
Song Niu & Xueyan Li

To cite this article: Song Niu & Xueyan Li (2022): Between Religious Obligation and Health Security: Saudi Hajj Governance Under COVID-19, Asian Journal of Middle Eastern and Islamic Studies, DOI: 10.1080/25765949.2022.2051936

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/25765949.2022.2051936

Published online: 15 Mar 2022.
RESEARCH ARTICLE


Song Niu and Xueyan Li

Middle East Studies Institute, Shanghai International Studies University, Shanghai, China

ABSTRACT
Hajj is one of the ‘Five Pillars’ in Islam. However, the large-scale cross-border movement of pilgrims around the world poses huge challenges over health security. Saudi Hajj governance is not only a need to maintain health security, but also to a large extent the sharia considerations related to the prerequisites for Hajj. In recent years, Saudi Arabia has gained rich experience in dealing with the challenges of SARS, MERS and other infectious diseases on Hajj. With the spread of the COVID-19 to Mecca in February 2020, Saudi Arabia has been facing serious challenges. Based on domestic and global epidemic prevention considerations, the Saudi government finally introduced the new policy on 2020 Hajj, which for the first time halted the Hajj of overseas Muslims, and only selected a very limited number of pilgrims within Saudi territory to perform Hajj. Saudi actually balances three major structural contradictions between maintaining health security and fighting the epidemic, and to a certain extent ensuring the rights of Muslims around the world. With the easing of the epidemic in Saudi Arabia in 2021, how to ensure that the Hajj can be performed in 2021 under the COVID-19 has aroused great attention from the international community. For the current review, Saudi new Hajj policy in 2020 has achieved due results. Saudi Arabia continued the scaled-down Hajj policy in 2021 due to the constant mutations of the coronavirus. The formation of Saudi Hajj policy under COVID-19 directly comes from the rich experience of Saudi Arabia in effectively maintaining the Hajj health security during the spread of different global epidemics, and fundamentally rooted in the hygiene and cleanliness within the Islamic civilisation.

KEYWORDS
Religious obligation; health security; COVID-19; hajj; Saudi Arabia

Hajj is one of the ‘five pillars’ in Islam. As the guardian of the two holy cities and the ‘Islamic leader’, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia regards it as the top priority to organise and ensure the safe conduct of annual Hajj. The annual Hajj has extraordinary sacredness and global influence. The Hajj is commanded in the Quran, as a religious obligation for Muslims, ‘And pilgrimage to the House is a duty unto God for mankind, for him who can find the way thither’ (Quran, 3:97). Hajj to Mecca is obligatory on
every financially and physically stable Muslim once in a lifetime, on the 8-12th of December (Dul Hijjah) every year in the Islamic calendar. Hajj maintains and develops the interaction and communication of Muslims around the world based on common beliefs. In addition, the Hajj, as the most important annual event in Saudi Arabia and an important carrier of the legitimacy of its regime, is of great significance for Saudi Arabia to maintain its status as the ‘Islamic leader’, to improve its international influence, and to demonstrate its global projection ability as a ‘religious great power’. Therefore, Saudi Arabia has spared no effort in Hajj management and strived to improve its ability to receive pilgrims. Even if it was previously affected by world wars, large-scale epidemics and the world economic crisis, it has never suspended Hajj.

At the beginning of 2020, the COVID-19 virus was spreading rapidly around the world. The Middle East is one of the hardest-hit areas of the global COVID-19 epidemic. The first country in the region to suffer a large-scale outbreak was Iran. Beginning in late February 2020, affected by the outbreak in Iran, Saudi Arabia and other Arab countries had successively seen confirmed cases. Since the first case of the COVID-19 in the country was diagnosed on 2 March 2020, the epidemic in Saudi Arabia has shown a trend of rapid spreading. As a result, Saudi Arabia became the country with the largest number of confirmed infections in the Middle East besides Iran, and it was facing extremely severe epidemic prevention and control situation. Since 1 April, the number of confirmed cases of COVID-19 in Saudi Arabia has been among the top 3 in the cumulative number of confirmed cases in Arab countries. According to data released by the Saudi Ministry of Health on 2 August 2020, there were a total of 278,835 confirmed cases of COVID-19 in Saudi Arabia, with a total of 2,400,81 cured cases, a total of 2,917 deaths, and 1,357 new cases in the past 24 hours.

Mecca is the first holy city in Islam, and Muslims from all over the world come to perform the year-round Umrah and annual Hajj. From February to March 2020, there had been large-scale infections due to the Umrah pilgrims in many countries. Mecca’s unique religious status and severe epidemic situation have exacerbated the spread of the COVID-19 in Saudi Arabia. In response to the special situation of holy cities, the Saudi government has previously implemented the targeted closure of the al-Masjid-al-Nabi and the suspension of Umrah, as well as the blockade of Mecca and Medina, until the implementation of a curfew policy in response to the severe epidemic situation. As the 2020 Hajj will begin in July, after evaluating the contradiction between the Hajj as a religious obligation and the serious health security risks that may be caused by the Hajj under the COVID-19, Saudi Arabia finally launched the special Hajj policy of the year in June 2020. The Hajj promotion poster issued by the Communication and Media Centre (CMC) of the Saudi Ministry of Foreign Affairs has a slogan on the top that reads ‘The health and safety of Muslims is our primary’.

