ARAB NEWS
The Voice of a Changing Region

The journey begins...

Special edition marking Hajj 2019



ARAB NEWS Friday, August 9, 2019

Hajj2019

Hajj2019

Hajj in numbers

From transport to health care, the annual pilgrimage adds up to a major logistical challenge.

- **1,849,817** Total number of pilgrims who have arrived in the Kingdom
- **1,736,492** Number of pilgrims who arrived by air
- **17,250** Number of pilgrims who arrived by sea
- **96,075** Number of pilgrims who arrived by land
- **30,000** Medical specialists who provide health care services to pilgrims
- **25** Number of hospitals
- **180** Number of ambulances
- **155** Number of health care centers
- **5,000** Number of beds

SACRED JOURNEY

Dreams become reality on road to Makkah

The rites and rituals of the Hajj pilgrimage offer a unique opportunity for worship and spiritual renewal

Arab News Makkah

All Muslims dream of making Hajj at least once in their life. Saudi authorities are getting ready to host nearly 2 million pilgrims who have received their Hajj permits and are about to make their dreams come true. Each year the Saudi government provides facilities and services to enable pilgrims to perform their rituals with ease and tranquility.

Custodian of the Two Holy Mosques, King Salman, recently inaugurated the Guests of God Service Program, which features more than 130 initiatives, including management of Saudi archaeological and cultural sites to enrich pilgrims' experience. Over 100,00 security personnel are expected to oversee this year's Hajj to ensure pilgrims safe access to the holy sites.

More than 32,000 health specialists will provide health care services to this year's Guests of God. Pilgrims will receive necessary vaccines at entry checkpoints to ensure their well-being. The Health Ministry delivered more than 360,000 polio vaccine doses and 480,000 influenza and meningitis vaccine doses to domestic pilgrims and residents of Makkah and Madinah last Hajj season. The ministry has made 180 hospital and medical centers ready to serve pilgrims.

A step-by-step guide to Hajj

How Muslims perform the rituals of the Hajj pilgrimage to Makkah



Miqat

Pilgrims must be in a state of 'Ihram,' or ritual purity, as they prepare to leave from 'Miqat' or from their accommodation in Makkah.

They are obliged to don simple clothing, with men wearing nothing but two sheets of unsown cloth and a pair of slippers.



Grand Mosque

On arrival in Makkah, worshippers circle the Kaaba counter-clockwise seven times in what is known as 'Tawaf.'

Pilgrims recite "Labbayka Allahumma Labbayk," which means "Here I am at your service, O God, here I am!"



Mina

The first day of Hajj is the 8th of Dul Hijjah; pilgrims set out for Mina the same day and stay the night.





Muzdalifa

After Arafat, pilgrims head to Muzdalifa, located between Mina and Arafat, to pray and sleep, and then leave before sunrise.

Mina

On the 10th of Dul Hijjah, they return to Mina to throw seven pebbles at a stone pillar that represents the devil.



Arafat

On the 9th of Dul Hijjah, pilgrims leave Mina for Arafat before midday and offer prayers until sunset.

Source: Arabnews.com, Wikipedia

1 MIQAT

Hajj begins with Ihram (state of ritual purity) for all pilgrims. Pilgrims start their Hajj at a Miqat. There are five Mawaqeet (plural of Miqat) before they can reach Makkah. There they wash, wear their white clothes (Ihram), pray and make the intention to make their Hajj (niyyah), before getting to Makkah. They start making Talbiah (saying: 'Labbaika Allahuma Labbaik') .

Allah made Makkah a sacred and hallowed city that hosts His house, so it shouldn't be entered except in a specific manner which implies glorifying God and surrendering to Him. Therefore, the Almighty ruled that anyone wanting to visit His glorified House for Hajj or Umrah must enter the state of Ihram from specific places that he is not permitted to pass without Ihram.

The Mawaqeet surround the boundaries of Makkah from north, south, east and west, and are on the path of pilgrims who come from all over the world.



