

# Comprehensive Analysis of the Ministry of Hajj and Umrah: Governance, Digital Transformation, and Operational Strategies for the 2026 Pilgrimage Season

The Ministry of Hajj and Umrah (MHU) in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia occupies a distinct and unparalleled position within the landscape of global public administration. Serving as the supreme sovereign authority responsible for the supervision, regulation, and facilitation of all Hajj and Umrah operations, it is the only cabinet-level ministry in the world dedicated exclusively to the logistical, spiritual, and administrative management of religious pilgrimage. Uniquely headquartered in Makkah al-Mukarramah—a deliberate strategic positioning that places its operational core in immediate proximity to the holy sites rather than in the political capital of Riyadh—the Ministry functions as the primary node in a vast, complex network. It coordinates continuous interactions between domestic governmental agencies, international diplomatic delegations, and a sprawling ecosystem of private sector service providers to ensure seamless, secure, and spiritually enriching experiences for millions of annual pilgrims.

As Saudi Arabia rapidly advances its Vision 2030 socio-economic diversification framework, the Ministry of Hajj and Umrah has been subjected to a profound institutional paradigm shift. Evolving far beyond its traditional role as a seasonal administrative oversight body, the Ministry has been reconstituted as a highly digitized, data-driven logistical command center. It is currently tasked with orchestrating one of the most complex, recurring human migrations in human history. Driven by the strategic imperative to host 15 million international Umrah pilgrims annually by 2025, and scaling significantly higher toward 2030, the Ministry is actively deploying unprecedented upgrades in urban infrastructure, corporate governance, financial technology, and spatial engineering.

This report provides an exhaustive, multi-dimensional analysis of the Ministry of Hajj and Umrah. It dissects the institution's historical evolution, current executive leadership architecture, inter-agency synergies, and mega-project infrastructure developments. Furthermore, it extensively examines the specific regulatory frameworks, digital ecosystems, and operational blueprints established for the upcoming 1447 AH (2026) Hajj and Umrah seasons, identifying the underlying trends that signal the future of global mass-gathering management.

## Historical Evolution and Institutional Architecture

The institutionalization of Hajj management in Saudi Arabia closely mirrors the modern state-building trajectory of the Kingdom itself. What began as ad-hoc regional oversight relying on hereditary guild structures has been meticulously transformed into a sophisticated, globally integrated B2C (Business-to-Consumer) and G2G (Government-to-Government) bureaucratic apparatus. The shifting nomenclature and expanding mandates of the organization reflect the

increasing complexity of international travel, public health requirements, and mass logistics.

## Chronology of Institutional Development

The formalization of pilgrimage oversight dates back to the foundational years of the modern Saudi state, evolving through deliberate phases of administrative specialization.

Year	Institutional Milestone	Strategic Significance
<b>1926</b>	Formation of the "Hajj Management Committee"	Presided over by then-Prince Faisal Bin Abdulaziz, this marked the earliest centralized state effort to manage pilgrimage logistics, superseding localized tribal arrangements.
<b>1932</b>	Assignment to the Shura Council	The founding monarch, King Abdulaziz, issued a directive transferring the overarching responsibility for Hajj and pilgrim care to the Shura Council, thereby establishing a permanent, institutionalized committee structure.
<b>1962</b>	Establishment of the "Ministry of Hajj and Endowments"	Under the reign of King Saud Bin Abdulaziz Al Saud, Hussein bin Ali Arab was appointed as the first Minister. This elevated pilgrimage management to a formalized, cabinet-level priority, integrating religious endowments into its portfolio.
<b>1993</b>	Renamed to "Ministry of Hajj"	A critical specialization occurred when the endowment sector was separated into an independent ministry. Concurrently, the direct supervision of the Two Holy Mosques and the Kaaba's Kiswa factory was distinctly separated, narrowing the Ministry's focus strictly to human logistics, routing, and accommodation.
<b>2016</b>	Renamed to "Ministry of Hajj and Umrah"	A Royal Order officially added "Umrah" to the ministerial title. This semantic shift reflected the rising strategic and economic importance of year-round minor