---

1Since 629 AD, the Hajj has been cancelled nearly 40 times due to political reasons, war, epidemic and other reasons. M. Sneineh, ‘Plagues, politics and conflict: hajj cancellations over the centuries’, (1 April 2020), available at: https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/coronavirus-saudi-arabia-muslims-hajj-cancel-pilgrim.


3The health and safety of muslims is our primary’ [in Arabic], CMC of Saudi Ministry of Foreign Affairs, (27 June 2020), available at: https://www.mwllo.org.uk/health-and-safety-of-pilgrims-is-our-priority/.
Although Saudi Arabia has gained a lot of fruitful experience in Hajj sanitation governance since the 21st century, it still adopted a cautious attitude in the face of the raging COVID-19 and made full preparations to welcome the Hajj 2020.

1. Hajj as an Islamic religious obligation and the health security considerations within it

Hajj is one of the ‘Five Pillars’ of the Islam, as one of the obligations commanded by the Quran, which is distinct from other religious pilgrimage activities. As human beings move from fragmentation to integration, the Hajj has transformed from a fragmented private religious activity in some areas to a transnational religious movement led or funded by the governments of almost all countries in the world. That is, Hajj has evolved from a private product with Islamic characteristics in the early years (private supply, non-exclusive, non-competitive) to a global religious quasi-public goods (multiple supply, non-exclusive, competitive). After WWII, structural changes in the entire Islamic world in terms of population size, the revival of religious awareness, the convenience of long-distance transportation, and economic development have spawned a continuous increase in the absolute number of Hajj demand. The demand side and the supply side are the two aspects of Hajj products. The structural changes on the demand side will inevitably promote the corresponding adjustments on the supply side. In addition to expanding the capacity to accommodate a large number of pilgrims and the increase of the flow speed of pilgrims in Mecca, Saudi Arabia has also implemented structural reforms on the supply side of Hajj products through regulatory, sanitation based on sharia, economic, and technical measures, in order to encourage rational needs of the Hajj and restrain irrational needs.

In specific, the sanitation measures based on sharia. The Quran only stipulates in general that Hajj is one of the ‘Five Pillars’ of the Islam for Muslims. The major sectarian sects have formed a basic consensus on the physical and mental health and economic conditions that Hajj pilgrims should have. As far as the physical and mental health of pilgrims are concerned, from the perspective of international health governance, Saudi Arabia closely links the prevention and treatment of epidemic diseases with the acquisition of Hajj visas. Starting from the epidemics that broke out during the Hajj in the 1980s, Saudi Arabia has increased the health requirements of the pilgrims from the perspective of modern disease control. In fact, the health is not an isolated problem, behind it is the level of economic development. For those countries with relatively low levels of economic development, their national health governance has huge flaws. As pandemic diseases continue to lead to global public events and crises, Saudi Arabia strongly supports the WHO’s health requirements for cross-border population movements including Hajj. Thanks to the health requirements of the sharia and the relevant regulations of the WHO for the pilgrims, the Saudi government was able to carry out guided and explicit screening of pilgrims on the basis of the dual legitimacy conferred by the Islam and secular international organisation.

Although such requirements on the health of individual pilgrims and the quarantine system of the countries where the pilgrims are from have strong rationality, the imbalance of health power in international relations actually results in large disadvantages
for those regimes with lower level of economic development, political failures, frequent wars and conflicts, and those were not widely recognised by the international community. Even within the same country, the gap in economic development is often closely linked to the lag in health governance. According to the World Health Organisation, ‘1.2 billion people in the world live in extreme poverty (less than one dollar per day). Poverty creates ill-health because it forces people to live in environments that make them sick, without decent shelter, clean water or adequate sanitation.’

Nigeria is a major country for Hajj, but its health level is restricted by both natural conditions and economic development, and often faces the risk of ‘stigmatisation’ in the eyes of Saudi Arabia. ‘Saudi police routinely detain Nigerian pilgrims on suspicion of drug dealing, prostitution, smuggling, money laundering, the carrying of infectious diseases, vagrancy, pick-pocketing, and visa overstays’, ‘Saudi officials tried to impose a blanket ban on Nigerian pilgrims during outbreaks of meningitis and other diseases’, ‘Nigerians have tried to assuage Saudi concerns by adopting strict and costly screening measures for intended pilgrims’. The WHO has also paid great attention to the health security issues involved in the Hajj. In addition to the International Health Regulations (IHR), it released a large number of notifications and reports on this. The WHO has repeatedly notified Nigeria’s efforts in the quarantine of pilgrims. In September 2014, ‘Nigerian authorities put extra security measures in place to allay fears that Nigerian Muslims making the Hajj pilgrimage to Saudi Arabia would spread Ebola’, as the Ebola screening process taking place for the pilgrims at Nigeria’s international airport Hajj Terminal.

All in all, with the advent of the aviation era, Saudi Arabia has been in the midst of a difficult balance between ensuring the completion of the religious obligations of pilgrims around the world and ensuring the health security of Saudi Arabia as well as of that of global pilgrims. Especially in the context of the global spread of the COVID-19, Islamic countries, even those with better sanitary conditions, are facing tremendous pressure from the epidemic. Moreover, those Islamic countries with underdeveloped economies have suffered from more severely damages in their fragile health conditions under the impact of the COVID-19.

