

# Saudi-Iran tensions overshadow hajj pilgrimage

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(RNS) Reports last month that Iran plotted to assassinate Saudi Arabia's ambassador to the U.S. have enflamed animosity between the two Muslim powers, and raised concerns that violence could mar this year's hajj pilgrimage that starts on Friday (Nov. 4).

More than 1.7 million pilgrims have already arrived in Mecca, the Saudi city where Islam was founded 1,400 years ago. A record 2.8 million pilgrims performed the hajj last year, including more than 14,000 Americans and almost 100,000 Iranians. Saudi authorities expect similar numbers this year.

"If people want to create havoc, this is the place to do it," said Nail Al-Jubeir, a spokesman for the Saudi Embassy in Washington, D.C. "We're always on heightened alert during hajj."

Iran is primarily Shiite Muslim, a branch of Islam that claims about 15 percent of the world's Muslims. Saudi Arabia is predominantly Sunni Muslim and home to the Wahhabi sect, some of whose members consider Shiites to be heretics.

The ancient Sunni-Shia split over who would be the Prophet Muhammad's successor has fueled a battle for regional supremacy between the two neighbors.

Security for the hajj starts beyond Saudi Arabia's borders. To be able to keep track of pilgrims and control their numbers, Saudi Arabia's Hajj Ministry issues a fixed number of "hajj visas" to individual countries every year.

Saudi Arabia also created a special police unit this year to prevent people without hajj visas from entering pilgrimage areas. Yet visa recipients are hard to vet.

"It is next to impossible to determine the true identity of an Iraqi, Palestinian, Somalian or Afghan tribesman, yet thousands of pilgrims have been granted visas to

travel to Saudi Arabia from these locations," noted a 2007 report from Stratfor, an Austin, Texas-based intelligence and analysis company.

The Saudi government has also set up special police and military units trained to respond to attacks by extremists, according to local news reports. In recent months, these forces have staged training exercises at Mecca's Grand Mosque and other sites along the pilgrimage route.

In accordance with Islamic tradition, pilgrims are forbidden from any displays of temper or argument, and are prohibited from killing animals or bugs, let alone committing violence. Nevertheless, violence has sometimes blemished the hajj.

In 1979, militants from an Islamic sect seized control of the Grand Mosque before Saudi security forces defeated them two weeks later. More than 300 pilgrims, militants, and Saudi security officers were killed.

In 1987, after years of letting Iranian pilgrims stage anti-American and anti-Israeli demonstrations during the hajj, Saudi security forces killed dozens Iranian pilgrims, causing a stampede that killed dozens more. More than 400 people were killed altogether.

Two years later, a bomb blamed on Shiite pilgrims from Kuwait killed one pilgrim.