2 GRAND MOSQUE

When pilgrims reach Makkah, they head to the Holy Mosque and circle Kaaba seven times (Tawaf), starting with the Black Stone. They walk counter-clockwise so that the Kaaba stays on their left. This is the Tawaf of Umrah for those performing the Tamattu Hajj (rites of Hajj and Umrah), and the tawaf of the arrival for those performing the Ifraad type (only performing the rites of Hajj) or Qiran type (performing the rites of Hajj and Umrah, also known as minor Hajj: this type doesn't require animal sacrifice). Pilgrims are then required to pray next to the Ibrahim site when they complete seven circles.

Afterwards, they undertake Sa'e, which means "seeking" or "ritual walking." This rite consists of walking seven times between the hills of Safa and Marwah,



which are to the south and north of the Kaaba, respectively. Originally, this was done outdoors, but today the path is enclosed in a gallery. Pilgrims recite prayers, including: "O Allah! I intend to perform seven rounds of Sa'e between Safa and Marwah to please You. Make it easy for me and accept it from me." All rituals performed in the Grand Mosque are done barefoot.

After completing Sa'e, those performing the Tamattu type of Hajj shave their heads twice — once after the previous rites and again after the animal-sacrifice ritual. Men have their hair either completely shaved or trimmed, though shaving is preferred. However, a man may not want to have his head shaved completely during the Umrah if he plans to complete the Hajj rites in the next few days, which also include shaving. Women do not have their heads shaved, but instead cut a lock of hair or have their hair trimmed. After hair-cutting, Umrah is complete and the restrictions of Ihram are lifted.

Pilgrims can return to their normal activities. However, if a pilgrim is performing the second and third type of Hajj: Ifraad or Qiran, then the hair-cutting ritual is delayed after the animal-sacrifice part.



3 MINA

On the first day of Hajj (eighth day of Dhu'l-Hijjah), pilgrims head to Mina, near Makkah, where they spend the rest of the day, which is known as the Day of Tarawiyyah. Here, the Saudi government provides amenities, including thousands of air-conditioned tents offering temporary housing for pilgrims. On the first night, no major rituals take place, so pilgrims spend their time praying and reflecting with other pilgrims. In Mina, men and women stay in separate tents, which are located adjacent to each other.



4 ARAFAT

On the second day of Hajj (ninth day of Dul Hijjah), pilgrims travel to nearby Mount Arafat. Pilgrims complete Dhuhr (noon prayer) and Asr (afternoon prayer), and stay there supplicating the Almighty and asking Him for forgiveness and mercy until the sun sets.

It was narrated that the Prophet said: "Hajj is Arafa." It is the day of Dua'a (supplication) and Dhikr (remembrance of Allah), on which Allah prides His Angels on His pilgrims and forgive them.

The Prophet is reported to have said: "When the day of Arafa comes, Allah descends to the heavens and prides the angels on His servants. He says: 'Look at my servants; they came to Me from every valley, unwashed and uncombed. Be witness that I have forgiven them."

5 MUZDALIFAH

After sundown, pilgrims head quietly to Muzdalifah, between Mina and Arafat. There, they offer an evening prayer to God (Maghrib and Isha) and spend the night sleeping on the ground beneath the open sky. In the morning, pilgrims gather pebbles, which they will use in the stoning ritual later in the day. They spend the night in Muzdalifah as the Prophet — peace be upon him — did until dawn. However, it is permissible to leave Muzdalifah after midnight.



6 MINA AGAIN

Before the sun rises, pilgrims head back to Mina to take part in a ceremony meant to symbolize stoning the devil. Pilgrims throw seven consecutive pebbles at a special stone monument called the Jamrat Al-Aqabah. This ceremony can be crowded, tense and emotional. The elderly, children, sick and injured are discouraged from taking part. Instead, they may perform this later in the evening, or have a friend or confidant perform the ritual on their behalf. After stoning, men shave their heads while woman cut some of their hair. This is called the minor (Tahallul), which removes all the limitations of Ihram, except sexual intercourse.

After the stoning ritual, it is necessary to offer an animal sacrifice to God. In the past, each pilgrim did this individually; however, today, it is much more common for pilgrims to simply purchase a sacrifice voucher.

After selling vouchers, qualified personnel will sacrifice a lamb for each pilgrim (or a camel for every seven pilgrims), butcher the animals, package the meat, and ship it to Muslim communities worldwide to feed the poor.