2. Saudi 2020 hajj policy and its international response under the COVID-19

On 22 June 2020, the Saudi Ministry of Hajj and Umrah issued a statement that the Hajj 2020 (Islamic calendar year of 1441) would continue, but only a small number of pilgrims of different nationalities within Saudi territory were allowed to participate. Saudi Minister of Hajj and Umrah Mohammed Banten revealed on 23 June that the number of Hajj pilgrims in Mecca in 2020 would be controlled at about 1,000, while

---

in 2019 there were approximately 2.49 million pilgrims performing the Hajj, of which 1.85 million are Muslims from outside Saudi Arabia. This is the first time in the history of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia to stop overseas Muslim Hajj. The Saudi Ministry of Hajj and Umrah and the two Holy Mosques conducted consultations and arrangements for the special Hajj in 2020. This historic decision made by the Saudi government is directly related to the spread of the COVID-19 in the world, in Saudi Arabia and in Mecca. In short, the core consideration of Saudi 2020 Hajj policy is to stop Muslims outside Saudi territory from going to Mecca to perform the Hajj, and to simplify the long-implemented Hajj model of pilgrims-selected inside and outside Saudi Arabia to that the selection of a very limited number of Muslims of various nationalities within Saudi territory for the Hajj. This unprecedented Hajj policy since the birth of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia has been understood by the WHO and most countries under the background of the global raging COVID-19, but there have also been voices of doubt in a few countries.

2.1. The specific content of Saudi 2020 hajj policy

Judging from the 2020 Hajj policy issued by the Saudi government, it mainly includes three aspects, namely, the selection method of pilgrims, the specific organisation method of Hajj, and the special requirements of Hajj under the epidemic.

First, the selection method of pilgrims. According to Saudi official regulations, the Hajj quota in 2020 will be allocated to Saudi citizens and foreign residents in Saudi Arabia according to different proportions, of which 30% will be allocated to Saudi citizens. The Hajj quota for Saudi citizens will be mainly given to medical staffs and others participating in the fight against the COVID-19, that is, only medical staffs and security personnel who have recovered from the COVID-19 infection can participate in the Hajj, and the government will select people who meet the health standards from the database of recovered people to perform the Hajj.

For foreign Muslims within Saudi territory, the Saudi government has announced different selection policies. First, the government has strict screening standards for foreigners applying for Hajj. The Saudi Ministry of Hajj and Umrah issued detailed standards: applicants must hold a Saudi residence permit; must be between 20-50 years old; have not performed the Hajj before; have not suffered from chronic diseases such as diabetes, hypertension, heart disease, or other respiratory diseases; have not been infected with the COVID-19 or have similar symptoms; have a polymerase chain reaction (PCR) medical test certificate; are required to receive a nucleic acid test during the epidemic; must hold a valid nucleic acid test certificate and a physical health certificate, and agree to compulsory home isolation for 14 days before and after the Hajj; In addition, applicants are required to maintain daily contact with the Ministry of Health through a mobile application in accordance with the plan of the Ministry of Health. Obviously, physical health is a major

---

9[‘Hajj 1441H is decided to take place this year with limited number of pilgrims from all nationalities residing in Saudi Arabia’ [in Arabic], Saudi Ministry of Hajj and Umrah, (23 July 2020), available at: https://www.my.gov.sa/wps/portal/snp/content/news/newsDetails/CONT-news-230620201.]
10[Accurate health criteria for choosing pilgrims for the hajj season 1441 AH’ [in Arabic], Saudi Ministry of Hajj and Umrah, (July 2020), available at: https://www.haj.gov.sa/ar/News/Details/12489.]
factor in whether foreigners in Saudi Arabia can participate in the Hajj 2020. Secondly, foreign Muslims first need to log on to the website of the Saudi Ministry of Hajj and Umrah to register themselves online. The website was open from 6-10 July. The first batch of successful applicants was announced on 12 July. At that time, the Saudi government would register successful applicants for Hajj qualifications and issue them Hajj permits. The final result was sent to the applicant’s mobile phone in the form of SMS. The Saudi Ministry of Health stated that if there is a non-compliance with health or legal requirements during the application process, the application will be deemed to be automatically cancelled. If the information provided by applicants is fake, the authority has the right to cancel the approval at any time.11

Second, the specific organisation method of the Hajj. Under the background of the epidemic prevention and control, the various departments of the Saudi government have cooperated with each other and worked together to advance detailed arrangements to ensure the safety of pilgrims in 2020, especially their health. Specifically, 1) the Saudi government has set up pilgrims gathering areas and checkpoints at the entry points of pilgrims to Mecca. These checkpoints are also equipped with veterinary teams to ensure the safety and health of livestock transported to the holy city. A pilgrim gathering centre with an area of 6,000 square metres was established in Mecca, and different groups of the pilgrims will be divided to stay in the different areas; the roads and tents of the two holy cities were maintained and repaired to ensure that there will be no more than 10 persons in every 50 square metres. From 19 July, the pilgrims holding the Hajj permit will be divided into many groups while one group with no more than 20 people. Each group will be equipped with a fixed bus and every pilgrim will have fixed seat. After they undergo an arranged medical examination, the pilgrims are finally allowed to enter the holy cities and the Hajj sites.

