

## HAJJ AND THE MENTAL HEALTH OF MUSLIM PILGRIMS: A REVIEW

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### SUMMARY

Mass gatherings occur in different situations and settings around the world. A mass gathering can range in size from thousands to millions and in nature from recreation (i.e. concerts) to religious festivals (i.e. the Hajj pilgrimage). Such mass gatherings can result in high rates of morbidity and mortality from communicable and non-communicable diseases, 'accidents' and, over recent years, terror attacks. Disproportionately lower consideration has been given to the mental health and wellbeing of people during mass gatherings compared to that given to physical health during such events. Hajj is a religious pilgrimage to Mecca in Saudi Arabia that all Muslims are Islamically obliged to fulfil at least once in their lifetime. With up to 3 million pilgrims attending Hajj annually, it has been described as, 'The largest and longest-standing mass gathering event on Earth'. Although Hajj is a spiritual experience that is considered enlightening by many pilgrims, it can also be highly stressful which can have adverse effects on both physical and mental health. Few studies have been published hitherto on the impact that Hajj has on the mental health of pilgrims. This review article provides a narrative summary of studies conducted on Hajj and the relationship that this mass gathering has with the mental health of pilgrims.

**Key words:** Hajj – mass gatherings – Muslim mental health – pilgrimage – mental illness

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### INTRODUCTION

Approximately 1.8 billion or 24.1% of the world population are Muslims of which 62% live in Asian-Pacific countries (e.g., Indonesia, Pakistan, India, Bangladesh, Iran and Turkey), 20% in the Middle East or North Africa (e.g., Egypt, Yemen, Sudan, Saudi Arabia, Algeria, Syria), 15% in Sub-Saharan Africa (e.g., Nigeria, Rwanda, Kenya), 3% in Europe (e.g., France, Belgium, Austria, United Kingdom) and less than 1% in North America (e.g., United States, Canada) (Lipka et al. 2017).

Hajj is an annual Islamic pilgrimage to the holy city of Mecca in Saudi Arabia involving approximately 3 million Muslim pilgrims for over 30 days including a 5-day core period of intensive rituals and prayers. Hajj has been described as, 'The largest and longest-standing mass gathering event on Earth'. Hajj is one of the Five Pillars of Islam; it is a mandatory religious duty for adherents of the Islamic faith that must be carried out at least once in their lifetime. Pilgrims can also go to Mecca to perform the rituals at other times of the year. This is sometimes called the "lesser pilgrimage", or Umrah. However, even if pilgrims choose to perform

the Umrah, they are still obliged to perform the Hajj at some other point in their lifetime.

### HISTORY OF THE HAJJ PILGRIMAGE

The present custom of Hajj was established by the prophet Muhammed (PBUH). However, according to the Quran, aspects of the present custom of Hajj trace back to the time of the prophet Abraham (RA). According to Islamic tradition, Abraham (RA) was commanded by God to leave his wife Hagar and his son Ishmael (RA) alone in the barren desert of ancient Mecca. It is narrated that Hagar succumbed to despair and ran seven times between the two hills of Safa and Marwah in search of water to quench her own thirst and that of her son but to no avail. Returning in a state of resignation to her baby son Ishmael, she saw that her child started rubbing the ground with his leg and a fountain of water gushed forth beneath his foot. Later, Abraham (RA) was commanded to build the Kaaba and to invite people to perform pilgrimage there. The Quran refers to these events in chapter 2 ('The Cow') verses 124–127 and chapter 22 ('The Pilgrimage') verses 27–30.

The pilgrimage occurs from the 8th to 12th (or in some cases 13th) of Dhu al-Hijjah, the last month of the Islamic calendar. Because the Islamic calendar is lunar and the Islamic year is about eleven days shorter than the Gregorian year, the Gregorian date of Hajj changes from year to year.

## HAJJ AND HEALTH

Most pilgrims take the necessary precautions when it comes to their physical health before they travel to Mecca. For example, they would make sure they take all the injections and immunizations that their doctor recommends (Visser et al. 2011). It would be equally important for pilgrims to look after their mental health in the same way they do their physical health. This may seem counterintuitive to many Muslims since Hajj is considered a spiritual journey that is beneficial for a Muslim's mental health and 'soul'.