Animal sacrifice can be done at any point on the 10th, 11th, or 12th day of Dhul-Hijjah. This ritual commemorates Prophet Ibrahim's readiness to sacrifice his son, before he was replaced by a lamb, and symbolizes the believers' submission to God. The meat is shared out, especially among the needy.



7 GRAND MOSQUE

Pilgrims then go to the Haram to make Ifadah Tawaf, followed by Sa'e if they have not made the Sa'e after the Arrival Tawaf.

Worshippers return to Mina to spend the three nights of Tashreeq and throw the pebbles. It is recorded that the Prophet slept all three nights in Mina and did not rush into leaving. However, if someone wishes to leave early, he should throw the pebbles on the 12th day and leave Mina before sunset. If the sun sets before he leaves, he must sleep the third night in Mina. But if he proceeds to leave Mina and the sun sets on his way out, but he has not left Mina yet, he does not have to stay the night.

Just as in the Umrah, the Hajj requires pilgrims to perform the Tawaf and Sa'e rituals at the Kaaba and the nearby hills. The rituals are performed essentially identically to the way they are performed during the Umrah, but it is strongly recommended that these ceremonies be done only after the stoning, sacrifice, and hair-cutting rituals. After completing the Tawaf and Sa'e, pilgrims are released from their state of Ihram and may resume the activities that were previously prohibited. At the end of their third day, pilgrims return to Mina and spend the night there in prayer.



BE CONNECTED

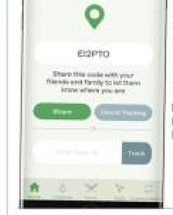
Arab News Hajj app explained

What it is

The Arab News Hajj app is a free smartphone application designed to help pilgrims visiting Saudi Arabia to perform the holy rituals. It offers essential information and contact details needed during their spiritual journey. This year's version of the app, endorsed once more by the Muslim World League, comes with a new design that provides an improved user experience. Enhanced features include live news updates and the signature 'Pilgrim Tracker,' which enables worshippers to connect with their loved ones back home. The new features give pilgrims the option to listen to verses from the Qur'an, to use a digital Qibla compass and activate a real-time currency converter to help to process their payments.



What it does: Main features



Pilgrim tracker

If you get lost in the crowd of Hajj pilgrims, there is no need to panic. This feature allows you to track and check on friends and family while performing Hajj. Each user has a unique code that can be shared with their loved ones to let them know where they are.



Hajj information

All you need to know about Hajj rituals. Key information such as daily prayer times and weather updates can also be found under this feature. It also has important contact details of all embassies and other useful numbers such as hotels and restaurants. The feature also shows pilgrims the nearest hospitals, train stations and Grand Mosque gates.

Latest news

Pilgrims no longer need to worry about grabbing newspapers or checking online news outlets while performing Hajj. All the latest stories and developments from our team of journalists covering Hajj will be listed in detail under this feature.





Media gallery

In this section, we supply you with photos and videos from around Makkah, Madinah and the holy sites so you do not miss a thing.

Download free from the App Store for iOS or Google Play for Android

Spotlight



The point of the exercise is to mingle with everyone out there until everyone is the same. No one should be above anyone.
Zakaria Murshid
Former Hajj mutawwif



During Murshid's most recent Hajj, he was stuck between Mount Arafat (above) and Mina, and had to ask a stranger for a lift back to Mina, as he could not make the journey on foot. For him, this is the spirit of Hajj. Photo/Supplied

HAJJ 2019

Insights of a pilgrimage veteran

A former volunteer paramedic and guide says visitors should immerse themselves in the experience

Hala Tashkandi Riyadh

As a child of Makkah and a regular visitor to the Kaaba since before he was 10 years old, no one knows the grounds of the Grand Mosque better than Zakaria Murshid. He told Arab News he has performed Hajj "maybe 40 times," but probably more.

Growing up in the city, Murshid volunteered with various organizations over the course of many Hajj pilgrimages.

He has been a volunteer paramedic, a mutawwif (someone who leads pilgrims in the traditional rites and prayers of Hajj and Umrah) and a guide. But 86-year-old Murshid is special in one more very personal way for me: He is my grandfather.

