

Article

Reimagining the Hajj

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Abstract: Throughout the Middle East and the Islamic world, political and religious leaders are being pulled into sharpening debates over rival approaches to reforming the Hajj. For at least two decades, Hajj controversies have deepened with rising death tolls among the pilgrims and with soaring complaints about corruption and incompetence against pilgrimage managers in Saudi Arabia and dozens of other countries. Demands for Hajj reform are reaching new peaks after Saudi officials recently revealed stunning details of the scope and magnitude of pilgrim fatalities during the last 14 years. The Saudi data leave little doubt that the quality of care for Hajjis varies enormously depending on several key factors which policy makers and religious leaders must address with greater honesty and determination. Year in and year out, the most vulnerable pilgrim populations are poor people, women, and children from across Africa and Asia as well as foreign workers, refugees, and illegal migrants living in Saudi Arabia. Most of the current proposals for Hajj reform ignore these high-risk groups. Saudi planners focus on promoting year-round pilgrimage to boost tourism revenues and high-end infrastructure. In most other countries, government-run Hajj agencies are busy cutting market-sharing deals with private business cartels and their political patrons. The combined effect of these policies is to weaken what remains of already inadequate regulations that are vital to the protection of all Hajjis. Meanwhile, support is also growing for more sweeping proposals to reimagine and reinvent the Hajj instead of fine-tuning the status quo. Some of these reforms are particularly likely to test the ingenuity and influence of leaders from all backgrounds because they challenge longstanding custom. A few of the most unconventional suggestions include lengthening the Hajj season to several months as well as linking the Hajj to pilgrimages and festivals of other world religions throughout the year.

Keywords: Hajj; women's issues; migration; pilgrimage; refugees; international regimes

1. Reimagining the Hajj

Demands for wide-ranging reforms of Hajj management have been mounting for several decades. Year after year, rising death tolls and endless scandals highlight the failures of the current system created by Saudi Arabia and governments in a handful of the largest Muslim nations. (Bianchi 2016).

Reform proposals have become increasingly ambitious in scope and urgent in tone. Earlier calls to loosen the quota system and phase out the most dangerous rituals have given way to more daring suggestions for lengthening the pilgrimage season and diverting excess Hajj demand toward a year-round Umrah traffic sweetened with tourist visas allowing Muslims to travel—and to shop—anywhere in Saudi Arabia (oxfordbusinessgroup.com 2014; RT News 2016).

Religious authorities play only a modest—and reactive—role in these debates compared to the bureaucrats, travel agents, politicians, and interest groups that run the day-to-day negotiation and implementation of Hajj policy around the world. Nevertheless, religious leaders will be pressured to take greater responsibility for guiding Hajj reform as the system continues to falter and the rival

remedies generate deeper divisions—internationally and domestically—between nations and citizens vying for the enormous power, wealth, and prestige that flow from pilgrimage enterprises.

For many years it seemed that the best path to reform was through internationalizing the Hajj—replacing Saudi claims of exclusive sovereignty over the holy cities with collective management by all Muslim countries under the auspices of the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC). When Saudi rulers were fending off the challenges of the Islamic Revolution in Iran, they endorsed internationalization and even agreed to power-sharing arrangements with large Sunni countries that went far beyond Hajj-related issues. However, after Ayatollah Khomeini passed away, Iran gradually ended its pilgrimage boycott and the threat to Saudi primacy appeared to recede (Bianchi 2004).

Sensing a new lease on life, the Saudis backtracked on pledges to foster an international regime for Hajj management (Amiri 2011). Instead, they embarked on a rapid expansion of the pilgrimage sites and a thorough remake of Mecca’s landscape—demolishing most of the city’s ancient quarters and working class districts and replacing them with luxury hotels and shopping malls that were beyond the reach of ordinary pilgrims. In the meantime, the dangers and tragedies of the Hajj reached greater levels and sparked deeper outrage. The more lavishly the Saudis spent and the more grandly they built, the more disastrous the results—greater crowding, newer choke points, and higher body counts (Economist 2015).

Today, the neglected crises of Hajj management are back with a vengeance—aggravated by more strident Iranian challenges to Saudi authority throughout the Middle East and by deepening cracks in Saudi society that threaten the stability of the regime (Law 2015; Dorsey 2017). Moreover, by adopting a fiercely unilateral posture on pilgrimage policy, the Saudis have alienated all of the large Sunni countries that helped them negotiate international arrangements as a face-saving defense against the initial wave of Iranian criticism thirty years ago.

Hence, Saudi rulers are more isolated than ever precisely when they face the greatest opposition at home and abroad. The royal family’s self-appointed prerogative as Custodian of the Two Holy Cities—supposedly a bulwark of their legitimacy—has become their Achilles’ heel drawing fire from all quarters including former allies and dependents (Fisk 2016).

In this environment, internationalizing the Hajj may no longer be enough even if the Saudis once again come to view it as a necessary evil. The reformist momentum is shifting steadily from trying to fine-tune the Hajj to reimagining it altogether. Instead of seeing the Hajj merely as an annual religious festival, Muslims increasingly regard it as a permanent worldwide network of trade, migration, and political competition—a multifunctional and hierarchical system riddled with injustices and abuses that no state or coalition can address independently.

Perceptions of the Hajj as a global nexus of labor, goods, and power are widespread not only in the Middle East, but particularly in the Asian and African countries that have contributed the greatest number of workers to Saudi Arabia and its neighbors while suffering the highest casualties in repeated pilgrimage disasters. Demands for holistic reform of the Hajj are bound to soar as the Islamic world absorbs the stunning details of multi-year death rolls recently made public by whistle blowers in the Saudi Ministry of Health (Al-Akhbar 2016).

The Saudi records are breathtaking and heart breaking. They chronicle 14 years of pilgrim deaths in Mecca, listing the names, nationalities, genders, ages, and dates of death for 90,276 victims from more than 100 countries. The rolls take up 3100 pages, covering every day from 2002 through 2015 and including both Hajjis and Umrah pilgrims from overseas as well as within Saudi Arabia (Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, Ministry of Health 2016).

The strongest correlates of Hajj mortality are poverty and youth. High Hajj death rates also appear in countries where women comprise a high proportion of the pilgrim population and when the Umrah—the shorter and less regulated pilgrimage that can be performed year round—is growing in popularity. Female fatalities are closely tied to cultural and ethnic differences as well as economic inequalities. In addition to poor, young, and female Hajjis, heightened vulnerability appears among migrants, refugees, and Muslim minorities in many predominantly non-Muslim societies.

The Saudi whistle blowers have allowed us to glimpse the greater forces that drew these multitudes to Mecca and pushed them too soon into a world beyond. At a minimum, they force us to reconsider our most basic assumptions about the Hajj—as it should be ideally, as it is lived in today's reality, and as it might become in a better future.

2. Competing Views of the Hajj and Umrah

In Islamic teachings, there is little doubt that the Hajj is doctrinally and spiritually a supreme act of worship, which cannot be substituted by other pilgrimages to Mecca or any other sacred place. Hajjis are instructed to concentrate as fully as possible on devotion and purification, shunning all distractions that might cause God to question the sincerity of their intentions and to withhold the blessing and mercy that are the pilgrims' just rewards. In addition, the simplicity of the ubiquitous *ihram* dress constantly reminds Hajjis that, in God's eyes, all Muslims and all humans are equal regardless of worldly distinctions among ranks, classes, races, genders, and ages.

Naturally, the reality has always been more complex and far more mundane, frequently contradicting the core values of the Hajj and of Islam in general. Pilgrims commonly combine the Hajj and Umrah, at the same time or in sequence, and many people perform both devotions multiple times if they have the means and feel the need. Whenever possible, travellers to Mecca join worship to non-religious activities such as business, tourism, study, and job seeking (Bianchi 2007). Crime is commonplace: smuggling, pick pocketing, vagrancy, human trafficking, prostitution, illegal migration, resettlement in the floating underground of foreigners connecting the Persian Gulf countries with towns and villages across Asia and Africa (Bennafla 2005; Ghana Review International 2012).

Nowadays, the Hajj and Umrah are virtually fused into a year-round cluster of parallel economies—each with its multiple segments and price points—enlisting legal authorities when possible and defying them when necessary (Nehme 2016). Because the quota system has capped Hajj numbers, new growth in pilgrimage traffic has steadily shifted to the Umrah where arrangements are dominated by loosely regulated private sector travel companies. At the same time, most state-sponsored Hajj agencies across the Islamic world have gradually dissolved their monopolies, handing over the more lucrative markets to politically connected firms in tourism, transportation, and financial services.

This combination of unrestrained growth and haphazard privatization has created a regulatory nightmare for all countries with substantial Hajj and Umrah pilgrimages. It is an environment that breeds glaring hierarchy and endemic favoritism. Instead of being united in worship and equal in stature, pilgrims are divided by the strength of their patrons and the size of their money belts—with potentially fatal consequences for those at the bottom of the pecking order (Bianchi 2014).

Saudi Arabia's proposed remedy is to open its doors to Muslim tourists who want to travel beyond the traditional limits of the holy cities in the Hejaz. In this view, the Hajj crisis creates an opportunity to kill several birds with one stone. Saudi technocrats believe they can not only reduce the pressures of peak season bottlenecks, but also stimulate the rapid rise of a domestic tourism industry.

According to Saudi planners, higher Hajj revenues will spill over and prime the pump for much higher earnings during the longer Umrah periods. The presumed ripple effects will stimulate cross-investments in hospitality, construction, merchandizing, and services in multiple regions. Saudi Arabia's ever-elusive goal of economic diversification will come within reach just in time to cushion the country against the looming dangers of falling oil prices and slower growth in China (RT News 2016; Carey and Nereim 2017).

Even though most of Saudi Arabia still lacks the local infrastructure and experience to absorb foreign travelers demanding international standards, the government already has created a global feeder network of pre-approved travel agencies specially licensed to expedite cash-paying pilgrim-tourists. In nearly every country, intending pilgrims can access the website of the Saudi embassy to conduct their own market research and find referrals to recommended companies near their homes.

