to KSA; suspension and refund options were given to pilgrims.

Public and private sector partnership in the management of Hajj and Umrah pilgrimage in Turkey is crucial in the rapid response to the COVID-19 pandemic. In the case of both for the organisation of the returning pilgrims and the caring for infected pilgrims, such a partnership worked out very efficiently. The findings of this study may contribute to the examination of mass gathering management in risky periods such as pandemics.

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