

Ideology Outweighs Diplomacy in Iran's Hajj Decision

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For Islamic Republic leaders, the benefits of allowing the pilgrimage to proceed transcended the risks of appearing soft in their confrontation with the Saudis.

On the evening of September 5, more than 86,000 Iranian pilgrims will complete the Hajj ritual, following Saudi measures to once again issue visas to Iranians after a one-year suspension. The move also follows Iranian gestures in July to resume diplomatic ties with Riyadh, more than a year after Iranian protestors attacked the Saudi embassy in Tehran.

Additional sources of friction between the Islamic Republic and the Saudi kingdom include the September 2015 stampede that killed hundreds of Iranian pilgrims in the Mina section of Mecca -- prompting remarkably inflammatory rhetoric from Tehran -- as well as directly opposing stances on the wars in Syria and Yemen. The Saudis and their Sunni peers, for their part, view the Iranian quest for regional hegemony with great unease. Notwithstanding these tensions, the Supreme Leader's representatives negotiated assiduously with Saudi officials to reopen the path for Iranian pilgrims, demonstrating the strategic importance of the Hajj for Iranian officials, despite the significant concession it represented for regime hardliners.

Background

Prior to this year's turnabout, Iranians had reasons to doubt they would be going on pilgrimage any time soon. This was the case given provocative anti-Saudi statements and an aggressive regional policy -- both emanating from Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei -- as well as warming U.S. ties with regional Sunni states. Indeed, Ayatollah Khamenei is the ultimate decisionmaker on Hajj affairs.

Tense relations between the Iranian clerical leadership and the Saudi hosts date to at least 1987, when clashes in Mecca between Saudi security forces and Shia pilgrims killed at least four hundred Iranians. At the time, Iranian pilgrims were known to engage in boisterous demonstrations theoretically aimed at the United States but implicitly targeting the kingdom. The Saudis, moreover, charged that many of the Iranian protestors were carrying weapons. Following the tragedy, Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini proclaimed that the Islamic Republic could not "disregard the Saudi issue," just as it could not disregard "al-Quds" (Jerusalem) or the wrongs committed by Iraqi president Saddam Hussein. Diplomatic ties were restored in 1991 -- two years after Khomeini's death -- but relations have never been fully normalized.

On January 7, 2016, responding to the Mina incident in a time of otherwise intense Saudi-Iran discord, Ali Qazi Askar, Ayatollah Khamenei's representative on Hajj and pilgrimage affairs, promised to look more deeply into the issue, further claiming that decisions regarding the Hajj were among the Supreme Leader's exclusive authorities. For others to comment, he implied, was a mistake. He continued, purportedly reflecting Khamenei's views, that the Hajj -- as a "divine imperative" and a "pillar of Islam" -- "cannot be easily suspended." After then seeking to assert a separation between the Hajj and quotidian political matters, he offered the caveat that the Hajj, as a religious duty, must be conditioned on the safety and security of pilgrims and that the Islamic Republic, through its ideological guidelines, does permit the Supreme Leader to suspend adherence to Islam's pillars, including the Hajj, fasting, and prayer. In January 1988, Khomeini himself made such a point clear in response to a Friday prayer sermon delivered by then president Khamenei, contending that the Hajj could be paused "if regarded as contrary to the expediency of the Islamic country." Thus, one detects the grounding of suspending the Hajj in both Islamic jurisprudence and the Iranian regime's ideology.

Broader Iranian Problems with the Hajj

Iranian criticisms of the Hajj, often grounded in anti-Arab chauvinism, have served a variety of purposes. A common refrain holds that the Hajj is good business for Arabs. More subtly, in recent years, anti-Saudi propaganda has rallied anti-Arab Iranian nationalists -- a historically antiregime bloc -- to the cause. Hardline Islamists too, who support Iran's regional policies, especially in Syria, from an ideological perspective, have united behind the principle of opposing the Saudis. Such societal elements welcomed the Hajj suspension and worried over its reinstatement.

Public pressure on this front was strong enough that on March 18, when Askar, Khamenei's representative,

announced the Hajj agreement with the Saudis, he felt the need to justify this decision: "We have agreed with the Saudis to divorce the Hajj ritual from political relations, and they made concessions on the necessary provision of dignity and security to pilgrims. Yet the Hajj has been targeted by an unprecedented attack essentially waged by counterrevolutionary elements." Noting thereafter that "it was beneath Iran's dignity to obtain a visa from a third country," he explained that the Saudis had consented to issue such visas electronically. Riyadh, he continued, had acknowledged responsibility for the Mina incident and the Saudi Binladin Group would pay compensation to victims' families.

Askar then mused on the allegation that going on Hajj amounted to "filling the Saudis'" pockets so that they could fight the Iran-aligned Houthis in Yemen. Some surely would contend, he said, that uplifting the needy at home would be a better use of Iranian money. But the question remained whether a religious duty should be suspended in favor of another good practice. On August 9, Askar similarly reflected that "certain groups exploit the Hajj only in order to spread irreligious and racist thought" but that the Islamic Republic cannot deprive people of performing such a religious duty. He added that not only the Saudis benefited financially from the Hajj; cash flowed to the Iranians as well.