In a nutshell, the Saudi vision is a global franchise system of government licensed enterprises handling the high end of a consolidated Hajj-Umrah market generating year-round revenues from trade and tourism across every continent with new tributaries reaching into previously isolated corners of the Kingdom itself. It would leave a smaller and lower-end market of Hajjis to state-subsidized agencies in countries where government bureaucrats formerly monopolized the pilgrimage business. The remnants of the once mighty Hajj Directorates would provide bare bones services for economy-minded customers willing to stand in line for years or try their luck in quota lotteries.

By deepening the worldwide privatization of pilgrimage services, the Saudi Arabian government aims to put the entire industry under its protection and use the profits to bolster the Kingdom's struggling economy and political system. These policies threaten to undermine what is left of the regulatory resources the international community needs to rein in a pilgrimage system that is out of control. Perhaps some officials in the Saudi Ministry of Health arrived at similar conclusions before they leaked the extraordinary information we examine next.

3. The Correlates of Death in Mecca

Between 2002 and 2015, about 23 million overseas pilgrims came to Mecca for the Hajj. During the same period, about 30,000 overseas pilgrims died in all of the three month intervals that define the Hajj season—the Hijri months of Dhu al-Qi'dah, Dhu al-Hijjah, and Muharram. Another 29,000 foreign pilgrims perished during the remaining nine months that comprise the longer Umrah season. In addition, among the more than 11 million Hajjis who came from inside Saudi Arabia, over 31,000 died in Mecca—about 10,000 during the Hajj months and 21,000 over the Umrah months.

The most populous Muslim countries sent the largest delegations of Hajjis and accounted for the highest numbers of deaths, but at widely varying rates of mortality (deaths per 10,000 pilgrims). Eight countries stand out as the leading overseas sources of Hajjis (75 percent) and Hajj-related fatalities (73 percent). For the entire 14-year period, Iran and Turkey had the lowest death rates whereas Egypt and India had rates that were three to four times higher. In between, were Indonesia, Pakistan, Bangladesh, and Nigeria with death rates clustering slightly above the international average of 13 victims per 10,000 Hajjis (Table 1).

Table 1. Death Rates and Demographic Profiles for the 8 Largest Sources of Hajjis, 2002–2015.

Country	Hajj Death Rate	Total Hajjis	Hajj Deaths	Umrah Deaths	GDP Per Capita	Average Age	Female Percent	Umrah Deaths Percent
Iran	6.30	1,173,307	738	469	17,346	66.15	20.19	38.86
Turkey	7.20	1,291,338	935	483	20,420	66.90	27.91	34.06
Indonesia	15.83	2,770,000	4386	1451	11,149	63.67	37.65	24.86
Pakistan	16.80	2,127,112	3579	4413	4906	59.16	28.54	55.22
Bangladesh	17.28	1,032,088	1783	1836	3629	58.32	16.14	50.73
Nigeria	17.60	1,123,000	1988	3001	6121	54.24	46.28	60.15
India	18.91	1,480,186	2803	939	6187	64.40	28.11	25.09
Egypt	23.52	1,000,500	2353	3141	11,803	59.74	33.88	57.17

Source: Author's computations of raw data from [Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, Ministry of Health \(2016\)](#).

When trying to explain disparities in the performance of Hajj agencies, it is always helpful to begin by comparing their countries' relative living standards. Economic conditions directly influence the level of public resources available for government support of pilgrimage as well as the disposable income and health of the people they serve. More prosperous countries can afford to invest in agencies that screen, educate, and care for their clients, identifying at-risk populations and ensuring they receive timely medical attention. In a similar vein, travelers who are well-off can upgrade to safer and healthier accommodations in the public sector market or splurge on the frills and add-ons touted by competing private firms.

Indeed, per capita gross domestic product is a powerful predictor of the most basic goal of Hajj management—the ability to bring their charges back home safe and sound (Figure 1). Among

the largest Hajj programs, Turkey and Iran are the best performers year in and year out and they also enjoy the highest income levels. Egypt's performance is much weaker than its living standard would suggest, particularly compared to Indonesia. On the other hand, Bangladesh and Pakistan are slightly more effective than India and Nigeria at similar income levels. Thus, even though adequate material resources are probably a necessary condition for effective management, there is still plenty of remaining variance to be accounted for—in some cases, by the experience and know-how of the Hajj organizations and, in other cases, by the characteristics and actions of the pilgrims themselves.

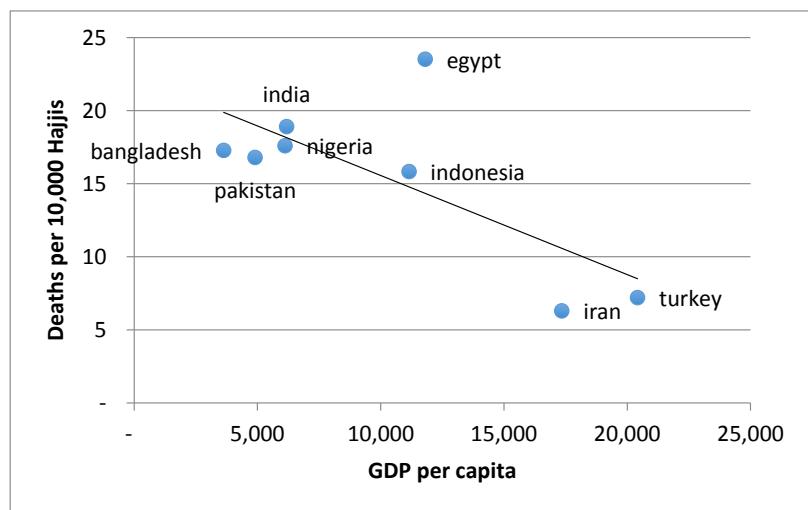


Figure 1. Hajj Death Rates and GDP per capita, 8 Largest Sources. Source: Author's computations of raw data from [Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, Ministry of Health \(2016\)](#).

Another strong correlate of Hajj mortality is the pilgrims' average age at their times of death (Figure 2). Older pilgrims fare much better than younger ones despite their obvious handicaps in terms of general health and physical stamina. A very high proportion of the Nigerian Hajj fatalities are working-age people less than 50 years old—33 percent of the men and 40 percent of the women. For Turkey and Iran, however, it is uncommon to find any fatalities in those age groups—4 percent of the deceased men and 6 percent of the women from Turkey and only 7 percent of the men and 8 percent of the women from Iran.

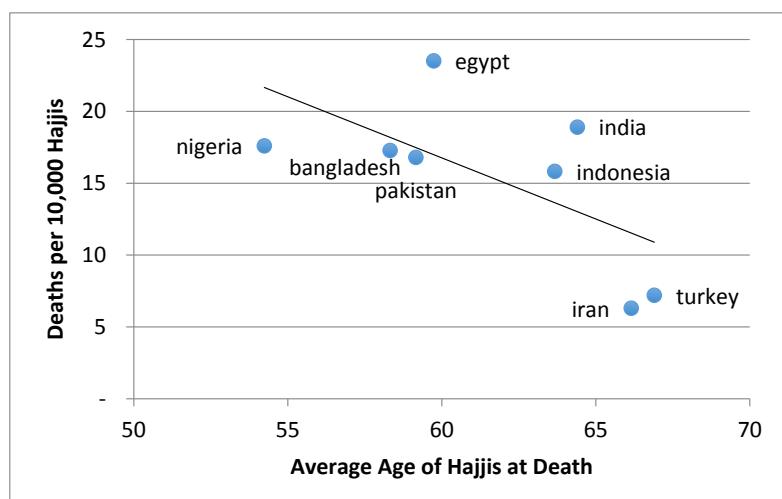


Figure 2. Hajj Death Rates and Pilgrims' Average Age, 8 Largest Sources. Source: Author's computations of raw data from [Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, Ministry of Health \(2016\)](#).

Why do fit Nigerian youths perish more frequently than wizened pensioners from Turkey and Iran? Probably because so many of the youngest pilgrims, hoping to flee poverty and unemployment at home, decide to plunge into a life of danger by absconding and seeking a niche in Saudi Arabia's vast pool of illegal foreigners. They are likely to engage in a host of risky behaviors, sleeping on the streets, scrounging for odd jobs, and trying to keep a step ahead of the law. The more time such fugitive pilgrims and visa overstayers spend in Mecca's underground, the more likely they are to end up on the death rolls—some to be identified by nationality, but not by name, and others to be coded simply as "African", "unknown", or "number 70,303".

In contrast, the Iranian shopkeeper and Turkish farmer enter the country fully vaccinated and primed with prescription medications (Razavi et al. 2013). Together with their spouses, they sleep in clean beds within walking distance of the Grand Mosque, watched over by teams of nurses and paramedics. Completing the Hajj, they shop and take in the sites before going back home where their breathless families can dote on the blessed couple and entertain their many well-wishers.

In addition to national living standards and pilgrim age, two other factors have a somewhat weaker correlation with Hajj deaths—the relative importance of the Umrah and the proportion of female Hajjis among the deceased (Figures 3 and 4).

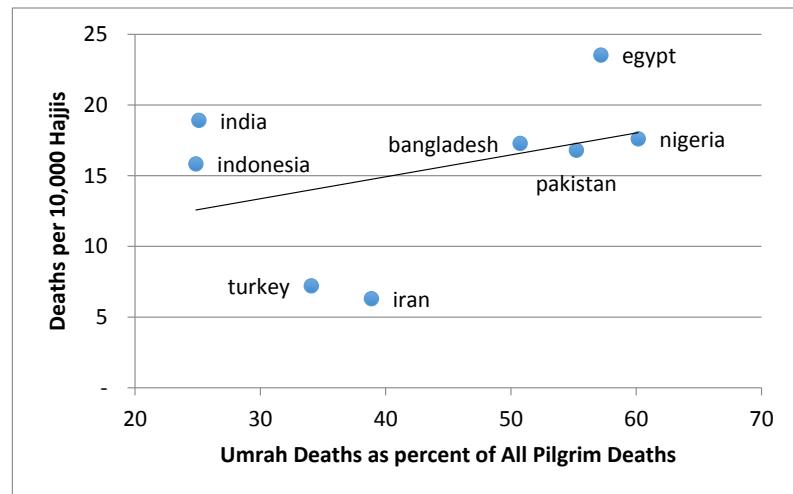


Figure 3. Hajj Death Rates and Umrah Predominance, 8 Largest Sources. Source: Author's computations of raw data from [Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, Ministry of Health \(2016\)](#).