Year	Institutional Milestone	Strategic Significance
		pilgrimage within the newly unveiled Vision 2030 framework.
<b>2018</b>	Identity and Logo Redesign	The Ministry launched a modernized corporate identity. The new logo integrates symbolic elements such as the Mina tents, the Kaaba, the Prophet's Mosque dome, the Holy Quran, and the national crossed swords, signaling a modernized public relations approach.
<b>2020</b>	Comprehensive Organizational Restructuring	The Ministry underwent a sweeping internal reorganization, resulting in the establishment of seven main agencies, three assistant agencies, and twenty-four general administrations. This structure was designed to enhance operational agility and data integration across all pilgrimage phases.

## Executive Leadership and Structural Governance

The current executive leadership of the Ministry embodies the critical intersection of deep administrative experience, digital innovation, and corporate governance. The strategic appointment of technocrats to key leadership positions underscores the Saudi state's pivot toward technology-driven, performance-measured pilgrimage management.

Dr. Tawfiq bin Fawzan Al-Rabiah, appointed as Minister of Hajj and Umrah on October 15, 2021, brings a remarkably robust background in systemic digitization and institutional reform. Holding the unique historical distinction of being the first Saudi minister to consecutively lead three different cabinet-level ministries (having previously served as Minister of Health and Minister of Commerce and Industry), Dr. Al-Rabiah's tenure is characterized by qualitative transformations rooted in technological innovation and corporate efficiency. His role extends far beyond the Ministry itself; he concurrently serves as the Chairman of the Guest Services Program Committee, Chairman of the Board of Kidana Development and Investment Company, and Chairman of the General Authority for the Care of the Holy Mosque and the Prophet's Mosque. This centralization of chairmanship ensures high-level strategic synchronization across the entire infrastructure, regulatory, and spiritual ecosystem of the pilgrimage.

The Ministry's operational command is systematically distributed among highly specialized deputies, each managing distinct phases of the pilgrimage lifecycle:

- **Dr. Abdelfattah bin Suliman Mashat (Deputy Minister of Hajj and Umrah):** Appointed in October 2017, Dr. Mashat drives the macro-strategic policies for the Hajj and Umrah systems. His explicit priorities include institutionalizing digital transformation, enhancing

integration between partner entities, and empowering the non-profit sector to enrich the pilgrim journey, closely aligning with Vision 2030 objectives.

- **Dr. Al-Hassan bin Yahya Al-Manakhrh (Assistant Minister):** Appointed in October 2021, and previously serving as Deputy Minister for International Cooperation, he leverages his deep background in international diplomacy to manage the complex bilateral agreements concerning global pilgrim quotas and cross-border logistics.
- *Eng. Abdulaziz bin Suliman bin Saud Al-Mutahmi (Deputy Minister for Planning and Digital Transformation):* Appointed in July 2024, his portfolio is critical for the continuous development of the Ministry's AI integration, smart contracts, and centralized digital platforms like Nusuk.
- *Eng. Abdulmohsen bin Abdulrahman Al-Salem (Deputy Minister for Umrah Affairs):* Appointed in June 2022, he manages the high-volume, year-round influx of Umrah pilgrims, ensuring regulatory compliance among hundreds of private service providers.
- *Eng. Iyad bin Ahmed Abdulrahman Rahbini (Acting Deputy Minister for Hajj Affairs):* Appointed in August 2025, his role focuses on the intense, highly concentrated logistical demands of the annual Hajj season, a period requiring military-grade crowd control and resource allocation.
- *Dr. Abdulaziz bin Abdulrahim Mohammed Wazzan (Deputy Minister for Visit Affairs) and Ms. Hidaya bint Waleed Bakhurji (Deputy Minister for Shared Services):* These leaders ensure that ancillary services, internal administrative operations, and visits to historical sites and the Prophet's Mosque in Madinah are seamlessly integrated into the broader operational matrix.

