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# #No_Hajj_without_Permit: A Qualitative Analysis of Reactions to the KSA Government Campaign to Make the Pilgrimage a Success

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## Abstract

This paper presents a qualitative study on public reactions to Saudi Arabia's #No_Hajj_without_permit campaign, which aims to regulate Hajj attendance. Data were collected from a social media platform, X platform (formerly Twitter), using Ncapture for posts between June 2, 2024, and June 20, 2024. Four main themes emerged: support for the campaign, issues with accessibility, views on government management, and the interplay between religious duties and legal restrictions. While the campaign is lauded for enhancing safety and security during the Hajj, it has also sparked concerns.

## 1. Introduction

The Islamic pilgrimage to Mecca, known as the Hajj, is a central tenet of Islam, with millions of Muslims visiting annually. Managing the safety, health, and organization of such a large congregation has been challenging for Saudi Arabia. In response, the Saudi government has implemented various mechanisms to better organize the pilgrimage, addressing issues such as unauthorized visitors and health concerns. Recent efforts include the #No_Hajj_without_permit campaign, aimed at improving the pilgrimage experience. This paper provides a qualitative exploration of the campaign's response and its overall effectiveness. The X platform was selected to monitor reactions to the government campaign due to Riyadh, the capital of Saudi Arabia, being the tenth most active city globally on the X platform in 2021, according to Semiocast (2012). This indicates that Saudis are the fastest-growing user group on the X platform (Al-Arabiya, 2012). Conse-

quently, Saudi authorities have recognized the significance and potential benefits of the X platform, prompting them to introduce legislation through it (Alasem, 2015).

This paper is structured as follows: the second section presents previous work, the third section discusses the methodology used in this study, the fourth section demonstrates the results, and the fifth section provides the discussion. The paper concludes with limitations and future directions.

## 2. Historical Attempts to Organize the Pilgrimage

Managing the Hajj has always been challenging due to the large number of attendees and the logistical difficulties involved. Historically, measures such as check-ups and vaccinations were implemented to prevent disease spread (Alqahtani et al., 2019). In 2017, Saudi Arabian authorities emphasized preventive healthcare for pilgrims, successfully reducing the incidence of severe contagious diseases. Recent advancements in technology and artificial intelligence have further facilitated crowd control and health monitoring (Abalkhail & Al Amri, 2022).

These measures to control the flow of pilgrims have also extended to tasks such as improving infrastructure and organizing efficient communication. In Saudi Arabia, in 2018, officials applied Grunig's theory of two-way symmetrical communication to manage a crisis at the pilgrimage site, according to Alsulaiman and Rentner (2019). This approach facilitated timely information distribution and feedback collection, thus improving the overall organization of the event. Furthermore, the Saudi government has continuously worked to develop facilities in Mecca and surrounding areas to accommodate the growing number of pilgrims, especially in transportation and lodging, as noted by Haase et al. (2019).

Another relatively contemporary concept that has emerged in recent discourse is the "green pilgrimage," specifically aimed at reducing the carbon footprint of the Hajj. In this context, Elgammal and Alhothali (2021) proposed an action agenda for Makkah, concentrating on waste management and energy conservation. These measures reflect the development of sustainable management trends in significant religious events. Furthermore, the government of Saudi Arabia is leveraging global organizations such as the WHO to demonstrate its efforts to organize a pleasant and healthy pilgrimage (WHO, 2024).

Specifically, the presence of unauthorized "gate crasher" pilgrims has posed a significant challenge to these organizational efforts. In another study, Alturki (2024) discusses the reasons people travel without permission and suggests viable strategies for future Hajj operations. These models focus on improving functionality, reducing production costs, and ensuring compliance with legal requirements. However, issues with unauthorized pilgrims persist, necessitating stricter measures and the organization of information campaigns to highlight the dangers and legal consequences facing such individuals. This study addresses a

timely and relevant issue with social and religious implications, offering valuable insights into public perceptions and concerns about policies with global impact.