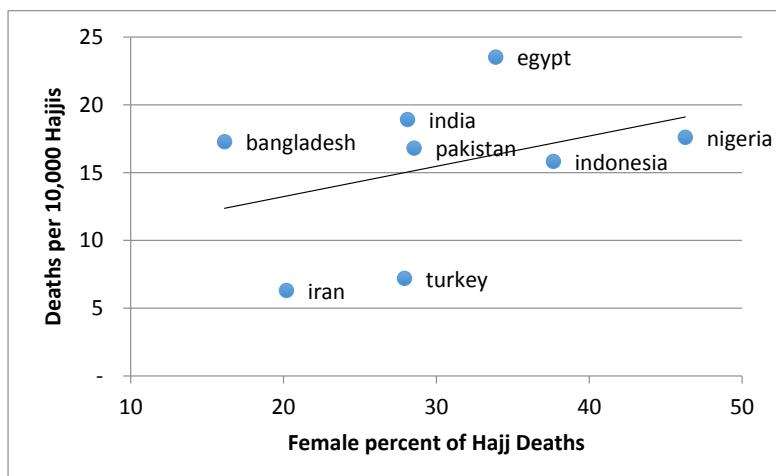


Figure 4. Hajj Death Rates and Female Hajji Participation, 8 Largest Sources. Source: Author's computations of raw data from [Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, Ministry of Health \(2016\)](#).

The Umrah, which is far less organized and regulated than the Hajj, is also more intimately tied to continuous transcontinental trade and migration linking Saudi Arabia and its neighbors with Africa, South Asia, and the Pacific Basin. While state agencies usually retain the upper hand in Hajj management, the Umrah has always been the preserve of private agents with extensive business connections and long experience in skirting legal formalities across borders. As Hajj growth has stagnated because of quota limits, the Umrah has skyrocketed around the world, generating a heavier and more constant flow of pilgrims that are less organized and supervised than during the Hajj.

In many countries, the total number of pilgrim deaths during the nine Umrah months now exceeds the body counts from the Hajj season. The countries with the largest Hajj delegations fall along a continuum of Hajj—Umrah prominence—Nigeria, Egypt, Pakistan, and Bangladesh lose most of their victims during the Umrah whereas Iran, Turkey, India, and Indonesia suffer most fatalities during the Hajj. Egypt stands out in this regard as a country where the Umrah is exceptionally popular—particularly during Ramadan—and where governments usually leave the Hajj in the hands of private businesses and religious groups ([Whitman 2015](#)). Little wonder that the death rates for Egypt's pilgrims are the highest in this group of countries.

Death rates also tend to rise when a larger share of fatalities are women. The most vulnerable women come from countries with longstanding grievances against Saudi abuse of their female pilgrims and migrant workers. Nigeria and Indonesia, which suffer the highest female tolls, are also the countries that have expressed the bitterest protests about mistreatment of their women in Saudi Arabia. For many years, Nigerians have complained that Saudi police falsely accuse their female pilgrims of prostitution, imprisoning or deporting them on mere suspicion. Jakarta waged a long battle with Saudi Arabia over widespread abuse of their female domestic workers during which the governments of both countries punished Indonesian women who sought employment in the Kingdom.

For Bangladesh, on the other hand, Hajj deaths are relatively high despite an extremely low proportion of women. In fact, Bangladesh's Hajj is so overwhelmingly dominated by males precisely because, for many years, it operated less as a pilgrimage than as a smuggling ring for young men who wanted to go overseas as illegal workers. Eventually, the Saudis pressured Bangladesh to clamp down on the travel agents that ran the business, leading to dozens of convictions for human trafficking ([Financial Express 2013](#); [Dhaka Tribune 2013](#)).

Thus, we find reinforcing evidence from several directions that pilgrimage to Mecca—both Hajj and Umrah—is systematically related to high death rates for vulnerable travelers—both female and male—who swell the pool of migrant labor in Saudi Arabia and nearby countries. The common thread linking these deaths is that many of the weakest pilgrims could not control their own movements and finances. Regardless of whether they took the path of the Hajj or the Umrah, and whether they were male or female, it was the compounded handicaps of poverty and youthful inexperience that shaped their tragedies most of all.

4. The Rise of the Umrah Belt

The growth of the Umrah has been a pervasive and cumulative process, spreading across the Islamic world at varying speeds in different countries and cultural zones ([Arab News 2016](#)). There are many ways to track and map this evolution, including a closer analysis of the shifting seasonal patterns of pilgrim mortality that the Hajj and Umrah have generated in one country after another. The copious Saudi records allow us to view the data from multiple perspectives—finely grained pictures of month by month death counts for every country and every year or sweeping panoramas of entire decades and continents.

To grasp the powerful impetus propelling Umrah growth, there is no better starting point than the example of Turkey. Before the quota system was adopted, Turkey's Hajj was one of the largest and most volatile in the world, oscillating sharply in the wake of partisan clashes, military coups, and coalition governments. However, once the quotas kicked in, Turkey's pilgrim count settled into a stable range with only modest fluctuations in years when Saudi Arabia was willing to negotiate a

temporary bonus with friendly politicians and bureaucrats in Ankara. During the 1990s, per capita Hajj rates actually declined in Turkey ([T.C. Diyanet İşleri Başkanlığı 2016](#)) (Figure 5).

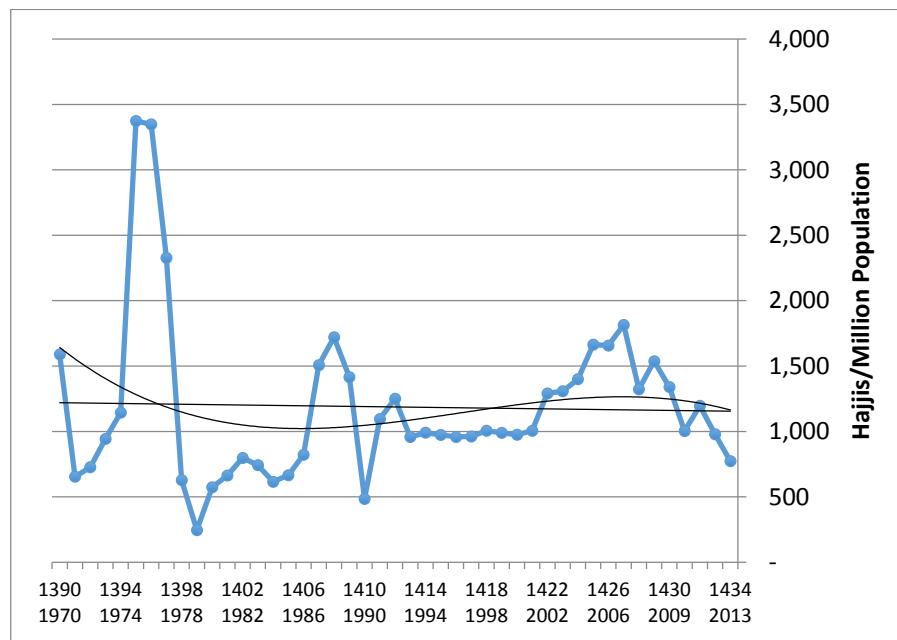


Figure 5. Turkey, Hajjis per Million Population, 1970–2013. Source: Author's computations of data from [T.C. Diyanet İşleri Başkanlığı \(2016\)](#).

Nonetheless, Hajj applications kept flooding in, creating waiting lists and backlogs that no government could hope to satisfy. In 2006, there were fewer than 3 applicants for each available place in the Turkish delegation. In 2010, the ratio was 11 to 1 and by 2013 it was nearing 30 to 1. This meant that new registrants would have to wait years or decades for their turn to come—longer than the remaining life expectancy of nearly everyone above the age of 60 ([Yeni Şafak 2015](#)) (Figure 6).

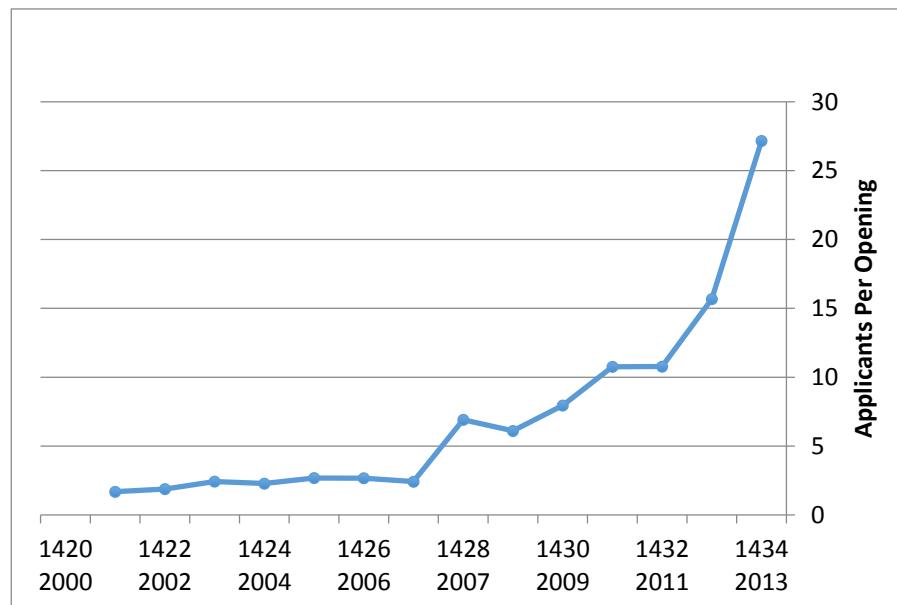


Figure 6. Turkey, Ratio of Applicants to Hajjis 2000–2013. Source: Author's computations of data from [T.C. Diyanet İşleri Başkanlığı \(2016\)](#).