Reassurance to Worshipers

On April 22, a month after the suspension had been lifted, the Office of the Supreme Leader's Mission to the Hajj reacted to anti-Saudi remarks by Tehran's Friday prayer imam, Mohammad Ali Movahedi Kermani. The imam had charged, for example, that "Saudis pretend that they follow Islam and the Quran, while every step they take is against the interests of world Islam." In its response, the mission noted that "the Islamic Republic of Iran's officials have never been and are not in favor of suspending the Hajj." Having divorced the religious ritual from acrimonious Saudi-Iran diplomatic ties, the statement reassured Iranians that in 2016 Shia pilgrims from various countries participated in the Hajj without encountering any threat. While further acknowledging forces that "work to prevent or decrease Shia presence in Hajj rituals, and maliciously spread lies" based on both antireligious and antinational objectives, the statement nevertheless advises Kermani that "we believe that taking steps toward decreasing tension among the Islamic *umma* is possible by using Hajj diplomacy; hence, such abusive language is not productive."

On May 16, Ali Parvaneh, a member of the Supreme Leader's Hajj mission, echoed his peers' emphasis that conditions were suitable for Iranian pilgrims. Dismissing claims that the Saudis would benefit unduly in economic terms, he remarked that the kingdom "did not need the revenue from eighty-six thousand Iranian pilgrims."

Bureaucratic Machinery

In Iran, the government controls every last detail of the Hajj, with roles distributed between two entities: the Supreme Leader's representative on Hajj and pilgrimage affairs, whose office oversees political-religious components and works directly under Ayatollah Khamenei, and the Organization for Hajj and Pilgrimage (OHP), in charge of logistics, services, and administrative affairs. Indeed, the OHP, a massive organization affiliated with the Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance, is responsible for coordinating the entire Hajj process. It consists of 2,150 branches and some 60,000 managers and staff nationwide, serving more than two million Iranian pilgrims a year, who travel not only to the Saudi sites but also to sacred Shia places in Iraq and elsewhere.

Last year, Iranian president Hassan Rouhani increased the nominal OHP budget from \$842,000 to \$1 million, but such figures do not account for a fraction of its resources. In reality, the OHP functions as an enormous travel agency, collecting all fees for pilgrimages. Sometimes, applicants must wait years between registering and actually journeying, and are required to cover the cost difference between when they signed up and their time of departure. While languishing on waiting lists, many aspiring pilgrims enter the black market in hopes of expediting their plans.

In the founding documents of the Office of the Supreme Leader's Representative on Hajj and Pilgrimage Affairs, certain language stands out among fourteen key tasks outlined:

- To use Hajj diplomacy for consolidation of a unified Islamic *umma* reflecting the framework of the government's general policies
- To develop strategy and plan policy for the international function of the Hajj
- To conduct research on and confront superstitions, deviations, and heterodoxies
- To supervise receipt of religious taxes and allocate their benefits
- To produce and distribute books and other cultural items

The representative's financial resources, meanwhile, consist of the Supreme Leader's donations, the government budget, donations by individuals and other entities, and income from cultural, art, and other activities.

Other Shia authorities run their own Hajj mission offices in Mecca and Medina, with such Qom-based clerics including Nasser Makarem Shirazi, Abdullah Javadi Amoli, Hossein Nouri Hamedani, Jafar Sobhani, Hossein Vahid Khorasani, Musa Shobeiri Zanjani, Lotfollah Safi Golpayegani, Mahmoud Hashemi Shahroudi, and Kadhim al-Haeri. Najafi clerics who preside over missions are Muhammad Ishaq al-Fayadh, Muhammad Saeed al-Hakim, and Ali al-Sistani.

In an interview published in September 2016 in the Qom-based periodical *Mobahesat*, Mohammad Mehdi Meraji,

who serves as Khamenei's liaison to the missions of other religious authorities, explained that these satellite missions offer religious guidance to followers on Hajj "from all over the Shia world." He continued, "Those Shia who are unable to easily connect with Iran can come here -- a great Hajj assembly -- and ask their questions." Elaborating, he noted that in the larger sense, *maraji* (religious authorities who have achieved the rank of grand ayatollah) follow the lead of Iran's religious establishment, even if they don't entirely agree with its attitudes or intellectual premises. Thus, when the Supreme Leader's mission announced that it would not participate in the 2016 Hajj, the other religious authorities did the same.

Ideological Uses and Misuses of the Hajj

Alongside the budgeted funds that the Supreme Leader's representative is authorized to transfer to Saudi Arabia, the office receives cash donations, or taxes, from Iranian and non-Iranian pilgrims alike. The office usually spreads such nontransparent income among other pilgrims and Shia leaders according to the government's various interests. More broadly in this regard, the Hajj offers an opportunity for the Islamic Republic to communicate its ideology to Muslims both Sunni and Shia and to reiterate its strong anti-Israel and anti-U.S. policies, especially as they apply to the region.

From the perspective of Iran's long-held pursuit of leadership over the world Islamic *umma*, resuming participation in the Hajj makes perfect sense. The alternative would have isolated the Islamic Republic from the world's Muslims, leaving the country increasingly vulnerable to propaganda campaigns waged by Sunni governments and Salafi entities.

Iran's role in the Syria crisis has made such a move all the more urgent. Indeed, heavy Iranian involvement in the war has fed a historical perception that the minority Shia are illegitimate Muslims who harbor imperial ambitions and heretical ideas, thus threatening the larger Muslim community. Along with resisting public pressure to uphold the Hajj suspension, Ayatollah Khamenei and officials under him have therefore also softened their anti-Saudi rhetoric, called on Iranian pilgrims to avoid provocations, and advised them to perform their prayers together with Sunnis in Masjid al-Haram (Great Mosque), following its imam. Such gestures are aimed at portraying the Iranian government as an organ inseparable from the *umma* with a vision and actions that are purely religious.

In the coming years, a breakthrough in Saudi-Iran diplomatic relations is virtually unimaginable, but the Islamic Republic will nevertheless likely continue its efforts to divorce the Hajj from broader bilateral diplomacy, thereby leaving the door open for Iranian pilgrims.

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