

Saudi Arabia's *caution* in times of health emergency

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The advent of the *Covid-19* pandemic and the resulting social distancing have revolutionized individual and collective life globally. In addition to affecting the economic and political dynamics of the countries involved, the socio-sanitary crisis has revealed a strong impact on the 'spirituality' of each individual and community. Believers of different faiths have been called to change their *habits* - especially of sharing the Word - and in some cases it has been impossible to observe the fundamental religious precepts.

From this point of view, the planetary incidence that Saudi Arabia has had on the collective exercise of Islamic worship must be considered crucial. As guardian of the two holy Mosques of Mecca and Medina, in fact, the Kingdom has found itself adopting strategic measures which have affected the religious life, not only of its citizens, but also of all the Muslims who every year reach the sacred sites to fulfil the *Hajj* and the *Umrah*¹.

With regard to these religious events, it is worth highlighting how the grouping of the many faithful who take part in them has, since ancient times, attracted the attention of government and medical authorities because of its possible effects on health.

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¹ The data, elaborated by the *Central Department of Statistics and Information*, are reported on the website of the *Saudi Ministry of Hajj*: <http://www.hajjinformation.com/main/u1.htm>. It is, in particular, the *Supreme Hajj Committee* which, established under the chairmanship of the *Ministry of the Interior*, oversees the general planning of religious events, studies, proposals and recommendations presented by the *Subcommittee for the development of Hajj structures*, also with a view to adopting the necessary provisions for the safe reception of the faithful.

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In the history of Saudi Arabia, already starting from 632 a.d., the first outbreak of infectious diseases was recorded in the *Hajj*, which, together with those spread in later times, put the national health system to the test². And it is precisely in the efforts made to face these considerable challenges that the reasons for the prudential approach adopted by the Kingdom in seeking a proper balance between the right to health and freedom of worship can probably be found. Given the need to guarantee collective rituals that weren't considered a danger to the health of the participants, the monarchy is committed to acquiring an adequate capacity to manage health security conditions in the main places of worship³.

With the re-emergence of new viruses in the last decade, however, the religious aggregation has returned to be considered the ideal *habitat* for the transmission of serious epidemic infections. The reappearance of the need to protect the welfare of pilgrims and Saudi residents has thus prompted government administrations to develop optimal recommendations for the prevention and control of potential contagious diseases, as well as specific national and global public health surveillance strategies.

The continuous monitoring carried out by the multidisciplinary committees set up for this purpose, for example, allowed Saudi Arabia to report for the first time, in September 2012, the *Middle East Coronavirus Respiratory Syndrome* (MERS-Cov)⁴. This implied the adoption by the *Ministry of Health* of targeted health

² On this subject we refer to the reflections of M.A. FARID, *The pilgrimage and its implications in a regional malaria eradication programme*, in *Bulletin of the World Health Organization*, 15 (3-5), 828 – 833.

³ On the occasion of the annual religious gatherings, in order to minimize health risks for pilgrims, the *Saudi Ministry of Health* maintains contact with the governments of all the countries from which the faithful come to visit Mecca and Medina. It is committed to disseminating the health requirements for the issuance of travel visas and provides advice on public health guidelines, strengthening their dissemination also with education and prevention campaigns through reading materials, travel agents, group leaders and media communications. Finally, the Ministry provides a proactive public health program that focuses on the provision of safe water and food, sanitation, carrier control, health checks and specific immunization in the port of entry, provision of free health care for pilgrims through various clinics and hospitals.

⁴ WORLD HEALTH ORGANIZATION MERS-COV RESEARCH GROUP, *State of knowledge and data gaps of Middle East respiratory coronavirus syndrome (MERS-CoV) in humans*, in *PLoS currents* (2013) - ncbi.nlm.nih.gov, pp. 1-30.

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instructions⁵, including mandatory vaccination against polio. The establishment of the *Global Center for Mass Gathering Medicine*⁶, whose scientific research is one of the main platforms from which to draw results and knowledge for the protection and improvement of the health of participants in meetings of the Islamic community and beyond, also dates back to the same period.

In response to the seriousness of the health emergency from *Covid-19*, the Saudi monarchy has accelerated and consolidated the strategies of planning and control of religious public places. This is a mission that the Islamic State has carried out and continues to carry out in the footsteps of the *Hadith* of the Prophet, who make explicit reference to the instructions to be observed in cases where a mass epidemic breaks out⁷.

With a directive from the *Ministry of Foreign Affairs*, adopted on 26 February 2020, the Kingdom has thus decided to implement stringent solutions, including the suspension of entry for those who would have wanted to fulfil the *Umrab* in the Great Mosque of Mecca and visit the Prophet's Mosque in Medina⁸. The directive was followed by an order from the *Ministry of the Interior*, which also decided to suspend the *Umrab* for the citizens and residents of the country⁹. To these decisions was added the invitation, addressed to the faithful, to refrain from planning trips to fulfill the *Hajj*.