When the Justice and Development Party consolidated power after 2002, its leaders devised a dual strategy to treat the problem. They adopted a vigorous campaign to promote the Umrah on an unprecedented scale while giving senior citizens the lion's share of the Hajj visas no matter how many younger applicants preceded them on the waiting lists. President Erdoğan personally urged intending Hajjis, including all the ministers in his cabinet, to make the Umrah instead and to take their spouses along as well ([Daily Sabah 2015](#)). For a couple of years, he also suspended new applications for the Hajj and reserved nearly the entire delegation for elderly first-time pilgrims who had been waiting several years already ([Bianchi 2015a](#)).

Thanks to Erdoğan, Turkey's Umrah traffic exploded. Before the Justice and Development Party era, Turkish Umrah goers were a small fraction of the number of Hajjis. By 2006 the total size of Turkey's Umrah was equal to its Hajj. In 2010, the Umrah was three times larger than the Hajj and in 2013 it was ten times bigger ([Hurriyet Daily News 2011](#); [Saudi Gazette 2016](#)) (Figure 7).

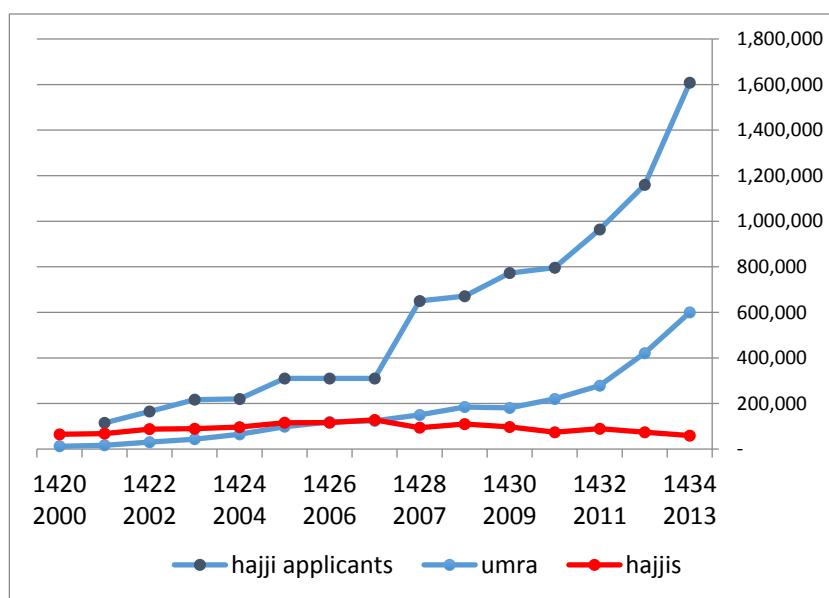


Figure 7. Turkey, Hajj Applicants, Umrah Goers, and Hajjis, 2000–2013. Source: Author's computations of data from [T.C. Diyanet İşleri Başkanlığı \(2016\)](#).

The combined opportunities for Umrah and Hajj still fell far short of the astronomical growth in Hajj demand, but the plan to grow and segment the overall pilgrimage market unfolded quite effectively. The rapid shift in the age profiles of Turkey's Hajjis and Umrah goers reveals the pattern with unusual clarity. A booming Umrah became the tour of choice for Turkey's pious middle classes with strong participation across all age groups and price points. In contrast, the greying Hajj became an old folks' refuge for those who saw their last chances slipping away while bureaucrats shuffled their paperwork and banked their down payments ([T.C. Diyanet İşleri Başkanlığı \(2014\)](#)) (Figures 8 and 9).

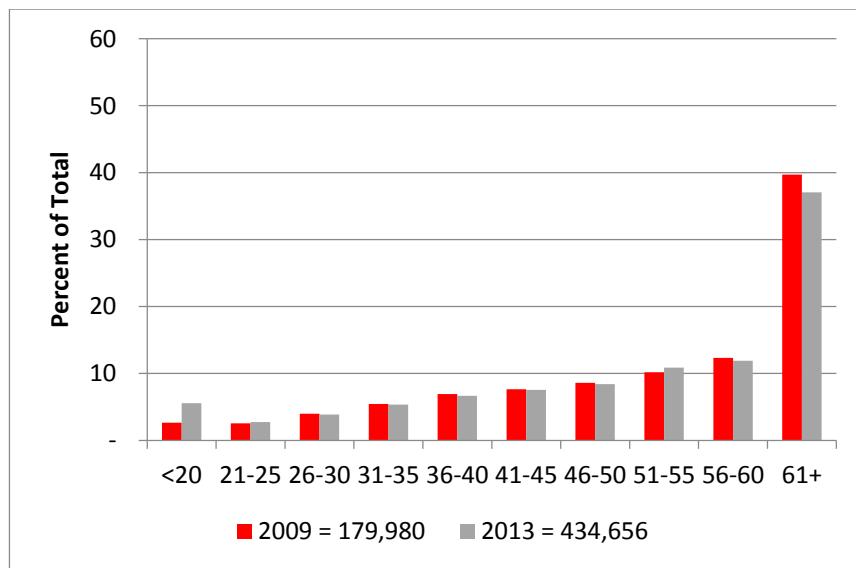


Figure 8. Turkey Umrah Age Groups, 2009 and 2013. Source: [T.C. Diyanet İşleri Başkanlığı \(2014\)](#).

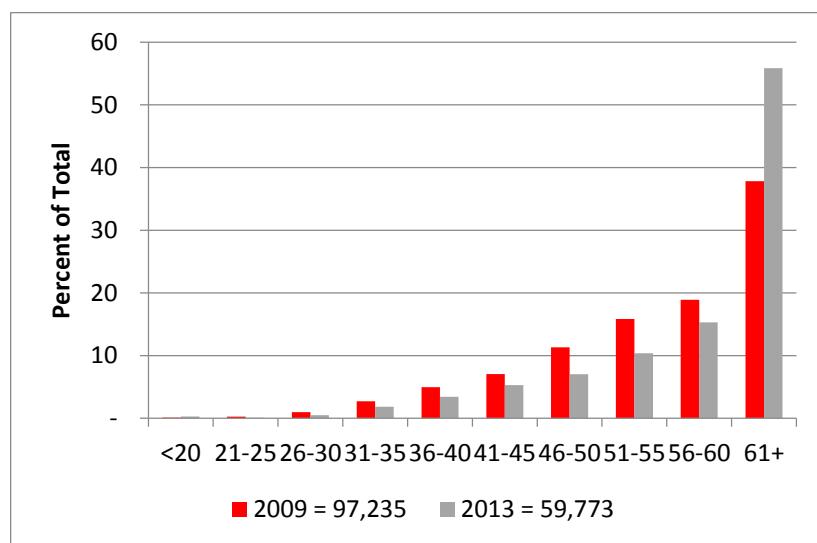


Figure 9. Turkey Hajj Age Groups, 2009 and 2013. Source: [T.C. Diyanet İşleri Başkanlığı \(2014\)](#).

Similar trends are playing out all across the Muslim world. A vigorous Umrah—entirely run by private travel companies with political connections at home and in Saudi Arabia—is eclipsing the once-mighty government Hajj monopolies—forced to farm out their markets to business cartels in tourism, transportation, and banking. The speed and circumstances of this transformation vary markedly from country to country. In some cases, such as nearby Egypt and Yemen, the Umrah has always generated year-round pilgrim flows which are simply increasing compared to past rates. On the other hand, several more distant countries, such as China and Senegal, remain solidly rooted in the Hajj-dominant pattern despite early signs that the Umrah is catching on there as well ([Aw 2015](#); [Ndiaye 2016](#)).

Most countries fall in between these opposing trends and their pilgrim mortality figures reflect the quickening pace of the Umrah shift across time and space. For example, Pakistan took the lead in South Asia with Umrah deaths surpassing Hajj deaths around 2006. More distant Indonesia traveled the same path, but it began later and just recently crossed the threshold where Umrah deaths exceed Hajj fatalities ([Onishi 2010](#)) (Figure 10). One after another, dozens of countries have followed

suit—Turkey, Bangladesh, the Philippines, Iran, Jordan, Oman, Malaysia, Thailand, Mali, Niger, Burkina Faso, Djibouti, Palestine, Kuwait, Ethiopia, Eritrea, Sudan, Libya, Afghanistan—and many more are close behind.

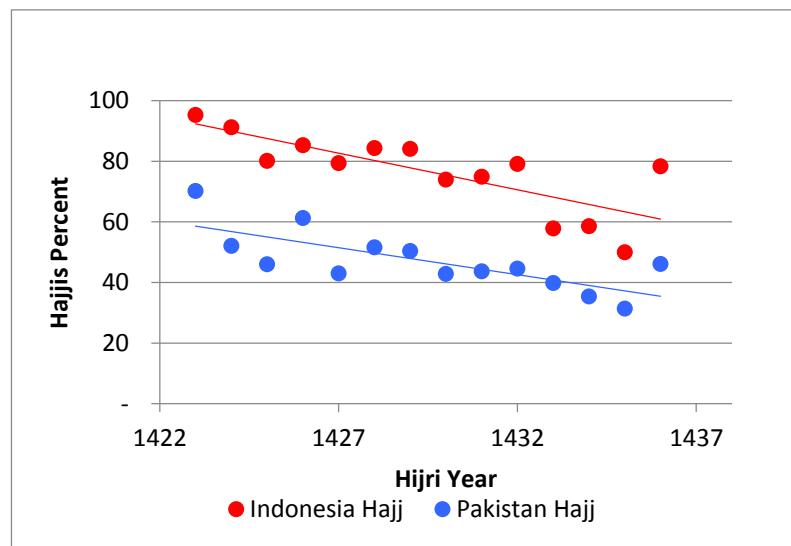


Figure 10. Indonesia and Pakistan, Hajjis as Percent of All Pilgrim Deaths. Source: Author's computations of raw data from [Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, Ministry of Health \(2016\)](#).