## The Vision 2030 Mandate and the Pilgrim Experience Program (PEP)

The Kingdom's Vision 2030 macro-economic framework explicitly identifies the facilitation and expansion of religious tourism as a foundational pillar for non-oil economic diversification, cultural exchange, and global soft power projection. Central to this effort is the **Pilgrim Experience Program (PEP)**, an agile, multi-disciplinary strategic initiative designed to elevate the baseline quality of services provided to the "Guests of Allah" while maximizing the sector's contribution to national GDP.

The PEP operates on three highly defined strategic objectives:

1. **Facilitation and Access:** Streamlining the hosting of larger volumes of Umrah visitors by fundamentally easing access to the Holy Mosques through frictionless visa processes and border control.
2. **Quality Assurance:** Drastically improving the quality, safety, and reliability of services provided to both Hajj and Umrah visitors via stringent regulatory oversight.
3. **Cultural Enrichment:** Broadening the scope of the pilgrimage from a strictly ritualistic journey into a comprehensive spiritual and cultural experience by developing and integrating historical Islamic sites related to the Prophetic Biography (Seerah) into official itineraries.

To achieve the ambitious interim target of hosting 15 million international Umrah pilgrims annually by 2025, the PEP paradigm relies heavily on the privatization of services. This marks a definitive departure from historical models where the state bore the overwhelming financial and logistical burden of direct service delivery. By transitioning the Ministry of Hajj and Umrah into an enabler-regulator role, the state fosters a highly competitive market where private hospitality,

technology, and transport firms continuously innovate to capture market share, thereby organically elevating the standards of the entire ecosystem.

## **Regulatory Metamorphosis: The Abolition of Tawafa Guilds and the Rise of Corporate Hospitality**

One of the most radical and economically significant regulatory shifts implemented for the upcoming 1447 AH (2026) and subsequent Hajj seasons is the complete abolition of the traditional "Tawafa" organizations. Historically, Tawafa establishments operated as hereditary, guild-like structures that held deeply entrenched monopolistic control over guiding, housing, and servicing pilgrims arriving from specific geographic regions around the world.

This legacy system, while historically functional, lacked the scalability, corporate accountability, and capital efficiency required by Vision 2030. Consequently, the Council of Ministers approved sweeping amendments to 21 articles of the Regulations for Service Providers of Foreign Pilgrims, replacing the Tawafa system with a highly regulated, competitive framework of **Hajj Hospitality Companies**.

This new corporate framework categorizes licensed hospitality companies into four distinct, specialized operational domains:

1. **Makkah and Holy Sites Services:** Companies licensed exclusively to provide holistic logistical and accommodation services within the city limits of Makkah and the sacred, geographically constrained precincts of Mina, Arafat, and Muzdalifah.
2. **Water Provision:** Specialized corporate entities licensed to manage the highly complex supply chain of providing potable water and Zamzam to pilgrim accommodations, a critical public health vector.
3. **Transit and Transport:** Companies focused on receiving pilgrims at the Kingdom's air, land, and sea entry points, safely transporting them between cities, and managing their return departure logistics.
4. **Madinah Services:** Companies dedicated to servicing pilgrims residing in or visiting the Prophet's Mosque and surrounding historical sites in Al-Madinah Al-Munawwarah.

The regulatory framework surrounding these new entities imposes strict corporate governance. Ownership and executive management of Hajj Hospitality Companies are strictly restricted to Saudi citizens, preventing foreign corporate monopolization of this religiously and economically sensitive sector. Furthermore, to stimulate downstream economic activity among Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs) and prevent vertical monopolistic stagnation, companies licensed for broad services in Makkah and Madinah are explicitly prohibited from executing the services directly. Instead, they are legally mandated to establish or contract independent subsidiary companies to handle actual service delivery, fostering a broader economic footprint.

Crucially, the transition to this corporate model grants the Ministry of Hajj and Umrah unprecedented regulatory "teeth." Under the previous hereditary system, enforcing quality control was politically and socially complex. Today, if a Hajj Hospitality Company fails to meet its contractual Service Level Agreements (SLAs), the Ministry possesses the unilateral, immediate authority to intervene, contract alternative licensed providers to rescue the pilgrims' experience, and subsequently recover all incurred costs directly from the violating company. Penalties for corporate negligence are severe, ranging from commercial suspension of the company for up to three years, to the individual dismissal or banishment of board members and executives from working in the sector for up to five years.