When I was growing up, he would regale me with his tales of Hajj. I recall playing with one of his old books that would pop up to become a mini replica of the Kaaba, which my siblings and I would circumambulate while repeating the prayers he taught us.

He would tell us stories of incidents you could only really experience in Makkah: Two pilgrims who speak different languages having an entire conversation without any words, or seeing pilgrims from all over the world come together to help, support and protect each other.

It is the most noble thing a human can do, he told me, and I grew to believe it as the years went by.

Murshid was keen to perform Hajj yearly, and made sure each of his children went on their first pilgrimage as soon as they were old enough. Even when he moved to Riyadh in the 1960s, he took his family to Hajj almost every year.



Zakaria Murshid, now aged 86, has worked as a volunteer paramedic, a guide and a mutawwif (someone who leads pilgrims in the traditional rites and prayers of Hajj and Umrah).





Over the years, Murshid's ability to perform the pilgrimage yearly has dwindled for a number of reasons.

Aside from factors such as age-related health problems, he said it has become much harder for people to perform Hajj on the spur of the moment.

"It used to be that you could just drive to Makkah and perform Hajj on your own. The regulations have gotten much stricter as of late," he said.

Nowadays you cannot perform Hajj without a permit, and unregistered pilgrims face hefty fines and risk deportation or jail.

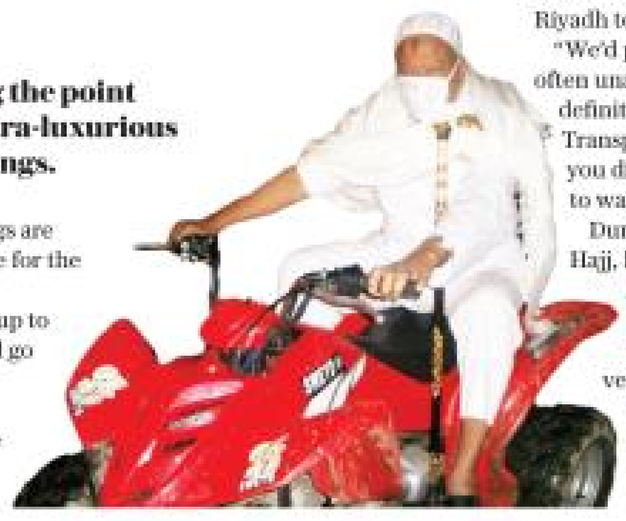
Also, the Saudi government will not issue Hajj visas to individuals who have performed the pilgrimage in the last five years.

But Murshid does think there are benefits to this. "Restricting the number of pilgrims each year gives more people a chance to come for the first time," he said.

"I consider myself lucky to have been able to perform Hajj so many times. That was a long time ago, however. Things are different now, and maybe for the better," he added.

People are missing the point when they seek ultra-luxurious facilities and lodgings.

"We used to just drive up to Mina, pitch our tents and go along with the crowd. When I was a young bachelor, I'd travel in the back of an ambulance with the Red Crescent or go along with the mutawwifeen," Murshid said.



"When I married, my wife, children and I would go with family. We'd get our trusty pickup truck, pile the tents and equipment in the back, and drive from Riyadh to Makkah.

"We'd perform the rites often unaided, and things were definitely harder back then. Transportation, for example. If you didn't have a car, you had to walk everywhere."

During his most recent Hajj, he was stuck between Arafat and Mina and had to ask a stranger with an all-terrain vehicle to take him back to Mina as he could not make the journey on foot due to his age.

"That, for me, is the spirit of Hajj — that kindness and willingness to go out of one's way for a stranger," Murshid said.

He applauded the government's efforts to make the pilgrimage easier, with new introductions such as the train system, the organized efforts of licensed Hajj campaigns, and the renovations of the mosque grounds and other facilities.

But Murshid is also nostalgic about the old struggles of Hajj. In his view, people are missing the point of the experience when they seek ultra-luxurious facilities and lodgings.

"The point of the exercise is to struggle, to mingle with everyone out there until everyone is the same," he said.

"No one should be above anyone. We need to work harder to unify the experience for everyone."

My grandfather has performed Hajj more times than anyone I know, but he said he would do it again in a heartbeat if he could.