Together, these far-flung societies are forming a transcontinental Umrah Belt—overlapping megaregions linked by constant flows of migrants, cash, and merchandise between the Far East, Africa, and Europe using the Middle East as a central crossroad. The Umrah Belt rests on a long chain of neighboring regions that are becoming more integrated internally and with each other. From west to east, they span the African Sahel and Savanna, the Red Sea, Arabia and the GCC, South Asia, and Southeast Asia ([Yamba 1995](#); [Miran 2009](#); [Tagliacozzo 2013](#); [Boivin and Delage 2015](#)) (Figure 11).

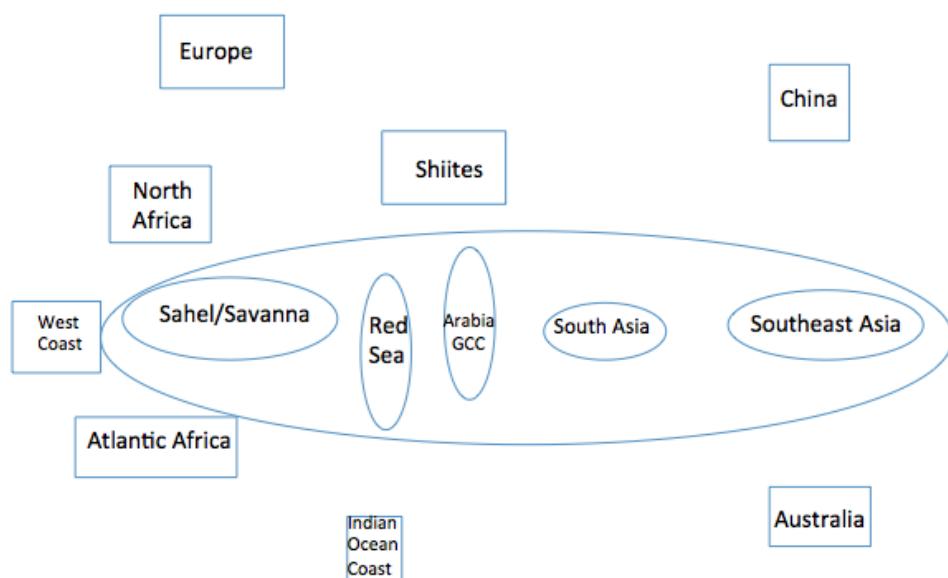


Figure 11. The Umrah Belt and Outlying Regions.

Just as important, the Umrah Belt is surrounded by several outlying zones and soft spots where many countries have preserved the older pattern of Hajj-centered pilgrimage despite the wider shift

toward year-round Umrah travel. Some of the holdouts can be explained by the enduring barriers of long distances, but there also are clear examples of local clustering that suggest cultural and political reasons for their aloofness. The most notable holdouts include Western Europe, Australia, North Africa, and the Atlantic coasts of Africa both in the far west and the Gulf of Guinea. Francophone regions are particularly laggard in Umrah growth compared to their equally distant neighbors. Pockets of weaker Umrah participation also appear in countries with sizeable populations of Shiites and Ahmadis—Lebanon, Syria, Iraq, Bahrain, Kenya, and Tanzania (Ahmed 2009). China stands out as one of the few countries where the state still monopolizes the Hajj, discourages the Umrah, and tries to ban unsupervised international pilgrimage altogether (Hoshur 2016; Bianchi 2017).

The Umrah Belt is taking shape in the shadow of a far more ambitious project of mega-regional integration—China’s New Silk Road linking the Atlantic and Pacific coasts of the Eastern Hemisphere with land and sea routes across all of Afro-Eurasia (Bianchi 2013). The Chinese ventures overlap and intersect the Umrah Belt at so many points that more and more people are calling it China’s Islamic Road. The countries that Chinese planners have pinpointed as the prime areas of investment—Indonesia, Pakistan, Iran, Turkey, and Nigeria—exemplify the synergies and conflicts we can expect from interactions of the Umrah-Hajj Belt and the New Silk Road in the near future (Bianchi 2015b).

5. Women Pilgrims: The Importance of Cultural Empowerment and Uniform Protection

Women are a particularly vulnerable part of the pilgrim population. They are highly susceptible to contradictory cultural norms and to enduring gaps in regulatory protections needed to prevent their systematic abuse. Mauritania is the leading example of pernicious victimization of female Hajjis on both cultural and legal grounds. It has the dubious distinction of combining one of the world’s highest Hajj death rates with the greatest proportion of female fatalities (Figure 12).

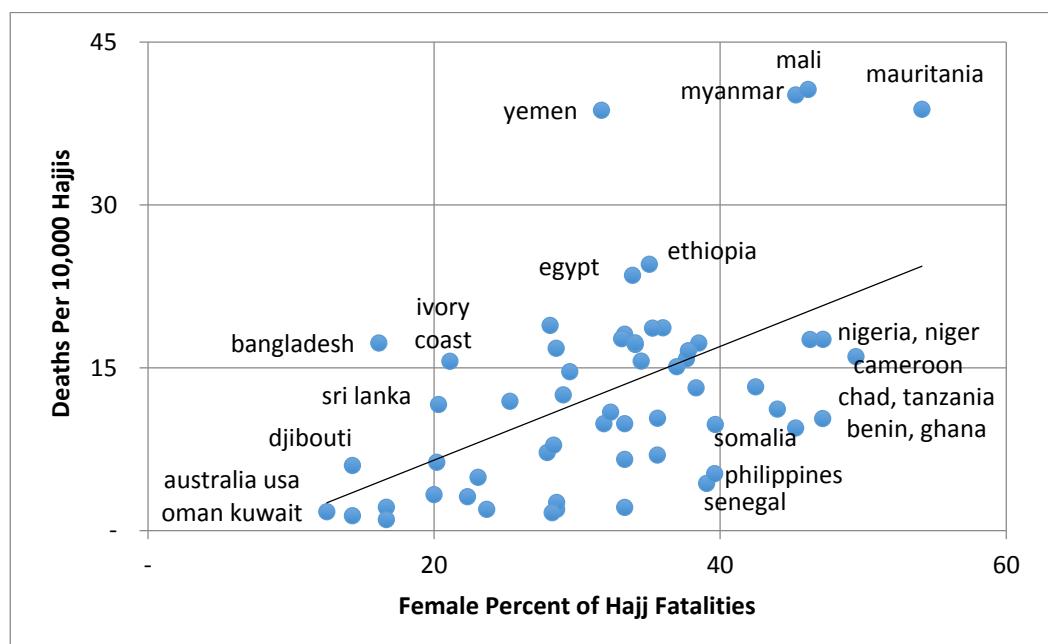


Figure 12. Hajj Death Rates and Female Percent of Fatalities, 2002–2015. Source: Author’s computations of raw data from [Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, Ministry of Health \(2016\)](#).

When official protests from Indonesia and the Philippines interrupted the flow of female domestic workers from Southeast Asia to Saudi Arabia, recruitment shifted 8500 miles away to the farthest corner of North Africa (Dima-Macabando 2015). Mauritania’s ongoing battle to stamp out slavery makes it a rich vein for people smuggling, especially when economic distress pushes recently emancipated

groups to accept new forms of indenture. Labor recruiters have used the Hajj as both bait and cover in luring Mauritanian women to non-existent job opportunities and forcing them into virtual captivity as low-wage household servants to Saudi families (Donaghy and Alsaafin 2015).

In contrast to the youthful women usually imported from other countries, the Mauritanian domestics are conspicuously advanced in age—88 percent of the Mauritanian women who died during the Hajj season were more than 50 years old. By specifically targeting older women, the phony employment agencies manage to circumvent Saudi immigration and police officers who typically profile young women from Africa and Asia as potential sex workers.

The most striking feature of female Hajj mortality is its strong dependence on economic and cultural differences. The sharpest contrast is the deep split between the very rich and the very poor—Mali, Mauritania, Myanmar, and Yemen with extremely high female death rates versus Western and Persian Gulf countries with negligible mortality for both men and women. Hajjis from wealthier countries benefit from careful screening and ongoing medical attention. Pilgrims from destitute areas usually have to fend for themselves or rely on predatory gangs that have no intention of assisting their safe return home.

There are many instances of geographical clustering in which women's death rates are unusually high or low compared to the overall international pattern (Figure 13). The Malay-speaking Muslims of Southeast Asia stand out in combining high death rates and strong female presence. Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore, Thailand, and Brunei cluster together in a tight cultural and regional grouping. All of these countries have flourishing economies and expanding middle classes that are fueling demands for higher Hajj quotas—demands that Saudi officials cannot satisfy short of a thorough overhaul of the quota system. In the meantime, Southeast Asia is teeming with illegal channels of pilgrimage that charge a premium for fake documents while providing no support for those who manage to slip through border controls at either end of the journey.

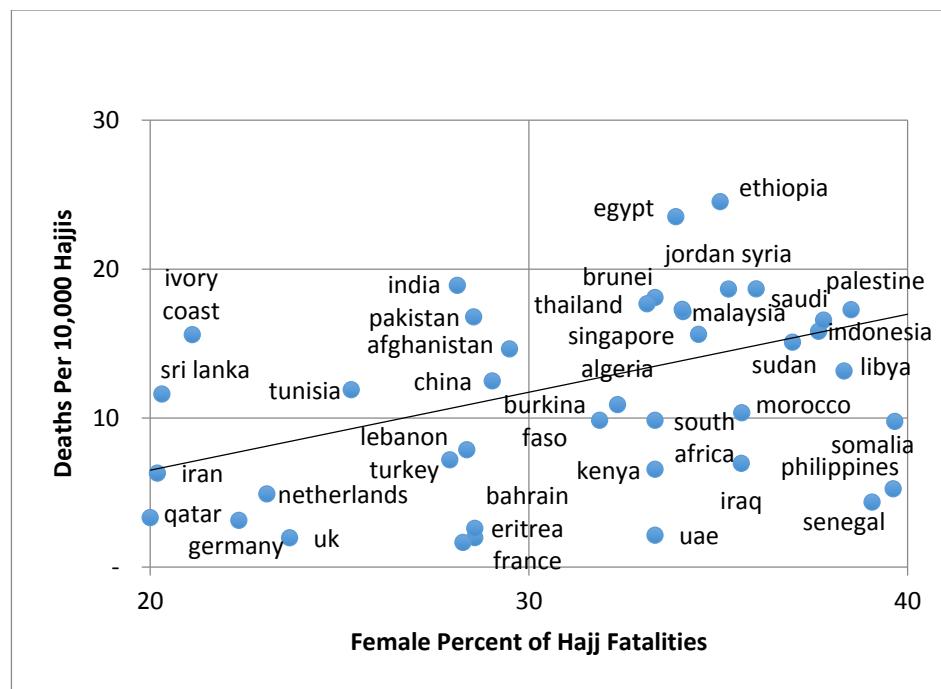


Figure 13. Hajj Death Rates and Female Percent of Fatalities, 2002–2015. Detailed View Source: Author's computations of raw data from [Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, Ministry of Health \(2016\)](#).