Muslims consider Hajj and the performing of it to be a blessing and pilgrims describe it as 'enlightening' and a 'life-changing experience'. However, there are factors that contribute to Hajj being a highly stressful experience such as: unfamiliar environment, overcrowding, heat, physical exertion, limited dietary intake, exhaustion, sleep deprivation and being on a foreign land that is far away from home (Masood et al. 2011). These stressors can adversely affect the mental health and wellbeing of pilgrims (Masood et al. 2011) as will be discussed and described in the review below.

## COMMON MISCONCEPTIONS ABOUT MENTAL ILLNESS IN MUSLIMS

Muslims often attribute mental health difficulties to supernatural causes like Jinn possession and/or the evil eye (Hankir et al. 2017). Muslims with mental health difficulties may think that Allah is punishing them for a sin they committed or that they have weak faith (Hankir et al. 2015). Of course, this isn't true; although Islam can be a protective factor against mental illness there are many Muslims who experience mental health difficulties despite having strong faith (Hankir et al. 2015). Prayer can provide relief and comfort and is very important, but since mental health problems are often caused by a psychiatric disease, it is important to seek help from a doctor for medical treatment in addition to prayer. The Prophet (PBUH) said:

"Make use of medical treatment, for Allah has not made a disease without appointing a remedy for it ..." (Kitah Al-Tibb of Sunan Abu-Dawud).

## THE EFFECTS OF HAJJ ON MENTAL HEALTH

Previous studies have shown that most pilgrims who developed mental health problems were not told about the "actual" difficulties involved or the details of rituals

during Hajj. Muslims may have pre-existing mental illness or may experience mental illness for the first time during Hajj. Pilgrims going to Hajj for the first time and older people seem to be at increased risk of experiencing a mental illness. Pilgrims who are from rural backgrounds and who have low exposure to urban life also seem to be at increased risk of certain mental illnesses (Masood et al. 2011).

The first few weeks of arrival in Mecca and the core Hajj period can be the most stressful and this is when Muslims can feel most anxious. Fear of getting lost, being on a foreign land and language barriers are all factors that can cause stress. Anticipation of a mishap such as a stampede or a terror attack are other factors that can contribute to stress and confusion. Heat and dehydration are some of the preventable causes of sudden confusion, especially in older people (Masood et al. 2011).

Common mental illnesses seen in Hajj are:

- Stress related;
- Psychosis (experiencing unusual and frightening beliefs and often hearing voices);
- Insomnia (difficulty sleeping);
- Mood disorders.

Cases of psychosis were often due to the discontinuation of anti-psychotic medication without medical advice. It is therefore crucial that Muslims with pre-existing mental illness such as psychosis continue adhering with their psychotropic medication. Simple measures such as going to an isolated place, physical comforting, nearness to family members, repeated reassurance, fluids and repeated verbalization of sequence of events as well as reorientation and deep breathing all help (Masood et al. 2011).

## Narrative Review of Published Research on Hajj and the mental health of Muslim Pilgrims

*Below is a narrative summary of studies conducted on Hajj and the relationship that this religious mass gathering has with the mental health of pilgrims.*

Bakhtiari and colleagues at the Sharif University of Technology investigated the relationship between the Hajj pilgrimage and mental health among university students in Iran (n=350). The General Health Questionnaire (GHQ) and the Meaning in Life Questionnaire were administered on participants before and after the Hajj pilgrimage. The authors of the study report that pilgrimage to Mecca lowered anxiety, depression, and stress levels in their sample and that there were improvements in social functioning and meaning in life (Bakhtiari et al. 2017).

However, Fateh and colleagues conducted a longitudinal study on the psychological effects of Hajj using the same instrument as Bakhtiari and colleagues did (the General Health Questionnaire (GHQ)). The findings of Fateh's study revealed that there was no statistically significant difference in the GHQ scores of pilgrims before and after the Hajj (Fateh et al. 2019).

Clingingsmith and colleagues estimated the impact of Hajj on 1,605 pilgrims from Pakistan. They reveal that female pilgrims were more likely to report negative feelings that suggest distress, and are less likely to report positive feelings of well-being (higher levels of distress were detected in female pilgrims, as measured by a version of the K6 screening scale). This could potentially be due to the impact of the Hajj on physical health. Indeed, the negative physical health effects were stronger for women than they were for men suggesting that part of the negative effect of the Hajj on women's feelings of well-being could be explained by poorer physical health. The findings could also potentially be due to the changes in pilgrim's beliefs and frame of reference discussed below (which the psychology literature suggests can lead to stress). Increased distress in female pilgrims might be due to the stark contrast between the typical Pakistani woman's daily life and the relatively greater equality and integration experienced during the Hajj. The impact of the Hajj on gender attitudes suggests an increased realization that the constraints and restrictions women are accustomed to in Pakistan may not be part of global Islam. It is important to note that this study revealed that while the Hajj has a negative impact on a female pilgrim's emotional state, it does not affect overall life satisfaction (Clingingsmith et al. 2009).