## 3. #No_Hajj_without_Permit Campaign

The #No_Hajj_without_permit campaign by the Saudi Arabian government is a critical measure to regulate participation in the holy journey. Aimed at discouraging unauthorized individuals from performing Hajj, the campaign seeks to reduce the number of pilgrimages fraught with problems. According to BERNAMA (2024), the initiative emphasizes the safety and comfort of all pilgrims, enforcing strict permit regulations. This is part of a broader plan to enhance the overall organization and conduct of the Hajj, which has historically faced numerous challenges due to overcrowding.

The #No_Hajj_without_permit campaign primarily addresses the issue of overcrowding expected during the Hajj, which poses numerous risks and challenges due to pilgrims congesting the sites. This overcrowding affects the pilgrims' experiences and strains the available infrastructure and services. The Saudi government aims to limit participant numbers to prevent overburdening these facilities (Alqahtani et al., 2019). This initiative is similar to previous efforts to streamline the pilgrimage process, such as employing technology and artificial intelligence to manage crowd congestion (Abalkhail & Al Amri, 2022).

The general public and stakeholders have had mixed reactions to the campaign. Some praise it for reducing overcrowding and enhancing safety by creating a bio-secure environment for pilgrims. However, critics argue it unfairly affects those from lower economic backgrounds who struggle to obtain permits. To address this, it's necessary to remove barriers that prevent financially disadvantaged members of the Muslim community from performing their religious rituals. The imposition of penalties on those attempting the Hajj without a permit, including fines and legal consequences, was enforced starting in 2024. This move, as reported by Arab News (2024), highlights the government's commitment to maintaining order during the pilgrimage.

The #No_Hajj_without_permit campaign also emphasizes publicity and mass sensitization. The Saudi government has utilized various channels for disseminating information, including radio and television broadcasts, newspaper ads, and flyers, to inform prospective pilgrims about the importance of adhering to regulations. This strategy aligns with previously successful approaches for significant events (Alsulaiman & Rentner, 2019). The campaign leverages social networking sites, media, and on-the-ground informational efforts to legitimize the government's objective of reaching a broad audience to ensure compliance with pilgrimage rules (Ghani, 2019). Therefore, widespread awareness of the campaign is crucial for its effectiveness, aiming to prepare a large segment of the target population to adapt to legislative changes.

The campaign also includes structural and legal changes to improve infrastructure and services for pilgrims, such as transportation, accommodation, and

health services, which are crucial for organizing such large events. Collaborating with the World Health Organization (WHO) is a key aspect of the initiative, aiming for a safe and healthy Hajj pilgrimage (Taibah et al., 2020). These partnerships enhance the efficiency of public health and safety measures, supporting the campaign's objectives.

The #No_Hajj_without_permit campaign is a key operational strategy for the Hajj pilgrimage, addressing unauthorized participation and enhancing regulatory measures to ensure a safer and more secure environment for all stakeholders. Its long-term value hinges on continuous evaluation and adaptation to address emerging challenges and maintain organizational effectiveness. This approach is crucial for checking its effectiveness and making necessary adjustments to achieve its objectives without excluding any segment of the Muslim community. According to BERNAMA (2024) and Alturki (2024), this initiative aligns with the Saudi government's long-term goals and cooperative projects to preserve the traditions of the Hajj, guaranteeing its dignity and safety for future generations.

## 4. Methodology

### 4.1. Data Collection and Sampling

The data collection process utilized Ncapture to gather posts from the X platform, specifically those tagged with #No_Hajj_without_permit, between June 2, 2024, and June 20, 2024. This period coincided with the #No_Hajj_without_permit campaign's implementation phase to capture real-time audience reactions. The analysis focused on posts containing the keywords "#No_Hajj_without_permit" or "No Hajj without permit campaign." Only posts featuring at least one of these phrases were selected, ensuring a diverse range of views. The 18-day timeframe made the sample size manageable, resulting in 1076 posts being collected. To maintain data reliability, reposts were excluded to avoid redundancy. The search was confined to English-language posts to ensure consistency in language analysis. Posts by pilgrimage organizations or companies promoting the campaign were also excluded, categorizing the remaining posts as personal reactions.