"Hajj is like nothing else in the world," he said. "The closeness you feel to Allah, the knowledge that all of your efforts and exertions are pleasing Him, and knowing that at the end of the ordeal all your sins will be cleansed and you'll be as you were the day you were born — those are my favorite things about Hajj."

Murshid offered advice to the all-female Arab News team performing the pilgrimage this year. "Stick together, take care of each other but, above all, immerse yourselves in the experience," he said.

"Hajj is the most beautiful thing you'll ever take part in. And know that you're making us all proud."

FASTFACTS

- Hajj takes about 3–5 days and occurs on the 8–12th of Dhu Al-Hijjah month of the Islamic calendar.
- Pilgrims stay at Mount Arafat, then move to Muzdalifah and Mina, where they perform the stoning ritual at the Jamarat.
- Almost 2.4 million pilgrims performed Hajj in 2018.
- Hajj is the fifth of the Five Pillars of Islam.
- For every Muslim, performing Hajj at least once in their lifetime is obligatory if they are physically fit and financially able.
- Male pilgrims are required to dress in two white sheets. Women can wear normal modest and clean clothes.


T. COOK & SON'S
MECCA PILGRIMAGE TICKET.
The holder of this Ticket is entitled to travel from
To JEDDAH and back, during 1886.
This Ticket, to be shewn when required,
if lost, cannot be replaced except by
repayment.
1886.
No.
is entitled to travel from BOMBAY to
1886.
No.
is entitled to travel by Steamboat from
JEDDAH to BOMBAY.
1886.
No.
is entitled to travel by Steamboat from
BOMBAY to JEDDAH.

A Hajj steamboat ticket voucher used in the late 1800s.

Hajj2019

Hajj through history

The annual Muslim pilgrimage of Hajj is an Islamic practice more than 1,400 years old that holds an incomparable spiritual value for Muslims when performed during their lifetime. The advancements in technology and security have considerably eased the burdens on pilgrims and their families.



EXCLUSIVE INTERVIEW

Kingdom 'open to Qatari pilgrims'

The service of pilgrims runs in the blood of all Saudis, says Hajj minister

Mohammed Al-Kinani Makkah

Saudi Hajj and Umrah Minister Dr. Mohammed Salih Bentin said Qatari citizens know that the Kingdom is open to them and they are welcome to visit.

In an exclusive interview with Arab News, Bentin said: "We have called the Qatari Hajj mission to come like all other Muslim countries. We asked them for the expected number of pilgrims. When the time to sign the agreements came, they did not do so. So, we could not know who their licensed Hajj agencies were. Saudi Arabia then launched websites for the Qataris to register and choose between the available services. We were surprised to see that the link was blocked by Doha.

"Despite the pressures on our brothers who would like to perform Hajj, they understand that Saudi Arabia is open to them. Airports, camps and services are all available. They are welcome."

Addressing the Kingdom's preparations for the Hajj season, the minister said: "There are over 350,000 people working for pilgrims from both the public and private sector."

He added that in Makkah, preparations are intensified to guarantee a safe environment.

"All Makkah citizens are delighted to see pilgrims come to their city. They do not experience any disorder or traffic congestion. This could not happen without our proficient efforts to deal with huge numbers of people," Bentin said.

"The Makkah Route initiative helps pilgrims organize Hajj procedures in their countries without needing to visit the Saudi Embassy. Their flights to Saudi Arabia are similar to a domestic flight. There are no restrictions as long as they are only coming to perform their religious duties," he added.



Hajj security forces have affirmed that pilgrims' safety and security is a red line, stressing that they won't let anything disrupt them. SPA

"Even passengers who travel through private or executive lounges rarely enjoy such services. Once their planes arrive, worshippers take buses directly to their residences. They do not even need to wait for their luggage. There are workers who take their baggage to Makkah," Bentin said.

The minister discussed the smart Hajj platform, which offers advanced services to help pilgrims, including an online electronic visa application process. "The platform also includes a smart Hajj card that holds a pilgrim's personal, medical and housing information. It can be quickly read using electronic scanners. The card also provides assistance to worshippers who are lost and controls entry to Hajj tents," he said.

350k+
people are working from different sectors to serve Hajj pigrims.

