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Mecca disaster rekindles urge for Islam renewal

As the causes of the 24 September stampede in Mina remains unclear, the world began asking: "How can Hajj calamities be avoided? Writes Salah Nasrawi

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The footage of the bodies of pilgrims piled half naked near the site where nearly 800 were killed and hundreds wounded in a stampede near Mecca as Muslims gathered to perform a key ritual of the Hajj pilgrimage last week was shocking and heart-breaking.

The stampede apparently started when two waves of pilgrims on their way to and from a hectic stoning ritual collided in a bottlenecked footpath near the holy sites. In the ensuing chaos, hundreds were trampled underfoot or suffocated.

The tragedy, the worst to befall the Muslim pilgrimage since July 1990 when 1,426 pilgrims perished in an overcrowded pedestrian tunnel leading to the holy sites near Mecca, has rattled the entire Muslim world and raised serious questions about the management of Islam's most sacred rituals and the world's largest gathering.

Moreover, the crush has rekindled debates about the need for reform in Islam in order that this faith with some 1.5 billion adherents can conform better to progress and modernity and adapt to new circumstances.

A week after the deadly crush the most pressing question has remained unanswered, namely what caused the chaotic stampede.

The Saudi government has remained tight-lipped on how such a tragedy, which has drawn fierce criticisms of the Saudi authorities' handling of the safety of the Hajj, could have occurred.

Saudi King Salman bin Abdul-Aziz has ordered a swift investigation into the "painful incident" and a review of the kingdom's planning for the annual Hajj pilgrimage to Mecca.

Yet, the kingdom's mufti, or top religious leader, Sheikh Abdel-Aziz Al-Sheikh, has decreed that the catastrophic Hajj stampede was "beyond human control," blaming it on "fate and destiny".

Meanwhile, Saudi Health Minister Khalid Al-Falih has pointed the finger of blame at the dead, saying that the pilgrims were "undisciplined" and did not follow traffic instructions.

Among other suggested causes have been the pilgrims ignoring the timetable put forward by the Saudi authorities for the rituals, their rushing to end the rites, the sweltering heat, and confusion and a lack of guidance and assistance by the organisers.

While some eyewitnesses among the pilgrims blamed laxity by the Saudi authorities in crowd control, the pro-Saudi media talked about an Iranian and Shia conspiracy with others putting the blame on undisciplined pilgrims of African nationalities.

Whatever the causes behind the human crush, the disaster has echoed across the Muslim world, as countries from Africa, Asia and Europe all claimed citizens from among the dead and as some called for changes in the pilgrimage procedures to ensure greater safety.

Iran, which had the largest group of casualties with some 155 of its citizens killed in the stampede, was quick to condemn Saudi Arabia for what it termed the kingdom's "incompetence" in organising the Hajj pilgrimage.

Iran's supreme leader Grand Ayatollah Ali Khamenei said the Saudi government "must accept huge responsibility for this catastrophe."

Iran's state prosecutor Ebrahim Raisi said he would pursue legal action against Saudi Arabia's rulers in the international courts over the crush.

Raisi and other Iranian officials accused the Saudi authorities of blocking a road used by the pilgrims to allow a royal convoy to pass through, causing the deadly convergence of two waves of pilgrims going in opposite directions.

Pro-Iranian Shia politicians such as former Iraqi prime minister Nuri Al-Maliki and the leader of the Lebanese Hizbullah group Hassan Nasrallah joined Tehran in the protests.

Criticism also came from Sunni Muslim countries. Nigeria's President Muhammadu Buhari urged King Salman "to ensure a comprehensive and thorough exercise that will identify any flaws in the Hajj organisation."

The head of Nigeria's Hajj delegation, Emir of Kano Muhammadu Sanusi II, said the Saudi authorities should not "apportion blame to the pilgrims for not obeying instructions".

In Turkey, a Sunni powerhouse which maintains close relations with Saudi Arabia, a senior official of the ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP) criticised the kingdom for failures in managing the pilgrimage.

AKP Deputy Chairman Mehmet Ali Shahin even called on Riyadh to give Turkey "the management" of the Hajj instead. Turkey, he said, would handle it in a "very orderly manner and solve the problems".

