



## AS IT IS

# A Different Hajj amid the Virus

July 29, 2020

Muslim **pilgrims**, wearing face coverings and moving in small groups, began circling Islam's holiest site, the Kaaba, in Mecca, Saudi Arabia on Wednesday.

During the **hajj**, the white floors that surround it usually have hundreds of thousands of pilgrims from around the world. But this year is different. Only a small number of pilgrims — as few as 1,000 — could take part.

Ammar Khaled is a 29-year-old Indian pilgrim who was born and raised in Saudi Arabia. He said that although he is alone on the hajj, he is praying for those he loves.

“Words aren't enough to explain how **blessed** I feel and how **amazing** the **arrangements** have been,” Khaled said.

Amr Al-Maddah is the chief planning officer at the Ministry of Hajj. He said, “We are taking every step possible to make sure that this hajj will end with zero cases of COVID-19 and also with zero deaths in our total hajj numbers.”

Before pilgrims could even enter Mecca, they were tested for the virus, required to self-isolate in hotel rooms, and have their temperatures checked. Each pilgrim is in a group with about 20 others. A group leader will guide them throughout the hajj. This will help limit any crowding in places like the Grand Mosque, which houses the Kaaba.

While on Mount Arafat, where the Prophet Muhammad is said to have delivered his final **sermon** nearly 1,400 years ago, the pilgrims wear identity cards that connect to their phones.

The card stores the pilgrims' personal information, health data, and other hajj-related details. It permits the Saudi government to easily **monitor** the pilgrims. It also gives pilgrims a way to contact their group leader and make special meal requests.

Pilgrims were also given special clothes to wear during the hajj. The clothes contain silver that helps kill bacteria. They were also provided with prayer rugs, umbrellas, towels, soaps, sanitizers and other necessities.

This year marks the first time in many years that people from outside Saudi Arabia do not take part in the five-day hajj. Al-Maddah said permitting people to enter Saudi Arabia from abroad would have created possible health risks.

This year, two-thirds of pilgrims are **foreigners** already living in Saudi Arabia. These foreigners come from among the 160 different nationalities that would have normally been on the hajj. The other one-third are Saudi security and medical officials. All have to be between the ages of 20 and 50 and have no serious illnesses.

“For us, safety comes first,” al-Maddah said. “We are employing technology to make sure that these services and these **precautions** are met and delivered in the highest standard.”

I'm John Russell.

*Aya Batrawy reported on this story for the Associated Press. John Russell adapted the report for Learning English. Hai Do was the editor.*

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## Words in This Story

**pilgrim** – n. someone who travels to a holy place

**hajj** – n. a journey to Mecca that is a religious duty for Muslims

**blessed** – *adj.* having a sacred nature : connected with God; very welcome, pleasant, or appreciated

**amazing** -- *adj.* causing great surprise or wonder : causing amazement

**arrangement** -- *n.* the way that things or people are organized for a particular purpose or activity : the way that things or people are arranged

**monitor** – *v.* to watch, observe, listen to, or check (something) for a special purpose over a period of time

**sermon** – *n.* a speech about a moral or religious subject that is usually given by a religious leader

**foreigner** – *n.* a person who is from a country that is not your own

**precaution** – *n.* something that is done to prevent possible harm or trouble from happening in the future

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