

بِسْمِ اللَّهِ الرَّحْمَنِ الرَّحِيمِ

Performing umrah during the COVID- 19 pandemic

الحمد لله رب العالمين والصلاة والسلام على أشرف الأنبياء والمرسلين. نبينا محمد ﷺ وعلى آله وصحبه أجمعين، أما بعد:

The umrah is a blessed invitation extended by Allaah Himself and an honour for every Muslim invitee. Allaah says, {Indeed, 'the hills of' Safa and Marwah are among the symbols of Allaah. So, whoever performs the pilgrimage or minor pilgrimage, let them walk between 'the two hills' ...} surah 2: ayah 158



Muslims perform the umrah throughout the year and there could be over 19 million pilgrims annually. The annual hajj attendance can be close to 3 million Muslims. Both the umrah and hajj pilgrimages weren't possible for most of 2020 because of the COVID- 19 pandemic.

Obviously like many, I also avoided travel during the pandemic to minimize unnecessary exposure to the coronavirus and all its variants, but information on stringent rules to ensure the

safety of pilgrims in the sacred cities of Makkah and Madinah encouraged me to go. In addition, I felt obligated to my spiritual responsibility of leading the Sacred Tours umrah group (2021 – 2022).

Personally, it continues to be humbling to be given the spiritual responsibility of leading their annual umrah groups for the past 12 years, الحمد لله.



As an Imam, chaplain, and faith ambassador who has been at the forefront in encouraging precautionary health measures and promoting vaccination in Ontario, I was impressed by what I experienced in Saudi Arabia. I believe that I experienced valuable lessons for other countries where mass gatherings take place. The strategies could also be emulated to handle large numbers of people and especially where there's the need to balance public health and the protection of

people's livelihood. Overall, measures in Saudi Arabia as a whole allowed it to reopen up for pilgrims.

Proof of vaccination and Testing

For starters, all visa applicants must provide proof of vaccination to travel to Saudi Arabia to perform umrah. In addition, the Saudi authorities required foreign pilgrims to have a negative PCR test result which had to be taken within 72 hours before arrival in Saudi Arabia.

Physical distancing



Before COVID- 19, there would be congestion and crowding. This time the flow of people within Makkah and Madinah was well organized. A limited number of worshippers were allowed in at a time and there was clear demarcation to ensure physical distancing. Security and Mosque employees monitored and directed the pilgrims. Face masks — which provide a barrier and keep the coronavirus and all variants from spreading mandatory.

In addition, the iftar meal was provided in neatly sealed packages. Indicated by a label, these were prepared under stringent hygiene conditions eliminating the risk of virus transmission from handling. In the past, pilgrims would eat open meals which is a high-risk situation for the virus transmission. Also, in some places zam zam water is distributed in sealed bottled.

Mobile technology (apps)

An innovative intervention was the use of mobile apps to record, track and monitor all COVID- 19 related personal records. These included test results and vaccination status. The apps were also used to apply for access to move around in public places.



The Tawakkalna app is being used across the country for contact tracing. It's the most important app, needed to access every place you go, for instance every shop, restaurant, hotel and vehicle. This app required a record of PCR results and vaccination to enable entry. Anyone with a positive PCR is barred from moving around. The app has a constant location tracker and warns if someone is out of their allowed zone.

For pilgrims wanting access to the Grand Mosque or the Prophet's ﷺ Masjid, there is an app called Eatmarna which allows pilgrims to book a specific time-slot for access to the following:

- Umrah
- Praying in the Grand Mosque
- Tawaf – First floor
- Praying in the Noble Rawdah – Men
- Praying in the Noble Rawdah – Women
- Prophet's ﷺ visit



The Eatmarna app is also linked to the Tawakkalna app which means access is granted based on COVID- 19 status. Some foreign pilgrims are issued with a bar-coded wrist band that could be scanned to confirm their status in case they couldn't display their Tawakkalna or Eatmarna status.

Overall, I see the introduction of these apps as crucial in preventing the spread of the coronavirus and variants. These apps limit crowding and also allow for the movement of those who are safe while restricting those who are unsafe. Apps that track people's movements — and that store their medical and personal data — do raise privacy concerns, particularly if the data falls into the wrong hands or is misused. However, I also feel that their usefulness

is a price that we need to pay in these unprecedented times, and steps must be taken to protect the data.

Preventing events that can be super spreaders

In the past, Makkah as a convergence point for millions of pilgrims and could have always been a flashpoint for the spread of various contagious diseases, however, Saudi Arabia's handling of the pilgrimages (hajj and umrah) during this pandemic provides many lessons worth emulating by sectors that bring together large numbers of people for sports, religious gatherings, entertainment, and hospitality industries. People wishing to use these facilities would have to accept that to enjoy these privileges they would need to be checked and monitored — for the welfare of everyone.

Again, of particular interest is the use of mobile technology which could be a very potent tool in combating the pandemic in all countries. It's important to use all these measures as they add layers of protection and prevent situations from becoming super-spreader events.



I pray in du'a to Allaah to extend an umrah invitation to every Muslim when He decrees it's best, اللهم آمين. I also beg Allaah to Allaah grant (عمرة مقبولة) to everyone who performed umrah. Narrated Abu Huraira (رضي الله عنه), Allaah's Messenger ﷺ said, *"(The performance of) Umrah is an expiation for the sins committed (between it and the previous one). And the reward of Hajj Mabruur (the one accepted by Allaah) is nothing except Paradise."*

Sahih al-Bukhari

On a separate note, before my departure from Saudi Arabia, I took a PCR test which was negative, however, upon my arrival, I was selected at Pearson International Airport to take a PCR test and was in immediate isolation, a strange feeling since the return from umrah or hajj is usually greeted with warm hugs, not this time. After waiting for 3 days and no result because of the backlog, and in an abundance of caution and primarily because of my son Yusuf (www.ydoh.ca) and my beloved household, I did another PCR test and sadly I received the result that I tested positive. I followed all public health guidelines, including being in quarantine. Thankfully throughout the entire period I was in very good spirits and I felt alright with no visible symptoms, الحمد لله.

I am double vaccinated and also took my booster of a COVID-19 vaccine. As a Muslim, I do believe in divine decree, however, I do believe that in addition to my unwavering Iman of Allaah's protection, it is the vaccination that aided my defense against any visible symptoms and thankfully, away from the hospital, بإذن الله تعالى.

Again, as an active and visible Muslim in the forefront of promoting vaccination and precautionary health measures, I am kindly reminding everyone to please reflect on where we were and where we are now, because of the safety and efficacy of the vaccine along with following all public health measures (masking, staying home, and testing if you are unwell), these remain the best ways to help keep our household, neighbours, relatives, and friends safe and healthy. Also, with the highly transmissible Omicron variant, please get vaccinated and kindly encourage everyone you know to get vaccinated and to add that booster dose when eligible, إن شاء الله تعالى.

All praise and thanks are indeed only due to Allaah and I firmly believe that my umrah journey would not have been possible without His Decree, followed by the unwavering and complete support of my beloved family. I also extend my heartfelt gratitude to Sacred Tours, the TARIC Islamic Centre and World Ways Travels, جزاكم الله خير الجزاء في الدنيا والآخرة.

And by the way, Timmies is everywhere! Found this Tim Hortons on the outskirts of Makkah and it's truly gourmet style.



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