2) the Saudi Ministry of Interior issued a policy prohibiting people without a Hajj permit from entering the holy sites (Mena, Muzdalifah, and Jabal Arafat) during the Hajj. Violators will be punished. The statement of the Saudi Ministry of Interior on 13 July called on all Saudi citizens and foreign residents to abide by the 2020 Hajj instructions, stressing that security personnel will perform their duties during the Hajj to prevent those without a Hajj permit from entering the holy sites during the Hajj, and to impose sanctions on all offenders. The Saudi government will impose a fine of 10,000 riyals on any illegal pilgrims who enter the holy sites (Mena, Muzdalifah, and Jabal Arafat) without a Hajj permit. The penalty will be doubled as the violations are repeated their illegal activities. This is part of a series of penalties for violating measures to prevent the pandemic and spread of the COVID-19 virus during the upcoming Hajj.12

3) the National Centre for Disease Control and Prevention of Saudi Arabia, in cooperation with the Ministry of Health, issued special hygiene rules and regulations for the Hajj 2020, and made detailed regulations on the hygiene and health of the pilgrims during the Hajj: a) From the beginning to the end of the Hajj, all pilgrims must wear masks at all times, and they must dispose their masks in designated places in an

11Ibid.
appropriate way; b) the authority has designated separate residences for pilgrims, and formulated transportation routes and timetables suitable for their circumstances. Pilgrims must wait at gathering at places with eye-catching signs. When depositing and withdrawing luggage and dining in restaurants, they must keep a distance of 1.5 metres between two people; c) During the Hajj, if there is a pilgrim who has flu symptoms, such as high body temperature, cough, runny nose, sore throat or sudden loss of smell and taste, the Hajj activities of the pilgrim should be suspended until the symptoms disappear and the permission of a professional doctor is obtained.13

Third, the special requirements for Hajj under the epidemic. During the epidemic period, the Saudi government has special requirements for Hajj. 1) pilgrims must carry smart cards and sanitary bags issued by the Saudi government with them. The smart card contains the detailed personal information of the pilgrims and the precautions and management regulations related to the Hajj. The sanitary bag is equipped with worship blankets, disinfectants, masks and other necessary religious and disease prevention and control items. 2) the Saudi government will provide the pilgrims with water from the Bir Zam Zam and ordinary drinking water. All water tanks in the Masjid al-Haram and other Hajj sites will be dismantled. The pilgrims need to use special water cups issued by the government (including disposable water cups) during the Hajj. When the pilgrims perform the Ramyu al-Jimari, the stones must be pre-sterilized and packed in bags; when performing the Tawaf, the distance between the pilgrims should be at least 1.5 metres; when they participate in the Ramyu al-Jimari at the Jamarat Bridge, there should be no more than 50 pilgrims at a time, and the distance between every two pilgrims should be between 1.5-2 metres. In addition, pilgrims are not allowed to touch or kiss the sacred Kaab and the Black Stone. Security personnel should strictly supervise the pilgrims over their compliance with social distancing and other hygiene regulations.14

2.2. The international community’s response to Saudi hajj policy

The 2020 Hajj policy is a choice made by the Saudi government based on the severe situation of the COVID-19 at home and abroad and its long-term emphasis on national security, especially health security. Generally speaking, it has been understood and supported by most countries and organisations in the international community. Since the Saudi Ministry of Hajj and Umrah issued an emergency statement on the 2020 Hajj policy on 22 June, the WHO, the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) and countries including China, Bahrain, UAE, Oman, Egypt, Afghanistan, Yemen, Maldives, Sudan, Australia, Madagascar, Senegal, and Comoros, have expressed their support and recognition of Saudi arrangement for the 2020 Hajj. Religious institutions such as the Al-Azhar Mosque in Egypt immediately expressed their support and spoke highly of this policy, believing that the Saudi government’s arrangements for Hajj are very wise and conform to the provisions of sharia. It has not interrupted the Hajj as an

14 Ibid.
worship adhere to the commands of Allah, and at the same time safeguarded the principle of *sharia*, that is, protecting life. Moreover, it has guaranteed the safety and health of a small number of pilgrims.\(^{15}\) The China Islamic Association immediately issued the ‘Notice on the Suspension of Hajj Activities in 2020’ on 24 June, deciding to stop Chinese Muslims from going to Saudi Arabia to perform the Hajj in 2020.\(^{16}\) It showed understanding and supporting to the Hajj arrangements made by Saudi government in adhering to the spirit of the *Quran* to protect the lives of pilgrims, and called on Chinese Muslims to correctly understand the Hajj obligation under the COVID-19. But there are also voices of dissatisfaction with Saudi 2020 Hajj policy in some countries, such as Iran, Turkey, and Kuwait. The Iranian Hajj and Pilgrimage Organisation (HOP) stated that Saudi arrangements for Hajj affairs were not appropriate. The HOP issued an Arabic statement in IRNA, stating that ‘The Saudi government should have sought the views of other Islamic countries on hajj affairs, but the current arrangements have eclipsed the entire world.’ In an interview with *DW Arabia*, the Turkish writer and analyst, Hamzah Tekin, described the Saudi move as ‘irresponsible’, expressing ‘the supremacy of Saudi Arabia through the monopoly of the decision.’ And Tekin added, ‘We encourage every decision that preserves the health of people. But the sole decision to make about Hajj, whether negative or positive, is recorded against Saudi Arabia and not in its favour.’ The Turkish writer believes that ‘Riyadh should have consulted with all Islamic countries before the decision.’ Hakem Mutairi, secretary-general of the Kuwait National Assembly and leader of the Ummah Party, criticised the Saudi Hajj arrangements on his personal Twitter, describing the Hajj as a ‘picture’, criticising the Saudi government turned the *Masjid al-Haram* into a Saudi national museum with the visitors only chosen by the Saudi government.\(^{17}\)