Khan and colleagues conducted a study on 136,000 Indian Hajj pilgrims in 2016 (Indian Medical Mission). They revealed that 182 patients developed psychological problems (1.3%) of which 45.7% were stress related issues, 9.8% psychosis, 7.3% insomnia and 5.6% mood disorders. The most common symptoms recorded in this sample were apprehension (45%), poor sleep (55%), anxiety (41%), and fear of being lost (27%). All cases of psychological problems were on their first Hajj, 60% were male and a majority were from rural areas. 22 patients (12%) required admission to hospital and only 12 pilgrims (6.8%) reported a past history of a mental illness (Khan et al. 2016).

Ozen and colleagues carried out a study on 130,000 Turkish Hajj pilgrims in 2008 (Turkish Mecca Hospital). 294 participants (0.2%) in their sample presented to psychiatric services, of which 38.4% reported anxiety, 22.1% mood disorders and 11.2% sleep disorders. The most common symptoms recorded were discomfort (70%), poor sleep (55%), anorexia (35%), 'whining' (30%) and fatigue (28%). 60% of those who presented to psychiatric services had a previous psychiatric history, 40% were male, 77% had low education and 71% had not been abroad before (Ozen et al. 2009).

### Psychological impact of mass gatherings

The traditional view (which has now largely been discredited) is that people in crowds tend to:

- Lose their sense of self;
- Lose their sense of judgement;
- Become capable of the most extreme actions.

However, in social identity theory, people perceive a common group membership and assume a shared social identity in a 'psychological crowd'. This leads to:

- *A cognitive transformation* - People stop behaving in terms of their idiosyncratic beliefs and start behaving on the basis of shared norms, values, and understandings.
- *A relational transformation* - The crowd is part of an extended group rather than "others". This leads to a shift towards greater intimacy and trust, respect, cooperation, mutual influence, helping, and also expectations of help from others.
- *An emotional transformation* - The crowd can display intense positive effect, termed 'effervescence'. Close and supportive relationships can contribute positively to feelings of wellbeing.

A study of 1,194 pilgrims attending Mecca in 2012 found that people felt safer and perceived the crowds to be less dangerous when they strongly identified with others in the crowd. Social identity theory helps to explain the perception that others in the crowd were supportive. The survey of pilgrims attending the 2012 Hajj showed that, although increasing levels of crowd density reduced feelings of safety, this effect was moderated by identification with the crowd and perceptions that others identified as Muslim. Specifically, those who were high in identification with the crowd actually felt safer as density increased. Mediation analysis was consistent with the idea that this moderation effect was because of the perception that others in the crowd were supportive, which was higher the more that people identified with the crowd. This same relationship was found for those pilgrims from Arab countries and Iran compared with those from other countries, whose greater reported safety was explicable in terms of their crowd identification and perceptions of support (Alnabulsi et al. 2014).

### CONCLUSION

Although Hajj is a spiritual experience that has been described as enlightening, it can also be highly stressful which can have adverse effects on both physical and mental health. Few studies have been published hitherto on the impact that Hajj has on the mental health of pilgrims. Currently the literature in relation to the mental health of Muslims during Hajj is conflicting and the conclusions from these studies must be interpreted with caution.

Protective factors against developing mental health difficulties during the Hajj pilgrimage include:

- Preparation for Hajj (i.e. being aware of the challenge and exertion of performing the Hajj (a detailed understanding of what is involved)) and physical fitness and healthy diet in months before Hajj.
- Support while on Hajj (i.e. family/close friends competent tour staff, realistic itinerary for visit, professional health services during Hajj, asking for help during Hajj from fellow pilgrims, consideration for less crowded times and areas).

Future research investigating the impact of Hajj on the mental health and wellbeing of pilgrims is urgently needed.

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#### **Contribution of individual authors:**

Ahmed Hankir & Zavid Chariwala conceived the idea for the paper and contributed to the literature review and revised the manuscript.

Usman Siddique, Frederick R. Carrick, Ian Walker & Rashid Zaman contributed to the literature review and revised the manuscript.

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