

Saudi Arabia`s measures to curb the COVID-19 outbreak: temporary suspension of the Umrah pilgrimage

Shahul H. Ebrahim¹, MD, PhD, Ziad A Memish², MD, FRCPC

¹University of Sciences, Technique and Technology, Bamako, Mali (Email: ebrahimsh2@gmail.com)

² Research & Innovation Center, King Saud Medical City, Ministry of Health and College of Medicine, Alfaisal University, Riyadh, Saudi Arabia. Hubert Department of Global Health, Rollins School of Public Health, Emory University, Atlanta, GA, USA (Email: zmemish@yahoo.com)

Corresponding author:

Professor Ziad A Memish, MD, FRCPC, FRCPE, FRCPL, FACP, FFPH

Email: zmemish@yahoo.com

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The ongoing explosive spread of SARS CoV-2 and new hotspots beyond the first city of Wuhan, China especially in Iran and Italy, and introduction to the Middle Eastern countries calls for additional regional actions to stem its further spread.^{1,2} For the first time in the eight decades of the history of Muslim pilgrimage to the holy sites in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA), on February 27, 2020, KSA placed restrictions on inbound Umrah pilgrimage. KSA also suspended the recently introduced e-Visa program, placed ban on inbound travel of persons from COVID-19 affected countries, and restrictions on travel of GCC citizens who have traveled to COVID-19 affected countries.

Umrah pilgrimage is a Muslim religious ritual continuously held throughout the year.³ In 2019, KSA welcomed 7.5 million Umrah visa holding visitors in addition to domestic Saudi national pilgrims, the large migrant worker population residing in KSA, and those from visa-free countries such as the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) Countries. Umrah is considered the “smaller” pilgrimage compared to the Hajj, an annual one-time scheduled mass gathering of 5-days with over 3 million pilgrims, the Hajj.⁴ Except the timing and density of pilgrims, the Hajj and Umrah are similar with respect to the demographics, national distribution, and risk factors for acquisition of diseases. However, Umrah pilgrims may be at greater risk for disease transmission due to some factors. Hajj pilgrims generally travel in chartered or exclusive flights, whereas Umrah countries generally travel commercially as single, families or in small groups along with regular passengers. Hajj pilgrims are exposed to didactic health education sessions as part of their preparedness package, but Umrah pilgrims do not receive any. Visa requirements are the same but have been less stringently enforced with the recently introduced tourism e-visa from 50 countries where more than 90% of people arriving for

tourism performing umra. Because the Umrah crowd size in ritual sites are smaller than that during Hajj, more elderly and disabled persons would be seen during Umrah. Beginning January 2020, Saudi Arabia's Ministry of Haj and Umrah made effective the new health insurance policy which will be applicable once the pilgrim arrives in the Kingdom. Under the insurance cover, Umrah pilgrims can avail insurance policy to visit government or private hospitals in the Kingdom and will have to present only a passport number. Moreover, comprehensive insurance cover can be helpful in case of flight delays or cancellations, death and in repatriating the deceased, or in accidents and disasters. Put together, Umrah pilgrims may be at high risk of person-to-person transmission of SARS CoV-2 both among pilgrims and with non-pilgrims, should they acquire SARS-COV2, and carrying the infection further to their home countries unknowingly. Continuation of inbound Umrah travels to KSA would have helped SARS-COV2 to reach currently unaffected countries.

KSA's decision to suspend Umrah pilgrimage services comes with a huge cost to the economy of KSA including the airline, transport and hospitality sector, and adversely affects the employment and livelihood of the native and immigrant workforce of holy cities of KSA. The impact on personal finance of pilgrims in all 180+ countries due to cancellations, and on transportation and hospitality sectors that cater to pilgrims in home countries would also be significant. Above all, pilgrimage is lifetime dream of people of Muslim faith, and many save up money for their entire lives to achieve their eternal dream. Many even express preference to die at the holy sites and consider it as a blessing. Therefore, the emotional and mental challenges experienced by would-be pilgrims who are affected by the suspension are unquantifiable. By cancelling a religious event of significance to the Muslim world, KSA also has

to manage diplomatic challenges with large pilgrim volume countries and manage requests for exemptions.

KSA's contribution to stem the SARS-COV2 spread has huge benefits for the GCC and all the lives of people dependent on the GCC. The ripple effects of sustained and continued SARS-COV2 transmission in GCC extends far beyond GCC to the family members, homes and cities of the immigrant workforce left behind in Asia, Africa and middle eastern countries. Some of the World's largest commercial airlines are now based in the GCC offering huge potential for rapid dissemination of SARS-COV-2. Further these airlines are also major employers of immigrant workforce and play a huge role in sustaining the tourism and commerce in their respective hubs and the countries they serve. Rather than awaiting in complacency for the first cases to emerge, it is commendable that KSA acted proactively. The collective contribution of KSA's timely decision to global COVID-19 containment would be enormous.

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