Organising Hajj-Going in Britain:
Executive Summary and Key Findings

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Executive Summary and Key Findings

Every year around 25,000 British Muslims travel to Mecca for the Hajj pilgrimage. Here, and usually just once in their lifetime, they join together with around 3 million co-religionists to perform a set of rituals said to have been established by the Prophet Muhammad in the seventh century.

However, until now, the organisation of Hajj-going among British Muslims has not been the subject of scholarly research.

This preliminary report forms part of new and on-going research among members of the ‘Hajj industry’ in the UK, from tour operators and their guides, to representatives of pilgrim welfare organisations, and officers in local and central government.

It details the results of an initial round of 11 in-depth interviews, which produced transcripts of more than 100,000 words, plus observations at Hajj industry events, the initial results of an online survey and an analysis of parliamentary discussions during the last decade.

The intention of this report is therefore to begin to locate the business of Hajj-going in the UK within its broader contexts. It focuses upon the complex and changing dynamics of relations between Saudi Arabia, UK Hajj tour operators, pilgrim markets, British Muslim organisations and the agencies of the UK state and society.

*Organising Hajj-Going in Britain: A Preliminary Report* should be read by practitioners and policy-makers in the travel and tourism sector, in Muslim and other faith—based organisations, as well as in the relevant departments of local and central government.

The key findings of the report are as follows and can be summarised under five main headings:

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1 The relevant annual UK pilgrim figures for 2004-08 are as follows: 2004 (22,270); 2005 (27,910); 2006 (25,000); 2007 (21,715); 2008 (18,604). See [http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm200809/cmhansrd/cm090226/text/90226](http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm200809/cmhansrd/cm090226/text/90226). In 2009 the figure was 23,000, see [http://www.britishhajdelegation.org.uk/about.php](http://www.britishhajdelegation.org.uk/about.php).
1) UK TOUR OPERATORS AND THE CHANGING HAJJ IN SAUDI ARABIA

- a) Against the context of Saudi Arabia’s longstanding efforts to accommodate huge pilgrim numbers, as well as diversify its economy, through the infrastructural and commercial development of Mecca, costs in every part of the Hajj industry are rising with $10 billion spent on the Hajj in 2011.

- b) While until the mid-2000s Hajj-going from Britain could still be organised independently and in small pilgrim groups, as part of the Ministry of Hajj’s concern to rationalise, professionalise and consolidate the industry, in the UK all visas and accommodation must now be secured via 80 or so approved tour operators.

- c) UK tour operators appreciate the very great demands made upon Saudi Arabia in terms of managing the contemporary Hajj. However, they do feel that more could be done to maximise efficiency and minimise last minute uncertainties.

2) BRITISH MUSLIM PILGRIM MARKETS

- a) In recent decades British Muslims’ expectations of going for Hajj have been transformed, just as they have been democratised in terms of social class, gender and generation. 91% of 211 survey respondents had always anticipated making the pilgrimage in their lifetime, while only 35% of their grandparents had.

- b) Indeed, rates of Hajj-going have increased at about twice the rate of British Muslim population growth in the UK since the 1960s because intending pilgrims here i) are not constrained by a national quota unlike pilgrims in Muslim-majority countries; ii) generally have access to the financial resources necessary to travel; and iii) no longer see Hajj as the preserve of older pilgrims preparing for the afterlife.

- c) Both ‘premium’ and more ‘no frills’ tour operator Hajj packages and experiences can be distinguished, with the former mimicking ‘mainstream’ holiday packages for middle classes of diverse ethnic backgrounds, and the latter offering more informally organised good value to a less prosperous but much larger and ethnically orientated customer base.
3) THE STRUCTURE OF THE UK HAJJ INDUSTRY

- a) The structure of the Hajj industry in the UK is unusual in that only around 50-60% of pilgrims book directly through ATOL (Air Tours Organisers’ Licensing) approved tour operators. For many intending pilgrims, Hajj-going is organised more informally.
- b) Given the pilgrim numbers they must agree and pay for in advance, some UK Hajj tour operators appoint agents, sub-agents and ‘touts’ to help them meet their quotas. Touts sometimes include ordinary members of the community such as imams.
- c) While the Hajj industry is a risky business it is also potentially lucrative with the spend on all ATOL approved Muslim pilgrimages estimated as £36 million in recent years. Rising pilgrim expectations and the informality of the organisation of Hajj-going among sub-agents and touts is increasingly recognised as fertile ground for so-called ‘Hajj fraud’.

4) HAJJ FRAUD IN THE UK

- a) Hajj fraud comprises a range of industry problems including incompetence, dishonesty and outright deception. Amongst sub-agents and touts especially there is inevitably a lack of skills and knowledge of tour operator responsibilities, while tour operators themselves can be unprofessional and disorganised.
- b) Subagents and touts have no power over the delivery of services, deal in cash and rarely provide written contracts, receipts or accurate documentation. Some take pilgrims’ money assuming they can deliver but others over-promise and raise expectations.
- c) There was a four-fold increase in the reporting of Hajj fraud in 2011-12. Most complaints are civil and concern changes to verbal agreements and mis-described hotels, rooms or other services, but are often difficult to prosecute. The scale of the problem remains unknown, with many older pilgrims reluctant to involve the authorities, often for ostensibly religio-cultural reasons, something unscrupulous tour operators can turn to their advantage.
5) BRITISH MUSLIM ORGANISATIONS, PILGRIM WELFARE AND UK GOVERNMENT

- a) While Hajj fraud has come to greater public attention only in recent years, British Muslim pilgrims have also faced longstanding problems in Saudi Arabia including various disasters during the 1990s. Stampedes and fires around Mecca at this time caused British Muslim voluntary organisations including The Association of British Hujjaj (Pilgrims) to call upon government to more actively support its Muslim citizens overseas.

- b) The secular UK government has no desire to control British Muslim pilgrimage. Nevertheless, when New Labour came to power in 1997, a political context emerged which was hospitable to the greater public recognition of Islam. With Foreign and Commonwealth Office support, a British Hajj Delegation with volunteer British Muslim doctors was based in Mecca/Mina through the 2000s, continuing since 2010 as a private British Muslim initiative as political and economic contexts changed. In terms of ‘Hajj fraud’, government has emphasised the need for better knowledge of consumer rights amongst British Muslims with a national campaign launched by the City of London police in 2013.

- c) Whether on the British Hajj Delegation or Hajj fraud, UK government has had to work with interlocutors reflecting the existing religious and ethnic diversity of British Muslim voluntary organisations. The Association of British Hujjaj, the Muslim Council of Britain and the Council of British Hajjis have all been key partners in driving important health, safety and anti-fraud messages to often ‘hard to reach’ British Muslim communities. However, lacking access to significant independent resources, even they are not always well-known at the grassroots. Moreover, as yet, UK tour operators have seemed reluctant to establish a self-regulating Hajj industry body in Britain with its own voluntary code of practice.

The rate at which British Muslims travel for Hajj and other pilgrimages overseas is only likely to increase in the future, as the 2.7 million strong population continues to grow and to prosper. Therefore, it is hoped that this preliminary mapping of the issues can make a helpful contribution to practitioners and policy-makers’ broader understanding of the changing dynamics at work in this aspect of the religious, economic, cultural and political life of British Muslims.