The minister said that the Royal Commission for Makkah City and Holy Sites is developing the holy sites to accommodate as many pilgrims as possible. "Makkah has a limited capacity. However, managing Hajj is a complete system covering entry ports, residences in Makkah, Arafat, Muzdalifah and Mina, where over 2 million pilgrims gather for stoning the pillars. The Holy Mosque also has a strict capacity," he said.

"We measure the rate of satisfaction through the Guests of God Service Program. There are also indicators to measure performance, where results specific to Hajj are submitted to the economic council. Moreover, the National Center for Performance Measurement reports about the performance of bodies working during the religious season," Bentin added.

He said his ministry is working with three independent entities to measure the satisfaction of pilgrims.

"There are other governmental bodies that assess the quality of services provided, including the Makkah region's governorate, King Abdul Aziz University and the Custodian of the Two Holy Mosques Institute for Hajj and Umrah Research," he added.

"The orderly movement of pilgrims and the services provided to them reflect the substantial efforts we provide to worshippers. This cannot be repeated elsewhere, except in Saudi Arabia," he said.

"A common concern we hear is the number of bathrooms in Mina. When worshippers come from a spacious area to Mina, they often feel disappointed," Bentin said.

The minister added that the Royal Commission for Makkah City and Holy Sites, the Makkah Region Development Authority and the Ministry of Hajj and Umrah are looking to add more toilets without reducing the total area of Mina.

Bentin said that Hajj is not a challenge to Saudi Arabia considering the desire to serve worshippers. "There is at least one person in every house in the Kingdom working at the service of pilgrims, whether they are in the Road Security Forces, sea or air ports, entry points, customs departments and restaurants. The service of pilgrims runs in the blood of all Saudis," he said.

He added that Saudi Arabia has become a global leader for mass management service. "We receive pilgrims who come from mountainous areas and have not seen a city in their countries. Some of these worshippers have struggled for a long time to save money in order to come and perform their rituals. Some other pilgrims come from advanced countries and are enjoying luxurious lives. Our ambition is serve these pilgrims in an appropriate way that better represents Saudi Arabia," he said.

Bentin added that workers feel overjoyed when they see a poor pilgrim ride an air-conditioned bus or eat from a plate for the first time. "This is not a challenge, we feel happy to provide them these new experiences," he said.



There is at least one person in every house in the Kingdom working at the service of pilgrims. Saudi Arabia has become a global leader for mass management service.

Dr. Mohammed Salih Bentin
Minister of Hajj and Umrah

The Royal Commission for Makkah City and Holy Sites is conducting studies to increase the number of Umrah performers to 30 million and Hajj pilgrims to 5 million in compliance with the Vision 2030 reform plan. "The commission is looking to enhance all services for pilgrims. In the past, each Hajj entity used to independently conduct its own studies, but now the commission is doing it all," Bentin said.

Hajj2019



A handwritten letter from civil rights activist Malcolm X to Gloria Owens: "Greetings from Arabia, where I have just completed my sacred pilgrimage to the Holy City of Mecca. El-Hajj Malik El-Shabazz (Malcolm X)." Photo supplied by Mohammed Al-Khalifah)

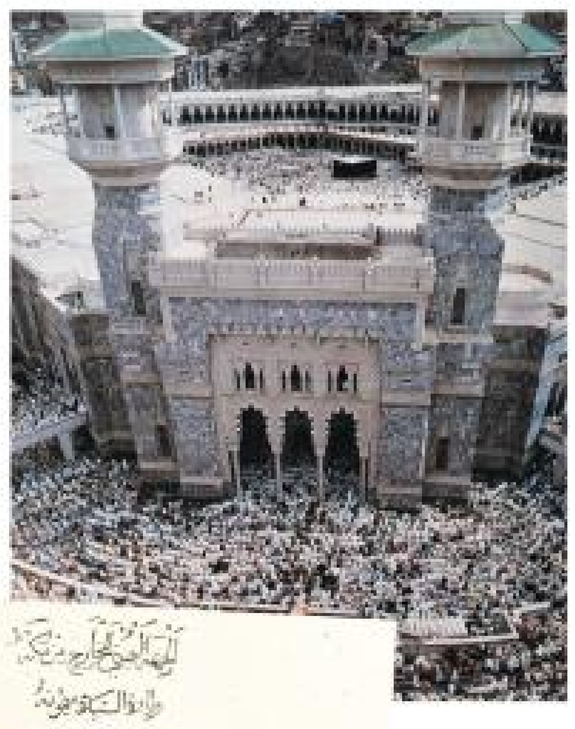
Memories of a Haj pilgrimage nearly 40 years ago reveal that Makkah has changed beyond recognition even if the message of the Prophet Mohammed is the same. Photos from the Al-Ittihad archives.