Indonesian President Joko Widodo, who leads the world's most populous Muslim nation, said "there must be improvements in the management of the Hajj so that this incident is not repeated."

The crush came less than two weeks after a construction crane smashed into the Grand Mosque at Mecca, Islam's holiest house of worship, killing some 100 people and wounding scores of others. The Saudi authorities blamed the sudden crash on strong winds.

In recent years, the kingdom has spent billions of dollars on upgrading infrastructure in Mecca, including the expansion of the Grand Mosque to increase its capacity to accommodate worshipers and improving transport.

Lavish mega-hotels, luxury residences with Kaaba views, and shopping malls with western fashion chains and international fast-food restaurants have also been part of the expansion projects in Islam's holiest city.

Many of these projects, as well as the luxurious Hajj style they have introduced, have come under fire from critics who say they undermine the spirituality of the divine rituals which are one of the five pillars of Islam along with the declaration of faith, prayer, the payment of charity and fasting in Ramadan.

In addition, the expansions have been criticised for encroaching on or eliminating almost all of Islam's architectural legacy in Mecca, such as the building where the Prophet Mohamed was born, the house of his wife Khadijah, and the shrines and mosques of distinguished early Muslims.

While many of Mecca's architectural monuments were removed as part of the expansion projects, some of these sites have been demolished in line with hardline Wahabi thinking that considers them symbols of "polytheism".

In many ways, the Hajj, which the Quran says all adult Muslims who are physically and financially able to should make once in their lifetimes, is increasingly becoming fraught with difficulties and sometimes unsafe conditions.

The discussions over the stampede and other accidents during the pilgrimage have thus far focused on the logistics of the Hajj, including organisation, infrastructure, transport and crowd management.

They have also centred on the inconsistencies and confusion in the statements made by Saudi officials and religious leaders and the political and sectarian bickering surrounding the accident, especially the Shia versus Wahabi interpretations of Islam.

The discussions have been avoiding how to deal with the basic theological and traditional elements relating to how the centuries-old and complex Hajj rituals are performed, however.

While the Hajj logistics and infrastructure are increasing being brought face to face with modernisation and globalisation, the rituals themselves remain deep rooted in the traditions of the 7th century CE when a few hundred of the Prophet Mohamed's Bedouin followers began flocking to the rugged desert around Mecca for the newly imposed Islamic rituals.

Indeed, the repeated calamities during the Hajj season have highlighted the need for a serious debate among Muslims from all schools of thought about theological renovation and renewed traditions within the context of Islamic revival and religious reformation.

Despite a quota system imposed by Saudi Arabia which earmarks 1,000 Hajj visas for each one million in the Muslim population of each country, the number of pilgrims is on the rise due to population increases and improved economic conditions.

According to some statistics, the number of foreign pilgrims has increased by approximately 2,824 per cent, from 58,584 in 1920 to 1,712,962 in 2012. Despite a quota cut of 20 per cent due to the continuation of the construction work, some 1.4 million foreign pilgrims performed the Hajj this year.

In essence, the millions of Muslim pilgrims perform today exactly what a few hundred of their ancestors did 1,400 years ago on the same small chunk of holy land. Meanwhile, millions of others are unable to carry out the religious duty because of the visa quota or other restrictions.

If the expansion of Islam's most sacred holy site has been a major result of the changes wrought by modernity, then it is time not only for Saudi Arabia but also for the entire Muslim world to develop or even modify the rituals in order to make them conform to modernity without compromising their spirituality or religious values.

The Islamic concept of *ijtihad*, the exercise of informed independent and legal judgement on issues of the faith, has always been used by enlightened Muslims to interpret and apply divine guidance to the problems of their time.

There are many historical examples. Working with such an understanding of theological expediency, Mohamed's second successor, the caliph Omar Ibn Al-Khattab, set aside the amputation of hands stipulated by the Quran as the penalty for stealing when the Muslims began starving during a time of famine.

Many of the Hajj rituals are not even mentioned in the Quran, and change or modification in the way they are performed would not affect beliefs, guidance, spiritual fulfilment, or attitudes towards worship.

Today is a moment of truth for all Muslims when the Hajj rites should be let free from the walls of Wahabi fundamentalism.