All of the South Asian countries have relatively high fatalities but with very weak female participation. Pakistan and India with professionally managed state agencies fare better than Sri Lanka and Bangladesh where private firms and labor brokers control the business. Nonetheless,

the general trend in South Asia is for high-risk and male-dominated Hajj where female pilgrims are marginalized and poorly protected.

Countries in most parts of Africa—North, West, and East—have fairly low morality plus high proportions of women pilgrims. Nigeria and most of its neighbors as well as Senegal provide women both high opportunity and relative safety in performing the Hajj. West African women have long experience as business owners and recently they have extended their reach into pilgrimage markets, benefitting simultaneously from government set asides as well as privatization measures to open more doors for women traders to travel to Saudi Arabia. The widely noted achievements of Senegalese and Nigerian women in the Hajj business have been emulated in Cameroon, Ivory Coast, and elsewhere in West Africa (Hardy and Semin 2009; Adama 2009; Dioum 2014).

Arabic-speaking countries are notably less consistent than other regions in protecting the welfare of female pilgrims. Wealthy Arab nations provide relative safety, but only limited opportunities for women Hajjis. Most North African countries lean toward the Senegalese example, but Egypt and the Fertile Crescent nations of Syria, Jordan and Palestine trend toward the Malay pattern of high risk and moderate opportunity.

6. Political Insecurity and Muslim Minorities: India and Ivory Coast

In many societies where Muslims are a sizeable minority, the Hajj rests on shaky foundations, reflecting the politically charged role of religion in a delicate balance of power. India and Ivory Coast portray this dilemma poignantly, demonstrating that state-sponsored Hajj programs can both exacerbate and moderate communal strife. In India, publicly-funded Hajj agencies have stirred increasingly bitter clashes in national and state politics. On the other hand, the experience of Ivory Coast shows that ascending Muslim power can promote multi-faith pilgrimages in a concerted effort to recover from a decade of civil war and social partition.

India has one of the world's most politicized programs of publicly-subsidized Hajj. Knowing nothing more than the fluctuations in the annual number of state-supported pilgrims to Mecca, one can easily spot the turning points in the seesaw battle to control the central government in New Delhi (Haj Committee of India 2008–2016). When the Congress Party was in power, they spurred or maintained Hajj growth. When the Hindu nationalists of the Bharatiya Janata Party took over, they slowed or reversed the pilgrim flow (Figure 14 and Table 2).

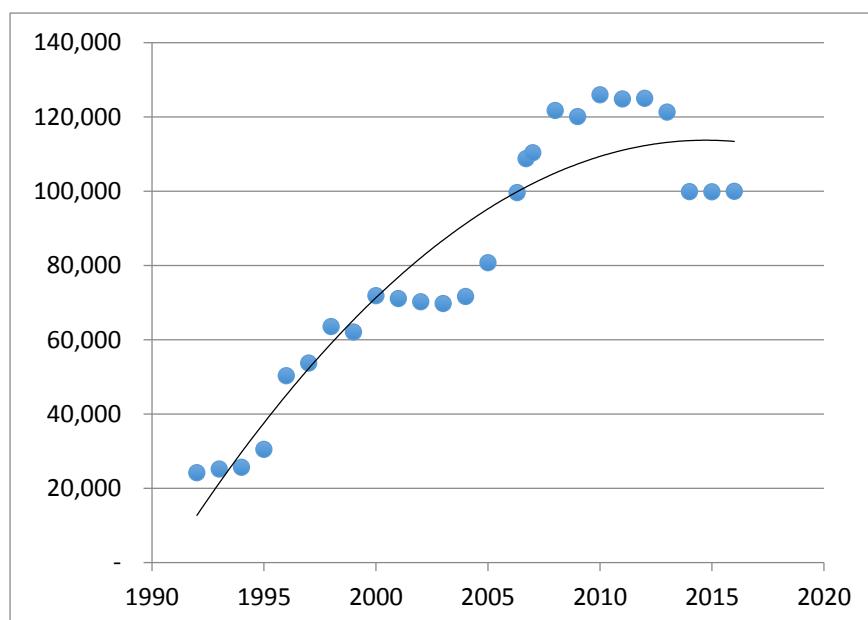


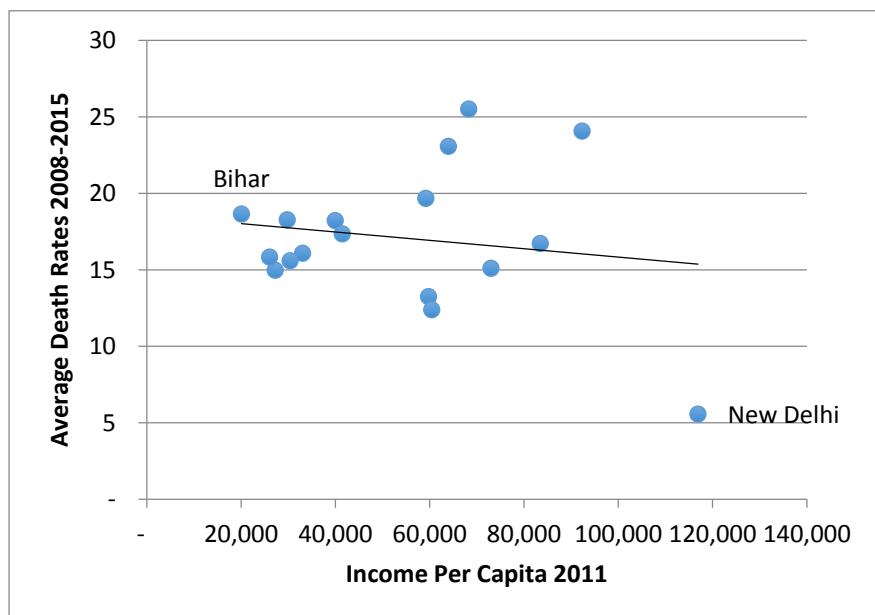
Figure 14. India Hajjis, 1992–2016. Source: [Haj Committee of India \(2008–2016\)](#).

Table 2. India National Election Winners and Hajj Growth.

Ruling Party	Years	Hajj Growth (1000)	Percent Change
Congress 1	1991–1996	23/50	116
BJP 1	1996–1999	50/72	43
BJP 2	1999–2004	72/71	−3
Congress 2	2004–2009	71/121	69
Congress 3	2009–2014	121/121	0
BJP 3	2014–2016	121/100	−17

Source: Author's computations of raw data from [Haj Committee of India \(2008–2016\)](#).

Comparing the performance of Hajj managers at the state level, we see a familiar trend in which pilgrim death rates closely track economic conditions ([Haj Committee of India 2016](#)). Well-endowed New Delhi is in a class by itself in dispensing Hajj services. At the other hand, the poorer states of the Ganges Basin and northeastern India provide shoestring aid that yields mediocre safety for its Hajjis (Figure 15). In between these economic extremes, two clusters of deviant cases stand out—a group of over-performing states where death rates are much lower than average and a set of under-performers where fatalities are far higher than local levels of prosperity would suggest (Figure 16) ([Huda 2015](#)).

**Figure 15.** Hajj Death Rates and Income in Indian States. Source: [Haj Committee of India \(2016\)](#).

India's highest Hajj mortality appears in states where dominant parties consistently oppose using public funds to help Muslim minorities in religious activities. Three of the four high fatality states are northern bastions of the BJP—Gujarat, Haryana, and Uttrakhand (Figure 17). The Himalayan state of Uttrakhand hosts some of the most popular and profitable Hindu pilgrimage sites in the country. Politicians in this state are eager to subsidize pilgrimages, but only if they are both local and Hindu. The sole southern state in this group, Kerala, is a stronghold of leftists and secularists who discourage government aid for all religions.

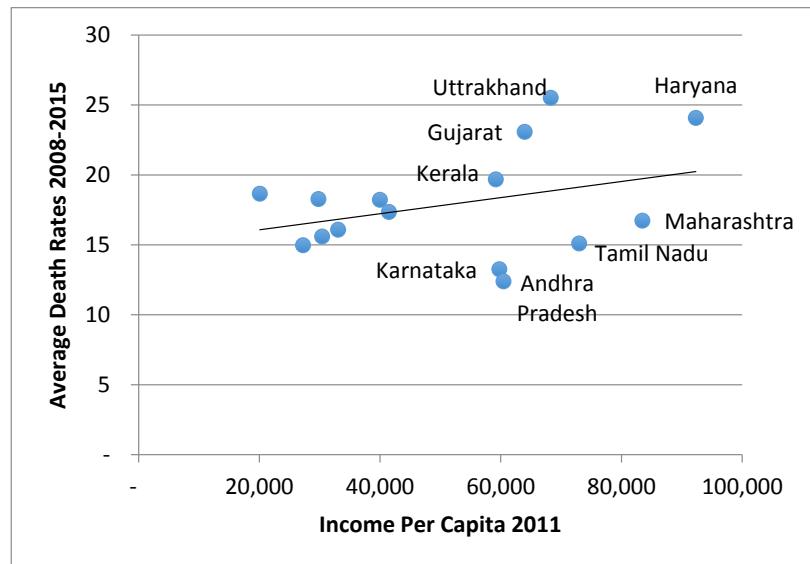


Figure 16. Hajj Death Rates and Income in Indian States. Detail without New Delhi. Source: [Haj Committee of India \(2016\)](#).



