

By Mufti Mohammad Farhan and Sultan Abdulhameed

A rising threat to Muslim tradition



Muslim pilgrims circumambulate around the Kaaba, the cubic building at the Grand Mosque, ahead of the annual Hajj pilgrimage in the Muslim holy city of Mecca, Saudi Arabia on Aug. 28, 2017. Hotter global temperatures due to climate change and repeat Hajj attendees endanger the future of the annual pilgrimage to Mecca. Credit: AP/Khalil Hamra

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We Muslims worry about the planet in the same way that people of all faiths do: We honor the creator by caring for God's creation. But we also have a climate concern unique to our faith: As the planet warms, future generations of Muslims may no longer be able to make Hajj, the pilgrimage to Mecca, in the already-hot desert of Saudi Arabia.

Muslims make up nearly 24 percent of the world's population, and those who are old enough, healthy enough, and financially able are obliged to make Hajj, one of the five

pillars of Islam, once in a lifetime. About 2.3 million Muslims made Hajj in 2019, and the number is expected to increase in future years.

But a huge obstacle lies ahead: According to a Massachusetts Institute of Technology study, air temperature and humidity in the Mecca region are increasing faster than the global average. That means acute heat stress in the hot season, from April to October. In the past 30 years, conditions exceeded the heat stress danger index established by the National Weather Service in 60 percent of the years when Hajj was in summer. Climate models project a 73 percent probability that the weather will exceed the danger index in 2020 (when Hajj occurs in July and August), and the heat is expected to rise even more dangerously in future years.

Despite that reality, nations in the Middle East that depend on oil revenue have not focused on climate change. Now that the adverse impact on Hajj is documented by the MIT report, we hope it stirs governmental and personal action.

We can urge governments to change their policies, but lasting change will require greater awareness among Muslims. Imams and other Islamic teachers can play an important role, because protection of the Earth and all its creatures is a key value in Islam. The Quran underlines the unity of all life: “There is no creature that crawls on the Earth, nor bird that flies upon its wings, but that they are communities like you.”

In addition to heeding the Quran, we must honor the environmental legacy of the prophet Muhammad. He lived a frugal life, free of excess and waste; renewed and recycled his belongings by repairing them or giving them to others; conserved water even when washing for prayer; forbade cutting down trees even in war; established protected areas (himas) for wildlife and vegetation, and reacted angrily to mistreatment of creatures as small as baby birds and ants.

Still, we must find ways to mitigate the environmental impact of Hajj. Though it is required only once in a lifetime, many wealthy people go repeatedly, adding to overcrowding and carbon emissions, through both air travel and animal sacrifice. Every person at Hajj is expected to sacrifice at least one animal, and millions of cattle are raised for this purpose annually. Many around the world also sacrifice an estimated 100 million animals to observe Eid-al-Adha, on the last day of Hajj.

We urge imams and Muslim scholars to teach that it is indeed a religious duty to take steps to reduce our carbon footprint. We implore Muslims everywhere to make changes to their lifestyle, such as adapting their diet and traveling more sustainably. Listen to both the prophet Muhammad and the scientists, to protect our planet, so that our children and grandchildren will be able to make this pilgrimage in safety for generations to come.

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