If these initial measures of prevention were finalized to the containment of the incoming and outgoing flows sustained prevalently for reasons of worship, the subsequent decisions aimed, instead, at the limitation of the movements within the same borders of the Kingdom through the prevision of a national

⁵ Based on the clinical, scientific and epidemiological data generated by the *Global Center for Mass Gathering Medicine*, the Saudi *Ministry of Health* has decided that people with the following risk factors should postpone *Hajj* or *Umrab*: individuals over 65 years of age; individuals with chronic, cardiac, renal, respiratory, autoimmune or immunodeficiency (congenital and acquired) diseases; individuals taking immunosuppressive drugs; individuals with malignant or terminal disease; pregnant women and children under 12 years of age.

⁶ Further information on the work of the research centre can be found on the official website: <https://gcmgm.mob.gov.sa>.

⁷ From the teachings reported in the prophetic tradition of self-quarantine emerges a prudent approach to the risk of contagion, defined as the 'dodging'. In some *Hadith*, the Prophet reads: "If an epidemic should appear on a land, do not go there; and if you are in it, do not flee from this land"; "If the plague is in a country, do not enter, but if you are in one where the plague scourge remains".

⁸ The directive is available on the website of the Saudi government: www.spa.gov.sa/2039971.

⁹ The order of the *Ministry of Interior* is published at www.spa.gov.sa/2042784.

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curfew, forbidding, however, the residents of the thirteen Saudi regions to leave or move to another region¹⁰. Among these anti-accounting measures, there was also a ban on entering and leaving the cities of Mecca and Medina as they were subject to a 24-hour curfew¹¹; a provision which, although necessary in an inevitable process of adaptation to the civil rules of the emergency, added further repercussions on the exercise of worship.

In the timely implementation of the recommendations drawn up by national and international health institutions, other governmental interventions continued to affect the sacred sites. Starting with an initial temporary daily closure for the sterilization of the sites¹², they ended up suspending daily and Friday prayers inside and outside the Mosques. As decided by the *Grand Mufti Abdulaziz Al al-Sheikh*, together with the *Council of Senior Scholars* which he chairs, the practice of worship continued, at least until the order of closure, only in the holy Mosques of Mecca and Medina, with the express prohibition for potentially infected believers to take part.

The 'spiritual' implications of the global epidemic therefore required an immediate approach by the religious institutions of the Saudi Islamic sovereign State, also called upon to contribute to the fight against the spread of the *virus* through a renewed analysis of worship practices. Community leaders shared the isolation strategies indicated by science and called on the faithful to strictly observe all the provisions and guidelines indicated.

With the closure of places of worship, most religious services are therefore conducted at family level: each house has become a small mosque. In this respect, clerical institutions have made use of 'alternative' instruments of guidance and accompaniment for the faithful, and digital communication has proved to be of great support.

In the *domestic* mosque, another Pillar of Islam is destined to be observed: *Ramadan*. The month of fasting and sharing has changed its connotations and its 'limited' celebration has been legitimized by a *fatwa* of the supreme Saudi religious authority. The prohibition of gathering, which is essential, at least, until

¹⁰ These additional precautionary measures have been applied since 15:00 on 26.03.2020.

¹¹ The 24-hour curfew also covered *Riyadh*, *Dammam*, *Tabuk*, *Dhabran* and *Hofuf*.

¹² Decision n. 246 of 12 March 2020, available at www.spa.gov.sa.

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the risk of contagion tends to weaken significantly, seems to imply the impossibility of celebrating its traditional rites, such as the feast of *Eidal-Fitr*.

The Muslims of Saudi Arabia, like the believers of all religions, have found themselves ministers of their own cult. Solidarity and collaboration, associated with a strong sense of responsibility, have become the key words to face the adversities of this difficult historical phase with the firmness and coherence of believers¹³.

To date, the rigour of government intervention seems to be gradually diminishing. King *Salman bin Abdulaziz Al Saud* has approved a first partial measure to restore religious services in the two holy Mosques, maintaining the suspension of public participation of the faithful¹⁴. And with the intention of authorizing the start of certain economic activities in the presence of the necessary health conditions, with an order adopted on 26 April 2020 the Saudi King also ordered the partial lifting of curfew measures in almost all regions of the Kingdom¹⁵.

Although the danger of contagion hasn't yet been completely overcome, Saudi Arabia seems to want to move towards a return to normality. Of course, one wonders what the future normality will be!

It's still too early to formulate opinions on the actual economic, political and social consequences of the *Covid-19* crisis. But looking at the 'spiritual' test to which the epidemic has put the entire Saudi community through, the task that will surely be the responsibility of the religious leaders will be relevant. They will probably have to reconsider the prescriptions concerning places of worship, symbols and rites. But even more, taking up the words that *Ayatollah Alireza Araf* has addressed to all religions, the leaders of the communities will be called to strengthen with prayer the foundations of the faith, weakened by the tribulations, to face together the other contemporary emergencies¹⁶.

¹³ This is what the Sovereign said in a speech published at www.spa.gov.sa/2049571.

¹⁴ The decision of King *Salman bin Abdulaziz Al Saud* is intended to allow the prayers of *Tarawih* to take place. The service will be reduced to five greetings and the entire reading of the *Holy Koran* will be completed during the prayer of *Tabajjud*. The Order of the Sovereign, adopted on 22 April 2020, is available at www.spa.gov.sa/2077577.

¹⁵ The decision, however, excludes Mecca and other cities previously confined for specific socio-sanitary reasons.

¹⁶ The news is available in vaticannews.va.