Figure 17. Map of Hajj Death Rates in Indian States Higher than Average in Red and Lower than Average in Blue.

All of the states with low Hajj fatalities are contiguous southern regions with large linguistic minorities—Maharashtra, Karnataka, Andhra Pradesh, and Tamil Nadu. These states are well-known for a combination of cultural diversity and political independence that blunts the spread of Hindu extremism beyond its northern heartlands. In this more pluralistic environment, politicians compete vigorously for Muslim voters and provide more generous support for their religious pursuits, including the Hajj.

India's Hajj-related headaches are growing more severe every year. The Supreme Court of India has ordered New Delhi to phase out central government Hajj subsidies, leaving each state to decide whether to fill the funding gap with local tax revenues ([Vaidyanathan 2012](#); [SahilOnline 2013](#)). The Court's stance virtually guarantees an uptick in communal conflicts by stirring religious, regional, and cultural passions simultaneously in every state with a large Muslim population.

State-funded Hajj is enjoying greater success in Ivory Coast, but only after religiously motivated bloodletting nearly exhausted all sides. Much of the fighting revolved around protracted efforts to prevent one man from becoming the country's first Muslim president. Alassane Ouattara is an improbable demon. Often described as a secular Muslim, he is an aristocrat married to a French Jewish woman who became a Catholic. As an IMF-backed economist and protégé of founding father, Félix Houphouet-Boigny, Ouattara helped in navigating the Ivorian cocoa boom and tried to succeed H-B after his death in 1993 ([Economist 2011](#)).

Ouattara's rivals not only banned him from running for office, they also denied citizenship to a generation of Muslim immigrants from Burkina Faso and Mali who swelled the workforce of the southern fields and cities. Several army mutinies and market crashes paved the way for Laurent Gbagbo to seize power on a wave of xenophobia and religious extremism that tore the country apart both physically and politically ([Human Rights Watch 2005](#)). Eventually, Gbagbo accepted a South African-brokered truce and an electoral match up with Ouattara, but when he lost he unleashed a second civil war in which his militias targeted Muslim enclaves in Abidjan and across the south. French military intervention finally put an end to the slaughter, dispatching Gbagbo to the Hague where he currently faces trial before the International Criminal Court for war crimes and crimes against humanity ([Kaplan 2012](#)).

When Ouattara assumed the presidency, he sought to counter years of Islamophobia by rekindling Ivorian traditions of pluralism and religious tolerance. A key part of the campaign offered government aid for Christians and Muslims who wanted to travel abroad on pilgrimage. His administration has helped Muslims go on Hajj to Mecca, but it also sends Catholics to Lourdes and Protestants to Jerusalem ([Conférence des Evêques Catholiques de Côte d'Ivoire 2016](#)). Unlike the Indian politicians and judges who use rival pilgrimages as political weapons, Ouattara has tried to sweeten the transition to Christian-Muslim power sharing by reaching out to the very groups that slammed the door in his face over twenty years ago ([Miran-Guyon 2014](#)).

The coalition-building strategy is crystal clear when we compare Ouattara's regional shares of the vote in 2010 with the current pattern of Hajj participation in the Ivory Coast (Figure 18). Pilgrimage subsidies are going to the northern districts where Muslims predominate and where Ouattara handily carried the day in the first round of a three-man constant ([Commission Electorale Indépendante 2010](#)). However, the bulk of the aid reaches religiously mixed areas in the center of the country and Abidjan as well as Christian districts that Gbagbo's partisans once terrorized in the south and west ([Direction Générale des Cultes Commissariat du Hadj 2016](#)) (Figure 19).

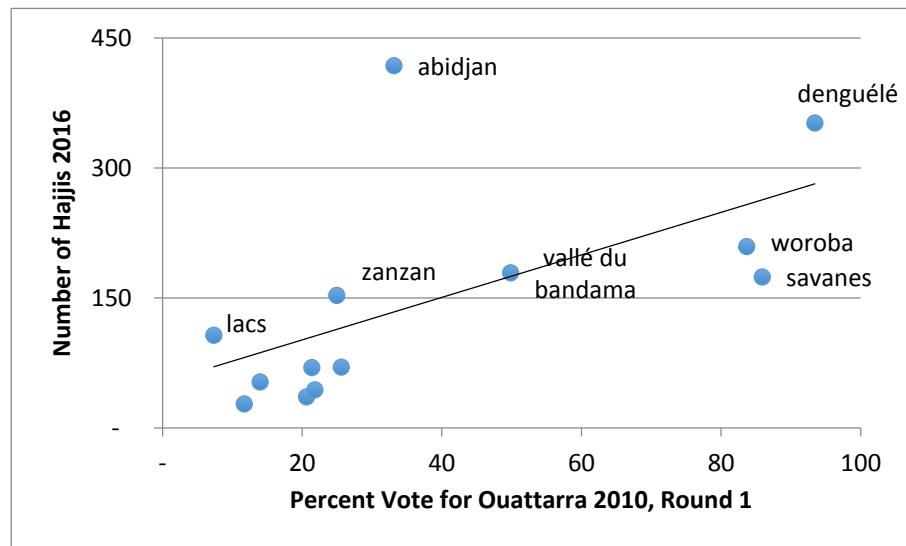


Figure 18. Hajj 2016 and Presidential Vote 2010, Districts Source: Author's computations of raw data from Direction Générale des Cultes Commissariat du Hadj ([Direction Générale des Cultes Commissariat du Hadj 2016](#)).



Figure 19. Lines of Control in the Ivorian Civil War 2007 ([Cormier 2016](#)) Rebels in the north, government forces in the south, and central buffer zone.

Today, most Ivorian Muslims live outside of their former northern heartlands among Christian and animist majorities that continue to dominate the coastal zones ([Miran-Guyon 2015](#)). Helping vulnerable Muslims—whether they are majorities or minorities—requires helping their struggling neighbors as well, not creating enclaves of privilege surrounded by hostile shutouts. Following that logic, Ouattara's supporters won over most of the non-Muslim districts in the second round of the 2010 election and even bigger majorities in his reelection of 2015.

India and Ivory Coast are not exotic cases. In contrast, they typify the pervasive intermingling of Muslim and non-Muslim peoples that has long characterized most of Asia and Africa and that is

increasingly familiar in Europe and North America ([McLoughlin 2013; British Muslim Experiences of the Hajj 2015](#)). Their contrasting experiences with politically charged pilgrimages carry wider implications for the Hajj and its future evolution everywhere.

7. The Perpetual Pilgrimage of Myanmar Refugees

The most vulnerable group in Mecca may be the Muslim refugees from Myanmar. Many of them found shelter in Saudi Arabia during the 1970s, when their homeland was still known as Burma. King Faisal welcomed them as they were pouring into Bangladesh and most other countries were turning them away. Faisal's successors continued the practice on a smaller scale, but never granted legal residency status that gives foreigners access to employment, schooling, and health care ([Ahmad 2009](#)).

Today there are at least a quarter million Myanmars living in Saudi Arabia, about half of them in Mecca's slums and working class neighborhoods—or what is left of them after years of demolition and gentrification. For this community, pilgrimage is far more than a seasonal festival. It is a livelihood and the pilgrims are their lifeline, dispensing a daily flow of sales, tips, and alms that sustains them and other members of Mecca's underclass twelve months a year ([Jalabi 2016](#)).

Those who ply the pilgrim throngs know the markets and side streets by heart. Many can sense danger before it erupts and flee in the knick of time. When tangled crowds brim with anger and panic, the street people—particularly children—are the first to react before stampedes trap the unwary in their own frantic footsteps. However, even the keenest survival instincts break down under constant stress and a steady stream of Myanmars fills the morgues and death rolls where they are labeled as foreigners even if their birthplace is Saudi Arabia.

The Myanmarese fatalities are extraordinary because of their enormous numbers—4193 over 14 years—but even more because of their nearly daily occurrence. During the 168 months covered by the Mecca death records, there were exactly six months when no Myanmarese victims appeared—at least none whose remains and nationality could be identified. Yemen, Mali, and Mauritania suffer similarly bloated mortality rates—nearly three times the average for all overseas Hajjis—but none matches the ceaseless flow of Myanmarese casualties ([BBC News 2015](#)) (Figure 20). Myanmarese deaths include an unusually high proportion of women—almost 50 percent during both Hajj and Umrah seasons—and heavy tolls of children and teenagers—about 10 percent year-round (Figure 21) ([World Bulletin 2016](#)).

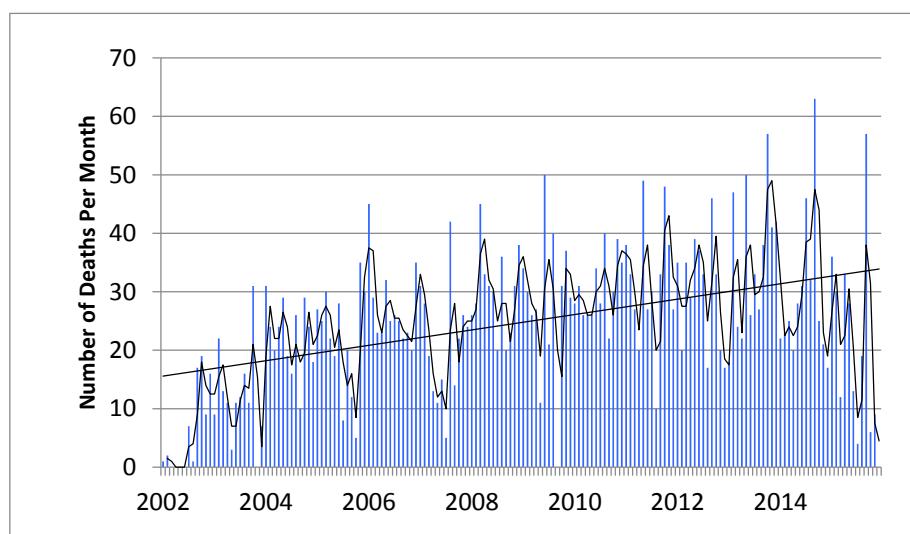


Figure 20. Myanmar Monthly Pilgrim Deaths, 2002–2015. Source: Author's computations of raw data from [Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, Ministry of Health \(2016\)](#).