3. Evaluation of the overall effectiveness of Saudi 2020 hajj policy under the COVID-19

Hajj management is a huge systematic project. Especially in the global epidemic situation, Hajj in 2020 face severe security risks and many complex issues that need to be resolved. Judging from the specific content and practice of the new Hajj policy urgently adopted by the Saudi government, it has generally ensured the smooth progress of Hajj activities. According to the actual situation, the Saudi government has made appropriate improvements to the long-term Hajj policy, which actually helps to balance the three major structural contradictions between the fight against the COVID-19 and the global Hajj: First, it balances the contradiction between maintaining global health security and ensuring the continuous development of Hajj; second, it balances the contradiction between preventing more COVID-19 infectors from being imported from abroad and guaranteeing over the Hajj rights of foreign Muslims around the world; third, it balances the contradiction between preventing the

---

\(^{15}\) ‘Saudi Arabia organizing the Hajj this year in limited numbers due to coronavirus is a wise decision’ [in Arabic], *Al Mal News*, (2 June 2020).


\(^{17}\) ‘Saudi Arabia, limiting hajj in light of corona, moves politics’ [in Arabic], *DW*, (24 June 2020).
continuous spread of the COVID-19 within Saudi territory and protecting the Hajj rights of Muslims of various nationalities within Saudi Arabia, which reflects the improvement of Saudi ability to govern the Hajj and to respond to the sudden crises. The formation of Saudi strict Hajj policy aiming at the maintenance of health security rooted in the hygiene and cleanliness within the Islamic civilisation. For example, Taqwa ‘not only determines the Islamic outlooks on life, values and morality, but also determines the Islamic outlook of hygiene and cleanliness’, ‘Islam implement a health system of hygiene and cleanliness from both internal and external, which is undoubtedly an important part of the Muslims’ supreme code Taqwa.’18 In addition, Saudi Arabia and other Islamic countries also strive to de-stigmatize the naming of infectious diseases, such as the dissatisfaction with the naming of MERS and the stigmatisation of COVID-19.19 In short, Saudi mode of COVID-19 combating is different from that of Western countries, and the Hajj policy under COVID-19 is also an important part of its health governance.

3.1. Saudi 2020 hajj policy balances the contradiction between maintaining global health security and ensuring the continuous development of hajj

During the Hajj season in 2020, the spread of the COVID-19 epidemic in the world and in Saudi Arabia has been rampant. It has caused more than 17.66 million infections worldwide20, posing a huge threat to the lives and health of people of all countries and posing a huge challenge to global public health. The COVID-19 has become another major public health emergency after SARS and MARS due to its rapid spread, wide range of infection, and difficulty in prevention and control. In the face of the epidemic, governments of various countries have adopted different epidemic prevention and control measures according to their own national conditions and achieved different results. In order to prevent and stop the spread of the COVID-19, many countries have to take measures: closed-end management, reduced social interaction, suspended work and business; closed borders, closed off flights, evacuated nationals, and suspended freight. The WHO held a regular press conference on the COVID-19 on 27 July 2020, stating that China, Canada, Germany, and South Korea had contained the large-scale epidemics, while Cambodia, New Zealand, and Rwanda had avoided the emergence of large-scale epidemics. The WHO Director-General Tedros Ghebreyesus highly praised Cambodia and other countries for taking effective epidemic prevention measures to avoid large-scale infections in their countries; calling on all countries to strengthen cooperation, participate in and listen to the needs of the community, and strengthen the basic measures of the containment against the spread of the COVID-19, such as finding, testing, caring for infectors, and tracing, isolating contacts. In addition, in order to prevent the spread of the virus, people are also required to maintain an appropriate physical distance, avoid crowding, avoid close contact in closed areas,

clean hands in time, and wear a mask as recommended.21 The epidemic in Saudi Arabia has spread rapidly in the first half of 2020. Saudi Arabia is one of the Middle Eastern countries with the largest number of confirmed infectors besides Iran. The epidemic situation in Saudi Arabia is extremely severe. The pilgrimage to Mecca of millions of Muslims is a large-scale population mobility, and the pilgrims come from all over the world. In this sense, the Hajj, as an annual religious gathering held by Muslims all over the world, whether in terms of the number of pilgrims or the countries and regions from which the pilgrims come, is with a huge risk of cross-infection because of the large number of population involved and the wide range of origins. It is not suitable to hold Hajj under the severe situation of the COVID-19. Prior to this, the Saudi government has announced the suspension of Muslims from various countries at home and abroad to perform Umrah in Mecca due to epidemic prevention considerations. There were rumours about the Saudi Arabia would cancel the Hajj in 2020. Countries such as Indonesia, Singapore, Thailand, Malaysia and Brunei had previously stated that their citizens will not participate in the 2020 Hajj.22

The Saudi government was facing the contradiction between maintaining global health security and ensuring the continuous development of Hajj. To this end, the Saudi government has introduced a special Hajj policy, restricting only a very limited number of Muslims of various nationalities within Saudi territory to perform Hajj. The combination of a small scale of Hajj with a limited number of Muslims in Saudi Arabia has become the best solution for the Saudi government to deal with this contradiction. The Saudi government will continue to assure Hajj activities under the condition of stronger epidemic prevention and control efforts, which guarantees the Muslims’ rights on Hajj, easing the consistent foreign doubts about Saudi Hajj management capabilities, and meanwhile reduces the health and security threats that Saudi Arabia will face due to the continued development of Hajj. This shows the effectiveness of Saudi health security reforms on Hajj and safeguards global health security. The 2020 Hajj policy is strictly a choice made by the Saudi government under special circumstances. To a large extent, it is a symbolic Hajj, which balances the contradiction between the maintaining global health security and ensuring the continuous development of Hajj.

