

Iran bans pilgrims from hajj, citing safety concerns

by [Madison Margolin](#) in the [July 6, 2016](#) issue

(The Christian Science Monitor) Iranian authorities will not allow the nation's pilgrims to participate in the hajj to Mecca in September, accusing Saudi Arabia of making insufficient safety arrangements for Iranian citizens.

The decision, which escalates tensions between Iran and Saudi Arabia, arises from concerns about whether Saudi Arabia has done enough to guarantee pilgrims' safety after last September's disaster, when hundreds and perhaps thousands of worshipers were killed in a stampede.

The Iranian hajj organization said it had worked with the Iranian government to allow pilgrims to honor the custom, but talks with Saudi Arabia did not go far enough.

"Our efforts have remained unheard by Saudis," the organization said a statement.

Saudi officials, however, suggested to news media that Iran had political motives for barring its pilgrims from the hajj.

More than two million Muslims participated in last year's hajj, a requirement for all Muslims, who must make the trip at least once if they are able.

For years safety issues have troubled the pilgrimage, one of the largest annual gatherings on earth. A stampede last September was the most deadly. Saudi Arabia stated that approximately 700 people were killed, while Iran said that more than 4,500 died, including 450 from Iran, as reported by the *New York Times*.

Saudi crown prince Muhammad bin Nayef, who is in charge of hajj security, announced in May that the Interior Ministry is establishing a more sophisticated operations control room to monitor Mecca.

Around 1,600 security personnel will be monitoring 1,800 closed-circuit TV cameras every hour of the day. Trained personnel around the grounds who speak various languages will also be able to help control the crowd and give special attention to pilgrims with disabilities. The crown prince did not, however, make any reference to last year's tragedy when he announced the initiatives.

The Iranian pilgrim ban comes amid ongoing tensions between Iran and Saudi Arabia, worsened by the conflict in Syria, where Iran supports President Bashar al-Assad while the Saudis have supported rebel groups. Saudi Arabia cut off diplomatic ties this year after Iranians stormed the Saudi embassy in Tehran, protesting the execution of a Shi'a cleric in Saudi Arabia. Iran has also banned Saudi imports.

The hajj ban is set to take a further economic toll on Saudi Arabia. The hajj brings in about \$18 billion every year from religious tourism, CNN reported. Iranians are typically one of the best-represented countries at the hajj.

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