Figure 21. Naseem from Burma. Naseem: “People can weigh themselves for 1 riyal. My mother passed away in Burma and my father works at a car shop. I’m 8 years old and this gets me around 30–40 riyals a day (about \$10). My father doesn’t want me to work and discourages me but I want to work.” Haji: “Why?” Naseem: “Because I want to study.” Source: [World Bulletin \(2016\)](#).

8. Religious Imagination and Hajj Reform

The Hajj is long overdue for reform and reinvention. The yawning gap between its eternal ideals and its tragic reality is an open secret that every pilgrim shares as freely as the Zamzam water and dates she brings back home. The ‘ulama are a necessary but flawed part of the reform equation. Divided and compromised by dependence on official patronage, they often lack both power and legitimacy. When they enjoy popularity, they have little influence on policy. When they gain formal authority, it erodes their credibility. A few of the more adaptive ‘ulama acquire enough modern education to compete with lay professionals and intellectuals, but they usually find it hard to gain equal standing.

An invaluable contribution of the ‘ulama is their constant contradiction of each other’s views. For Muslims everywhere, this invites debate instead of stifling it. Rulers and ideologues who try to monopolize religious authority or to wrap themselves in self-spun legitimacy will always feel the stings of gadflies beyond their reach. Dissenters bucking the mainstream and innovators pushing the envelope can mine the countless principles, parables, and analogies that Islamic scholars put at everyone’s disposal. Whenever Saudi Arabia and other states place new limits on pilgrim numbers and movement, preachers from every school will demand a solid justification for compromising the inherent right of free access to God’s house and its sacred surroundings. Each time an egalitarian voice offers a critical reinterpretation of ritual practice, there will be a hadith, hoja’s tale or poetic couplet that sounds tailor-made for the occasion.

With their distinctive blend of principle and pragmatism, Muslim scholars have eased the way for each generation to recreate the pilgrimage in light of changing times and needs. Focusing on sincere intention rather than ritual precision, clear-sighted ‘ulama have given Hajjis permission to bury many outmoded and dangerous customs so that they can avoid burying one another. The examples are legion and multiplying year by year—saluting the Black Stone from a distance instead of rushing in to kiss it, pausing briefly on the chaotic Muzdalifa plain rather than spending the entire night, letting younger and stronger Hajjis stone the devils on behalf of the aged and infirmed, buying a ticket to

share in the vicarious sacrifice of a common animal instead of slaughtering your own and leaving the remains to rot in the desert, and many other common-sense shortcuts that were once thought to make a Hajj invalid in God's eyes.

Today Muslims of all backgrounds—lay people as well as religious leaders—are debating further breaks with longstanding custom and doctrine as they envision a Hajj for the future. Most people are unwilling to limit their choices to the leading options—seasonal cycles of scandal and group funerals or the Saudi business plan for a year-round theme park. Many alternative proposals are coming into circulation, but three have stirred the greatest interest thus far—further internationalizing the current Hajj regime, refashioning the Hajj-Umrah calendar, and encouraging the cross-fertilization of global pilgrimages in all of the major faiths. Let us briefly consider each of these possible futures.

Internationalizing Hajj policy is a path that Muslim leaders supposedly embraced more than twenty years ago when Saudi Arabia was desperate for any help it could muster to fend off the Islamic revolution in Iran. When Saudi rulers had their backs to the wall, they did their best to appear open-minded. All Muslim states would run the Hajj together through the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC). Saudi Arabia's sovereign territorial rights would be conditional rather than absolute. Sovereignty would be balanced by two God-given principles that no ruler could violate—the right of all Muslims to visit the holy cities as well as the duty to preserve their history and environment as part of the common heritage of mankind.

But as Iranian pressures abated, Saudi Arabia slid back into unilateralism—decreeing and demolishing first and consulting later, if at all. By allowing the Saudis to block substantial moves toward collective decision-making, Muslim governments have discredited the original agenda and themselves to an extent that may be irreversible. Even if Saudi leaders returned to the internationalization program—and there is no sign they ever will—it would probably be too late to matter. Popular support for the quota system is evaporating and historic Mecca has all but vanished.

In Hajj affairs, the OIC is just as toothless now as in the 1980s when it assumed the nebulous responsibility to supervise the Saudi supervisors. International regimes have fallen on hard times everywhere in the upsurge of geopolitics and Great Power rivalry. Under such conditions, Middle Eastern leaders will be less likely than ever to revive the waning enthusiasm for transnational institutions and norms. If the OIC ever gains the authority to fulfill its supposed Hajj mandate, it is likely to be under Turkish and Iranian auspices—perhaps in a post-Saudi era—and this time with more sympathy from Moscow and Beijing than from Washington and Brussels ([Sola 2016](#)).

Using Islam's lunar calendar to weave a tapestry of seasonal pilgrimages has deep roots in popular belief and practice. Nearly every Muslim society and subculture has evolved a comfortable rhythm of movement around sacred months and annual festivals with special meanings. These pilgrimage subsystems frequently overlap and constantly change in relative importance. All of them also have multiple non-religious functions, allowing pragmatic adaptation to economic, political, and international realities.

Reinventing pilgrimages has become an integral part of Islamic tradition. Shedding old customs in favor of new ones is not only customary, it is also authentic and progressive at the same time. When modern Muslims think about revaluing and reordering the Hajj and Umrah, they speak to urgent needs of the present and the future while also tapping into histories and collective memories that are older than Islam itself.

Today, the most radical proposals for adjusting the pilgrimage calendar are not the Saudi campaign to expand and commercialize the Umrah, but efforts to redefine the Hajj season altogether. If Muslims could perform the Hajj over a longer time period—two or three months instead of a couple of weeks—they could save countless lives throughout the year. According to this view, the next 14 pilgrimage seasons need not be marred by another 91,000 fatalities if Muslims honor the Hajj by making it in safety at flexible times ([Karaca 2016](#); [masjidtucson.org 2016](#)).

These arguments are consistent with many trends that have already gained momentum in official policy and public opinion. Governments and religious leaders in many countries are urging Muslims

to avoid multiple Hajjs in favor of going on Umrah or staying home and making more generous gifts to charities. They are telling younger and wealthier people to delay their Hajjs so that the elderly and disadvantaged can move to the head of the waiting lists. Individuals and families are putting a higher premium on comfort and value regardless of the months they choose for travel ([BBC News 2004](#)).

Sometimes policy-makers and religious authorities appear to be guiding mass behavior, but at other times they are simply bending to what they perceive as the wisdom of crowds and the shifting preferences of voter-consumers. A typical example is playing out in Egypt where government, business, and religious leaders have been arm wrestling over pilgrimage practices that most people regarded as long-settled and taken for granted. Saudi authorities decided to increase fees for Umrah visas and President Sisi objected, ordering Egyptian travel agents to boycott the Umrah until the previous rates were reinstated. Tourism firms saw a whole year's revenue flying out the window, but their state-dominated professional syndicate had to toe the official line ([Mikhail 2016](#)).

Egypt's religious scholars jumped into the fray, staking out positions on both sides. The Cairo-based leader of Dar al-'Ifta—a government mouthpiece—pronounced that the limits on Umrah travel were justified by the public interest in conserving scarce resources during a downturn in the nation's economy. In response, an al-Azhar scholar in Tanta denounced the ban as illegal because it violated Muslims' rights of unfettered access to the holy cities. Like good contract lawyers everywhere, these 'ulama marshaled unassailable principles to defend contradictory interests—a sure sign that horse trading was well underway and that all parties were counting the minutes to a deal.

In theory, the Hajj is also inviolable and immutable, but in practice it is eminently negotiable. The Saudis have used the quota system to reward and punish one country after another for political positions that have nothing to do with pilgrimage or religion. Hajj managers and politicians throughout the Muslim world have responded in kind—agreeing to implement Saudi directives if they could hand out a few thousand extra slots to their supporters in time for the next election ([Adam 2016](#)).

Eventually, we could witness similar bargaining over the length of the Hajj season and its connections to the wider pilgrimage calendar. Conventional religious authorities such as the classically-trained 'ulama might be reluctant to bring flextime to the Hajj. However, they long ago became followers and middle-men in such policy debates, deferring to the views of politicians, professionals, and citizens. If the 'ulama think the tides are moving toward an extended Hajj season—or even an uninterrupted year-round Hajj—they'll probably go with the flow instead of trying to push it backwards.

Yet another approach to Hajj reform looks beyond the Islamic world to consider the possible contributions of pilgrimage in improving relations among all global religions. This is certainly the most idealistic of the three agendas discussed here—audacious, utopian, and desperately needed by a world that seems determined to tear itself apart using religion as the most lethal weapon in its growing arsenals.

Islamic civilization has always overlapped and interacted with other transnational religions and those connections have become more intimate than ever as Muslim communities fill all corners of the globe. Millions of people across Asia and Africa are accustomed to participating in multi-faith pilgrimages—common sites where worshippers from different traditions share blessings from juxtaposed manifestations of the sacred. Muslims benefit from these pilgrimages whether they are labeled as predominately Islamic or partially Islamic or originally non-Islamic.

The Hajj was an Arabian pilgrimage long before it became an Islamic festival ([Peters 1994a; Peters 1994b](#)). It has never stopped evolving and could move in many future directions ([Wolfe 2015](#)). The Hajj could become an ecumenical gathering with room for non-Muslims. It could serve as a rotating opportunity to partner with the fixed pilgrimages of other faiths that hold their events on the same dates every year. In Malaysia and Singapore, Muslims and non-Muslims regularly celebrate together when Hari Raya Ramadan coincides with the Chinese lunar New Year. Lebanese Christians and Muslims open their doors to one another when the Prophet's birthday falls near Christmas time. In Nigeria, Yoruba families commonly include Muslim, Christian, and animist relatives who live

under the same roof and intermarry with equally mixed neighbors. If Muslims in plural societies enjoy sharing their religious holidays with non-Muslims, then perhaps the Hajj can provide similar opportunities for all of humanity to become more cosmopolitan and more human.

Conflicts of Interest: The author declares no conflict of interest.

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