3.2. Saudi 2020 hajj policy balances the contradiction between preventing more COVID-19 infectors from being imported from abroad and guaranteeing over the hajj rights of foreign Muslims around the world

The rapid spread of overseas epidemics has brought about continuously increased risks from abroad. Saudi Arabia is facing extremely severe and complex situation in preventing the ‘imports’ of COVID-19 from outside. Quick and effective prevention of the spread of epidemics from abroad is one of the important tasks of the Saudi government to fight the epidemic. It is also an important premise to ensure domestic

22‘Malaysia is the sixth country that will not send its citizens for Hajj due to ‘Corona’ [in Arabic], Al Khaleej, (11 May 2020).
security and the smooth progress of Hajj activities. To this end, the Saudi government has adopted the most comprehensive, strict, and thorough prevention and control measures to maximise the plugging of risk loopholes in order to prevent the ‘import’ of overseas epidemics. Saudi departments of foreign affairs, internal affairs, health, transportation, education, information, and customs maintain close contact with each other. They have established a joint prevention and control mechanism, implemented the strategy of ‘early detection, early reporting, early isolation, and early treatment’, and comprehensively strengthened prevention and control measures to protect the safety of people.

Specifically, on the one hand, Saudi Arabia has strengthened international cooperation. As the rotating presidency of the G20, Saudi Arabia proposes to hold a video emergency meeting of G20 leaders, proposing to strengthen international cooperation, put aside disputes about ideology, and work together to build the most rigorous joint prevention and control network to learn from the ‘Chinese Way’ and select the overall solution of ‘Fire Eye’ Laboratory of China’s BGI Group to launch the national COVID-19 nucleic acid detection project. In addition, Saudi Arabia has strengthened information exchanges with MENA countries, deepened anti-epidemic cooperation, and jointly safeguarded regional and global health security.

On the other hand, Saudi Arabia has adopted strict external prevention and control measures. 1) it suspends air and sea transportation with many countries, cancels international passenger flights; 2) It implements entry and exit control measures, strictly carries out entry and exit quarantine, and suspends all land, sea and air customs ports for export of medicines and medical supplies (suspends the export of medical supplies and equipment for the prevention and control of the COVID-19 for commercial purposes, including medical masks, goggles, protective clothing, etc.); 3) it stops pilgrims outside Saudi territory from travelling to Mecca, suspends the Umrah, closes the Masjid-al-Madinah, and evaluates on a regular basis according to the relevant data of the health departments; 4) it implements centralised isolation measures. Entry-personnel at all ports are quarantined for centralised isolation, nucleic acid testing, and luggage clearance. Customs, border inspections, airports, airlines and other units implement safeguard plans and operating procedures, and coordinate and cooperate to ensure orderly and smooth work; 5) it introduces a penalty system. Those who conceal or evade quarantine observation, COVID-19 nucleic acid testing and COVID-19 antibody testing will be held accountable in accordance with the law. Those violating the decisions and regulations issued by the relevant departments for the prevention and control of COVID-19 is a felony and will be held criminally responsible; 6) it

---


26. Saudi Arabia suspends umrah for citizens and residents due to corona’ [in Arabic], Al Jazeera, (3 April 2020).

27. Saudi Arabia: sanctions list limiting gatherings to counter the spread of corona’ [in Arabic], Al-Arabiya, (7 March 2020).
establishes a real-time monitoring system and an emergency response centre for real-time monitoring.

The above measures by the Saudi government is to prevent the spread of the epidemic from overseas based on the overall situation of the country, aiming to create a relatively safe environment within the country. In the previous Hajj management, Saudi Arabia has always implemented a policy of assigning quotas to foreign pilgrims based on nationalities, and has not imposed restrictions on other factors (such as skin colour, occupation, sectarian background, etc.) other than the nationality and strict health standards of the pilgrims. This is the embodiment of Saudi adherence to the value of ‘equality and justice’ in Quran, making the Hajj a strong international representation. In the severe situation of the COVID-19 and the pressure brought by the spread of the epidemic from outside, Saudi Arabia has introduced the 2020 Hajj policy after careful evaluation, and for the first time stopped overseas Muslims from coming for Hajj. Although this policy is understood by most countries, there are also many voices of opposition in the international arena. There has been controversy regarding Saudi Hajj management and the allocation of Hajj quota. Muslims from various countries must apply in advance if they want to perform Hajj. They may experience a long wait of several years, which often consumes a lot of time and money. The measures taken by the Saudi government to cancel the Hajj of overseas Muslims may cause chaos in the existing Hajj system, and cause huge losses to some overseas pilgrims, which is likely to result in direct and widespread confrontation. In the past, there have been precedents in various countries that when the Hajj activity failed to proceed smoothly, the pilgrims demanded the Saudi government to compensate for monetary losses and lift the strict restrictions on Hajj.

In order to ensure the rights to Hajj by foreign Muslims around the world, the Saudi 2020 Hajj policy specifically allocates 70% of the domestic Hajj quota to foreign Muslims in the country. There are no restrictions on nationality, colour, occupation, sect, etc., and foreigners in Saudi Arabia are encouraged to file application on their own for the quota to perform Hajj. For application, the key consideration for approval is the physical health condition of the applicants. In addition, the Saudi government releases special health rules and policies, which has made detailed regulations on the health requirements of pilgrims during the Hajj. This shows that the focus of Saudi government’s new arrangements for the Hajj under the epidemic is based on health and safety. On the premise of ensuring health security, Saudi Arabia tends to allocate the majority of Hajj quotas to foreign Muslims within the country instead of own nationals. This has given the special Hajj in 2020 of relatively broad nationality representation, which also promotes the democratisation of Hajj and guarantees rights of the pilgrims. This is a reasonable arrangement made by the Saudi government to balance the contradiction between preventing more COVID-19 infectors from being imported from abroad and guaranteeing over the Hajj rights of foreign Muslims around the world.