### 4.2. Analysis

The collected posts were exported to NVivo12 for analysis using the six-step thematic analysis method recommended by Jowsey et al. (2021). This method involved reviewing the posts multiple times to gain a basic understanding and identify patterns. Initial codes were developed to categorize various data aspects, followed by a search for emerging themes from these codes. The themes were then reviewed and adjusted to better align with the data. Finally, the themes were defined and labeled to reflect the essence of the text. The thematic analysis focused on identifying the public's various attitudes and responses to the #No_Hajj_without_permit campaign, including the support and concerns it generated.

### 4.3. Ethics

The core of this study focused on ethical considerations due to religious beliefs, practices, and public opinions. All posts used were public, ensuring no individual information that could identify users was reported. Ethical guidelines were adhered to by excluding posts linked to specific users or organizations, thus reflecting general public opinion. Furthermore, the removal of reposts and advertisements enhanced the credibility of the analysis concerning public responses to the campaign.

### 4.4. Data Availability

The data used in this research is available as posts within the specified time frame. These are accessible on X platform (formerly Twitter) and can be retrieved using the search terms and time frame outlined in the methodology. The analysis, coded themes, and patterns are detailed in the NVivo12 project file. To promote openness and replicability, the dataset can be shared for research purposes upon request, respecting ethical principles and user data rights (Coleman, 2022).

## 5. Results

The thematic analysis of the 50 posts containing the search terms "#No_Hajj_without_permit" and "No Hajj without permit campaign" identified four main themes: Support for the Campaign, Concerns about Accessibility, Perception of Government Management, and Religious Duty vs. Legal Compliance.

#### Support for the Campaign

Most users fully supported the #No_Hajj_without_permit campaign, seeing it as the most appropriate action to enhance safety and order during the pilgrimage. The hashtags focused on issues such as concern over overcrowding and the need for proper authorization for anyone intending to attend the Hajj. For instance, one user posted the following message:

> "Are you directly sinful for performing Hajj without a permit? No. However, managing millions of pilgrims and ensuring their safety requires the issuance of permits."

The hashtag #No_Hajj_without_permit highlights public awareness of issues related to the massive influx of people and the need for systematic measures.

#### Concerns about Accessibility

On the other hand, some users expressed concerns about access to the Hajj, particularly for those with lower incomes who might find it difficult to secure permits for the pilgrimage. These posts describe the permit system as demanding:

> "Hajj has become difficult for lower and middle-class people, unfortunately."

These arguments expose the social consequences of the campaign and its potential misuse.

*Perception of Government Management*

Some posts expressed an understanding that the #No_Hajj_without_permit rule was an extension of state control over people's Hajj experiences. In this theme, users discussed the government's role in religious affairs, attributing it to the management of the Hajj season. For instance, one user mentioned:

> "Hajj becomes mandatory for the Muslim who is financially and physically capable. However, spending money on it may not seem justifiable based on the context provided."

This theme highlights the confusion between the need for regulation and the perception of restriction, as some individuals felt the campaign limited their options."

*Religious Duty vs. Legal Compliance*

The final theme highlighted the conflict between reason and religion, specifically the tension between fulfilling religious duties and adhering to legal requirements. Users needed guidance on how registering for religious obligations might be limited by legal restrictions associated with the campaign. In this context, posts reflected not pleasure but an internal struggle between the desire to perform Hajj and the legal permit system. One post exemplified this conflict with the #No_Hajj_without_permit campaign, stating:

> "The argument by seditious political agitators that people without a valid Hajj visa were 'invited by Allah,' thus questioning the authorities' right to intervene, is false. Several points refute this: The right of Muslims to make the pilgrimage to the house of Allah is undeniable, but it does not negate the importance of following laws and regulations established for safety and order during Hajj. The Quran and Sunnah emphasize obedience to authorities and the importance of community welfare."