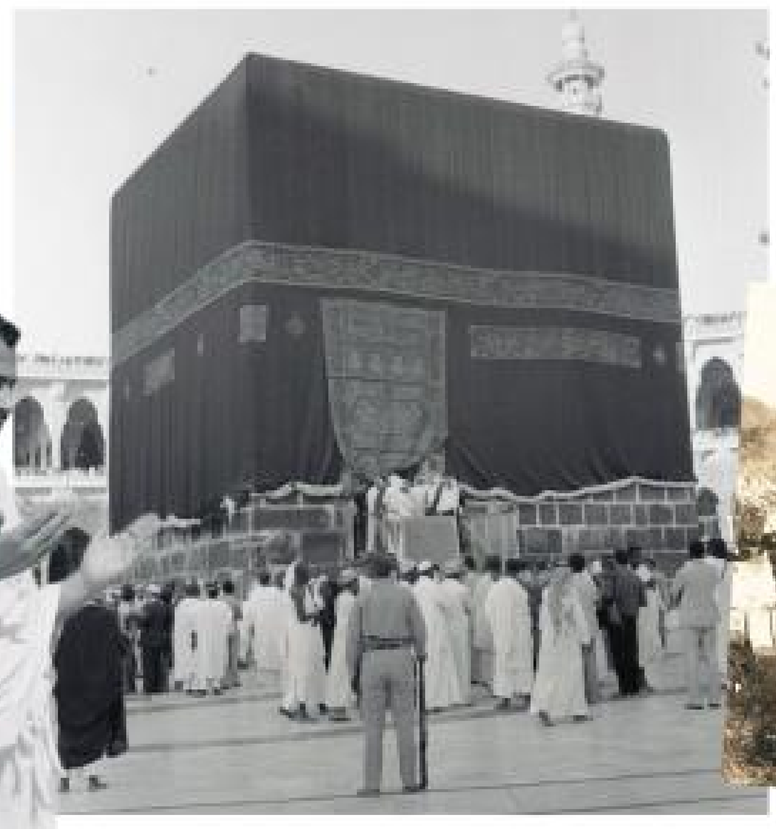
A file photo from Hajj 1978.



An old historical picture of Al-Marwa area outside the Grand Mosque, 1935.



Aerial photo of the Grand Mosque in Makkah.





The pilgrims' tent camp at the tomb of Sittana Maimuna, the wife of the Prophet, 1885. Photo/Christiaan Snouck Hurgronje



LEAP OF FAITH

Once a rapper, now a pilgrim

Before converting to Islam, I felt a sadness in my life, says Mélanie Georgiades

Essam Al-Ghalib Jeddah

She had money, fame, influence and power. By the age of 23, she had millions of fans, sold more than 4 million albums and won numerous awards.

Writing and performing numerous hit singles and records one after the other, by 2007, Mélanie Georgiades, better known by her stage name Diam's, seemed to have it all, living the life that many dreamed of.

Yet, despite her success, she felt unfulfilled and deeply troubled about her life, something that made her search for answers, finding new hope and happiness in life in converting to Islam.

"All this stuff, the money, the success, the power did not make me happy," Georgiades told Arab News while in Makkah. "I was searching for happiness; I was very, very sad, and I was alone. I was wondering why I was on this earth. I knew it was not to be rich or famous, because I had those things, and they did not make me happy. So, I began searching for answers to all my questions."

As hard as Georgiades looked for those answers, they eluded her despite her successful music career.

Then, one day in 2008, having just had her two most musically successful years in which she won the MTV European Music Award for Best French Artist as well as the NRJ Music Awards for Best Artist, Best Album, and Best Song, Georgiades' life changed while visiting her friend, Sousou, who was a Muslim.