### 3.3. Saudi 2020 Hajj policy balances the contradiction between preventing the continuous spread of the COVID-19 within Saudi territory and protecting the Hajj rights of Muslims of various nationalities within Saudi Arabia

Hajj is a religious festival in the Islamic world. Under the condition of ensuring effective prevention and control over the epidemic, how to deal with large-scale population
gatherings of Muslims of various nationalities within the country, and how to minimise the risk of infection as much as possible, so that the Hajj activities can be carried out relatively smoothly, are the religious mission that the Saudi government must consider and complete by the end of July 2020. According to the sharia, the Hajj cannot be cancelled, but the domestic epidemic must be strictly prevented from spreading across regions. This has caused great difficulties for the Saudi government to balance the contradiction between preventing the continuous spread of the COVID-19 within Saudi territory and protecting the Hajj rights of Muslims of various nationalities within Saudi Arabia, and to formulate a series of prevention and control measures.

To cope with this difficulty, the Saudi government has first introduced a series of policies to strictly control the domestic epidemic. 1) Strengthens the entry-exit control of Riyadh, Mecca and Medina. Saudi Arabia will establish security posts to ensure strict entry-exit access to these cities, and operate checkpoints for epidemic prevention and control in these cities from 26 March 2020. 28 2) Strengthens the control over citizens, prohibit people from 13 provinces from leaving their province at will, and suspend employees of government departments and private industry from going to work in centralised offices. 3) Blocks traffic between provinces and cities, and suspend international passenger flights and domestic passenger flights, buses, taxis, and railway operations; 4) Strengthens penalties: Prosecute, fine or even imprison individuals who post on social media about violations of curfew regulations; impose fines and penalties on those who gather in violation of the rules.29 As of the end of April 2020, the Saudi government has implemented a policy that prohibits going out all day in cities and regions such as Mecca, Medina, Riyadh, Tabuk, Dammam, Dhahran, Hofuf, Jeddah, Taif, Qatif and Al Khobar. The Saudi government provides various service information, related websites and apps, for example, the applications for trans-provincial travel due to urgent need should be filed at the website: tanaqul.ecloud.sa/login. After entering personal information, the applicants write down the cause of urgent need and provide relevant certificates. After the review by relevant departments, they will send a SMS to the applicants to confirm the travel route if their applications have been approved. If the relevant conditions are not met, the application will be rejected.30 In addition, the Saudi Grand Mufti and the Chairman of the High Commission for Religious Scholars, Abdul Aziz bin Abdullah, called on the Saudis to abide by the government’s anti-epidemic regulations and worship at home.31 Prevention of the epidemic spread within Saudi Arabia is the most fundamental anti-epidemic measure of the Saudi government, and the strong implementation of the above measures has effectively reduced the further spread of the COVID-19 in Saudi provinces and central cities.

28‘Determining the entry and exit prevention control centers for Riyadh, Makkah and Madinah’ [in Arabic], Saudi Ministry of Interior, (26 March 2020), available at: https://www.moi.gov.sa/wps/portal/Home/Home/home/dp-home?ut/p/z0/fY6xD0lwEIZfhaUjuUtRomPjAEokMS5KXzqKjVSIFWax7F3eVy9_1fLj99qIEBoOeqd9N0a-aft3madilfcg2eb6gBZYrRLYt2bhYY4jVCpcya8scapj4O6szg66kkagmFtbaeiOTQukPBAAgANb1_080m1aOadRGloMsYkSgixYwvnv67PQF+ckG0gl/.
29‘Cross-regional pass permit’ [in Arabic], Mhtwyat, (22 March 2020).
30‘Saudi Arabia: total curfew in cities, including Riyadh and Jeddah’ [in Arabic], Alwatan News, (7 April 2020).
In May 2020, due to the effective prevention and control measures in the previous months and the cooperation of the Saudis, the epidemic situation in Saudi Arabia showed signs of improvement, which laid a good foundation for organising the Hajj for Muslims within Saudi territory. However, pilgrims in Saudi Arabia are distributed throughout the country, involving cross-regional population movements, which will inevitably pose a huge challenge to the existing results of epidemic prevention and control. According to religious tradition and historical experience, a large number of pilgrims will flood into Mecca in July 2020, and during the Hajj period, the prevention and control pressure of relevant Saudi departments will also reach a peak. In this regard, the Saudi government continues to implement targeted measures, focussing on epidemic prevention and control while organising Hajj, trying to minimise the impact of Hajj on health security. On the one hand, the Saudi government continues to implement more flexible and normalised epidemic prevention and control measures. In specific: 1) it dynamically adjusts curfew and other prevention and control measures. The Saudi Ministry of Interior adjusts curfew and other prevention and control measures in time based on the actual needs, reduces the degree of controls in some towns and regions, and allows people free to go out within a limited time. For example, it continues to allow citizens to go out during the eight hours in daytime in all cities and regions except Mecca (from 9 a.m. to 5 p.m.), while emphasising that citizens and residents must take relevant precautions; 2) it continues to block traffic between provinces and cities, put forward specific requirements on domestic flight travel guide, and apply protective measures for passenger boarding at airports. 3) it strengthens monitoring. Relevant departments will continue to monitor some areas and cities where the epidemic has rebounded (such as Jeddah and Riyadh) in order to take appropriate measures to control the epidemic in time. 4) it strengthens the punishment of foreign residents. The Saudi Hajj security department announced that any foreign residents in Saudi Arabia who do not wear masks or maintain social distancing will be deported and barred from entering the country.32