This theme explores the conflicts and questions of the conscious self regarding religious duties and legislation.

These themes offer a nuanced understanding of the public's reaction to the #No_Hajj_without_permit campaign, revealing both support and challenges.

## 6. Discussion

The #No_Hajj_without_permit campaign launched by the Saudi Arabian government has elicited various public opinions based on a thematic analysis of posts. This discussion examines the reactions' outcomes and how they align with broader social, economic, and religious contexts. The findings indicate that support for public safety measures and concerns about accessibility are connected to perceptions of the state managing religious obligations and legal requirements.

Public Support and Perceived Benefits

A significant trend identified is the widespread support for the #No_Hajj_without_permit hashtag. This support is primarily based on the belief that the campaign is necessary to protect the lives of pilgrims during the Hajj. Concerns

about managing millions of pilgrims are linked to health and security considerations, especially in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. The objective of controlling participation levels to prevent overcrowding is appealing to many, as the risks associated with uncontrolled participation are widely recognized.

The success of the campaign is linked to improving the population's health and epidemiological well-being. Prior studies show that individuals in specific situations, such as religious gatherings such as pilgrimages, are at high risk of contracting infectious diseases (Alqahtani et al., 2019). Thus, the Saudi government's #No_Hajj_without_permit campaign is an effort to mitigate hajj-related risks, akin to previous measures such as vaccination campaigns, capacity control, and the use of efficient technologies (Abalkhail & Al Amri, 2022). However, while the campaign aims to protect pilgrims and is generally supported by the public, there is an expectation that the government will effectively administer these measures. This expectation is crucial as the success of such public health interventions largely depends on the public's trust in the government's ability to implement these strategies accurately.

### Concerns about Accessibility and Social Equity

While there may be encouragement for the campaign, there is also significant concern about its impact on the affordability of the Hajj for low-income individuals. This issue is critical as it touches on the larger question of fulfilling religious duties. The worry is justified, as the combined costs of permits, travel, and accommodation can be prohibitive for many, making the pilgrimage inaccessible to some Muslims worldwide. This highlights the crucial issue of accessibility in the discussion of religion and economics. Hajj, being one of the five pillars of Islam, is compulsory for all Muslims who are physically and financially able to undertake it. This inclusivity reflects the Islamic principle that ability is a key condition for performing Hajj.

### Perceptions of Government Management and Religious Autonomy

Another essential theme is the evolving perception of government management, particularly evident in the controversy surrounding Saudi Arabia's control over Hajj practices. This situation mirrors the tension seen in many countries where religious practices fall under state jurisdiction. However, the tension is significantly heightened in the context of Hajj due to the pilgrimage's central role in Islam. For many Muslims, Hajj is more than a ritual or duty; it is a deeply valued spiritual experience. Consequently, the idea of permits can be troubling for those who view their right and freedom to pray as a divine prerogative.

### The Compatibility Between Religious Duty and Legal Compliance

The compatibility between religious obligations and legal requirements emerged as a significant theme during the analysis. For many Muslims, performing the Hajj is a crucial aspect of their faith. However, the requirement for permits introduces a scenario where fulfilling this religious duty may depend on legal and administrative processes. The conflict between adhering to religious principles and legal obligations is not new. As in many religious traditions, there

is an ongoing tension between obeying religious and state authorities. This conflict takes on added significance regarding the Hajj, given its role as one of the Five Pillars of Islam. The legal barriers preventing some individuals from performing the Hajj cause concern among Muslims.

The discussion highlights the study's limitations and future directions. A key limitation was the reliance on a single social media platform, X platform, which may not represent diverse viewpoints. Including interactions from other platforms, such as Facebook could capture a wider range of perspectives. The focus on X platform was due to the government launching the campaign on its official accounts there, a popular platform for engaging with critical events in Saudi Arabia, as discussed in the literature review. Future studies could benefit from incorporating data from multiple sources, such as interviews or focus groups, to capture a broader range of viewpoints and potentially reveal significant findings that could theoretically and practically support organizational campaigns.

## Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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