During that visit, Sousou asked that she be excused for a few minutes to go perform her evening prayers in the other room. Suddenly, Georgiades felt compelled to join her friend in prayer. Despite not knowing how Muslims prayed, she followed what Sousou was doing and prostrated herself before Allah for the first time in her life.





Mélanie Georgiades embraced Islam after a life-changing visit to a Muslim friend in 2008. At right, Georgiades as the popular French rapper Diam's. Photos/Supplied

"When I prayed with her and I prostrated myself, I felt being connected with God," Georgiades said.

Soon after that, she obtained a copy of the Holy Qur'an and began reading it while on a trip to Mauritius.

"It was a revelation," she said. "I became intimately convinced that God existed. The more I was reading, the more convinced I became. Up until then, I believed in one God, but I was Christian in my heart, or rather, did not know exactly what I was, except sad."

In December 2008, Georgiades converted to Islam and disappeared entirely from the music scene and the public's eyes. However, in 2009, she found herself quickly thrust back into it when a press photographer photographed her coming out of a mosque in Gennevilliers, in France, wearing the hijab and covered from head to toe in a burka.

> **It was a revelation. I became intimately convinced that God existed. The more I was reading, the more convinced I became. Up until then, I believed in one God, but I was Christian in my heart, or rather, did not know exactly what I was, except sad.**
> **Mélanie Georgiades**

Those photographs were published in Paris Match magazine and were met with shock and horror by French society who knew her as Diam's, the hip-hop music icon who performed while wearing tight pants and a tank-top.

With the publication of that photo, she found herself being vilified in the French press.

"Diam's' veil is a step backwards, a defeat," Djemila Benhabib, a Canadian journalist who shared Georgiades' Greek Cypriot roots, wrote indignantly. Benhabib was known for her strong opposition to what she calls Muslim fundamentalism.

At the time, France was debating passing a law banning anyone from wearing a veil or covering their face while in a public place. Those photographs soon became central in that debate, leading to Georgiades finding herself the subject of public hatred.

In November of 2009, Georgiades felt it necessary to explain to her fans what led her to change her focus in life toward religion, and returned to music for one last time, releasing her single "Children of the Desert" from her album "SOS."

In the song she describes the intolerance of society in France, stating that society had been far from supportive of her after she converted to Islam, leaving her feeling betrayed herself looking for a new life elsewhere.

The lyrics of that last song, "Children of the Desert," described how she felt at the time of her unveiling as a Muslim, writing the lyrics, "It was either humanitarian help or trying to become a billionaire, I made my choice and to hell with you, may those who love me follow me."

Despite her troubles, she was more at peace than at any other time in her life.

"Before converting to Islam, I felt a sadness in my life because I did not realize that all I had to do was talk to God," Georgiades said. "Now, everything that is good in my life, or bad, I know that I have Allah who listens to me and answers my prayers."

Some years later, in 2017, Georgiades was able to move to Saudi Arabia along with her husband, a former Franco-Tunisian rapper, Faouzi Tarkhani. For the past two years they have made their home in the Kingdom, away from the Islamophobia and disdain she suffered in France.

Georgiades and her husband have traveled to Makkah to perform Hajj this year.

"This is going to be my second Hajj, but this time I am coming with a different mindset," she said. "Last time I came, I was a new Muslim and did not know the religion very well back then. But because I have now been a Muslim for many years, I have learned many things about Islam and the Sunnah and the Prophet (PBUH) and about the story of this land and of the Haramain. This Hajj will be quite different for me as I realize more now about the significance of the journey's rituals and steps. It will be an even more spiritual experience than before, Inshallah."

Georgiades was not the only celebrity or influencer to be invited by the Ministry of Hajj and Umrah to perform the pilgrimage this year.

Other celebrities invited by the ministry include Vassiriki Abou Diaby, who played for the Arsenal and Marseille football clubs, Philippe Christanval, who played for the Monaco and Barcelona Foothall Clubs, Thabet Naghmouchi, the reigning world champion in Kempo Karate from Tunisia, as well as Raoua Tlili, who won a gold medal for Tunisia in the discus throw at the London 2017 World Para Athletics Championships.

All are now in Makkah ready for the pilgrimage to begin.