On the other hand, detailed regulations have been made for performing Hajj in Mecca. In the context of strengthening the strict prevention and control measures for Mecca, special requirements have been made for the organisation of Hajj activities and the health of pilgrims. Specifically: 1) The various departments of the Saudi government strengthen cooperation, set up gathering areas and checkpoints at each entry point, divide the pilgrims into groups, and arrange all matters for the pilgrims. 2) it strengthens the health protection of pilgrims. For example, pilgrims must wear masks, live and eat meals in a separate way, and ensure safe distance during Hajj rituals.

In short, the Saudi government adopts strict entry-exit control and implementation of targeted epidemic prevention policies for Saudi citizens and foreign residents within Saudi territory, combines entire domestic prevention and control over individuals with that over the cities, and flexibly implements control measures based on specific situations. This is an effective prevention of spread of the COVID-19. All these measures are aimed to ensure that individuals and overall healthcare meet the standards, and to prepare for the smooth progress of the Hajj 2020, that is, preventing the continuous

32’Saudi Arabia: deportation of any resident who does not adhere to the muzzle and other measures’, RT, (6 April 2020).
spread of the COVID-19 within Saudi territory and protecting the Hajj rights of Muslims of various nationalities within Saudi Arabia.

4. Conclusion

From the perspective of the history of the third Saudi state since its establishment, the Saudi royal family has been committed to ensuring the continuity and safety of the Hajj since the capture of Mecca, which is an important source of the legitimacy of its rule. Mecca is the core of the global Hajj network, while Saudi Arabia is at the centre of the country-based global Hajj network. The relationship between Hajj and health security is not a new topic. Since the birth of Hajj, health security issues have been there. In order to ensure the democratisation and rationalisation of Hajj in the era of globalisation, Saudi Arabia has actively promoted the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation to play a practical role in global Hajj governance, so as to reduce the criticism and questioning of Saudi Arabia on the issue of Hajj quota allocation by various countries. In addition, in order to ensure the smooth development of Hajj which is a transnational religious population flow with a huge scale and consisted of people from all over the world in a specific period of time, Saudi Arabia has also actively strengthened cooperation with the WHO to improve the level of global Hajj health governance. Hajj is performed on an annual base. Saudi Arabia obtains huge political and economic benefits from Hajj, but also bears the inevitable pressure on health security at the same time. It is the key goal of Saudi Arabia to prevent Mecca from becoming a global ‘transit station’ for the infectious virus. In the 21st century, Saudi Arabia, together with the international community, has achieved remarkable results in dealing with the imported virus SARS and the indigenous virus MERS during the Hajj. Although Saudi Arabia has rich experience in Hajj health governance, the global outbreak of the raging COVID-19 in the first half of 2020 still caught it off guard. After scientific assessment of the global and domestic epidemics, Saudi Arabia finally made the difficult decision to suspend foreign Muslims from going to Saudi Arabia for Hajj. Even so, Saudi Arabia is not cancelling the Hajj, as a cancellation will be questioned by sharia. Instead, it uses reasonable methods to select Saudi citizens and foreign Muslims within Saudi territory, which covers a very limited number of pilgrims, to perform the Hajj. Saudi Arabia’s decision is based on the initial results it has achieved in the prevention and control of the domestic epidemic, laying the foundation for the cross-regional movement of Muslims within Saudi territory and gathering in Mecca. Saudi Hajj policy of balancing the dual demands for religious obligation and health security during the COVID-19 has played a positive role in meeting the religious and emotional needs of Muslims around the world and cooperating the overall situation of global fighting against the epidemic. With the improvement of the situation of the COVID-19 in many countries in 2021, especially when the vaccine production and vaccination of the COVID-19 have reached a scale, there will be a positive signal for the 2021 Hajj. The interference of ‘vaccine nationalism’ in the international community and the rejection of the attributes of vaccines as international public goods will cause

new inequalities in the global fighting against the epidemic, which will also affect Saudi Hajj policy in 2021 and cause new troubles for it. Saudi Arabia continued the 2020 Hajj policy in 2021, just the number of pilgrims has expanded, and insisted that the COVID-19 vaccine is a necessary condition for Hajj. In short, the COVID-19 has further intensified the pressure that Saudi Arabia faces due to the Hajj, which leads to the hard choice between religious obligation and health security. Saudi Arabia has also continued to advance on a prudent basis the adjustment and optimisation of Hajj governance under the COVID-19, based on its rich experience both in religious and health governance.

**Disclosure statement**

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

**Funding**

This essay is funded by the program ‘Evolution of Middle East Politics and Momentous Changes Unseen in a Century’ of the Innovation Team of Shanghai International Studies University; the program ‘Impacts of Islam on the Contemporary International Relations’ by the National Social Science Foundation of China [21BZJ054], and the project ‘Study on the Hajj Politics under the Perspective of Modern International Relations’ of Fok Ying Tung Education Foundation [161086].