# Operational Blueprint for Hajj 2026 (1447 AH)

The operational and logistical strategy for the 1447 AH (2026) Hajj season demonstrates a proactive, highly structured approach to managing global demand. Recognizing that administrative bottlenecks create physical bottlenecks, the Ministry has significantly accelerated its operational timeline, shifting administrative burdens to the preceding months to ensure flawless kinetic execution when the rituals commence.

## Advanced Visa Issuance and Rigid Deadlines

In a stark departure from historical norms where visas were processed in the frantic weeks close to the pilgrimage dates, the Ministry officially commenced the issuance of Hajj visas for the 1447 AH season on **February 08, 2026**. With the core Hajj rituals—spanning the Day of Tarwiyah, Arafat, Eid al-Adha, and the Days of Tashreeq—anticipated to occur between **May 25 and May 30, 2026** (8-13 Dhul Hijjah), this early rollout provides a vital, unprecedented four-month logistical buffer.

This strategic acceleration serves multiple systemic purposes. It provides national Hajj affairs offices globally the necessary lead time to finalize complex flight charters, secure medical clearances, and complete mandatory biometric data uploads without overwhelming IT infrastructure. Final processing cut-offs are now strictly enforced algorithmically. For instance, payment windows shrink dynamically as deadlines approach (e.g., a 72-hour payment window reducing to just 6 hours by Dhu Al-Qadah 28), and rigid refund cancellation policies expire entirely by Dhu Al-Hijjah 1, after which no refunds are granted.

## Bilateral Quota Management

For nations where the state manages Hajj operations directly, the Ministry negotiates strict bilateral quota agreements, delineating allocations between public missions and private tour operators. These agreements govern everything from reception logistics to housing. For the 2026 season, India's total allocated quota is divided such that 70% is managed directly by the government-run Haj Committee of India (HCoI), while the remaining 30% is distributed among highly regulated private Haj Group Organizers (HGOs). Furthermore, Indian state Haj Inspectors are specifically deducted from the overall quota at a ratio of one inspector per 150 pilgrims, ensuring adequate oversight.

Similarly, in Pakistan, the Ministry of Religious Affairs and Interfaith Harmony (MoRA&IH) negotiates the "Hajj Affairs Arrangements Agreement" directly with the Saudi Ministry of Hajj and Umrah. For 2026, the maximum quota allocated to the Private Hajj Scheme in Pakistan has been rigidly capped at 60,000 pilgrims, allowing Saudi authorities to predict exact inbound volumes through private channels.

## The Nusuk Ecosystem and the 12 Authorized Global Providers

For pilgrims originating from targeted western nations, the Americas, Europe, and Oceania—demographics historically vulnerable to unregulated third-party travel agent fraud—the Ministry has centralized the entire booking and visa process through the **Nusuk Hajj** digital platform.

For the 2026 season, the Ministry has authorized exactly **12 official service providers** to

operate on the Nusuk platform for these demographics. These corporate entities completely replace the fragmented ecosystem of hundreds of foreign travel agents, centralizing accountability and standardizing service delivery.

Authorized Hajj Service Providers for Nusuk (1447 AH / 2026)
1. Abdul Lateef Jameel Real Estate Investment Co. Ltd.
2. Al Bait Guests for Pilgrims Services
3. Company Al Rajhi Likhdemat Al Tajaria Masanda
4. Dur Hospitality Company
5. Holiday Inn Bakkah Company
6. Ikram Aldeif Company for Tourism
7. Ithraa Alkhair for Pilgrims Services
8. MCDC for Hajj and Umrah Services
9. Rawaf Mina Company for Pilgrimage Services
10. Saudi Hajj and Umrah
11. Seera Group Holding (Mawasim – Part of Almosafer)
12. Yosr AlMashaer for Hajj Services

Each of these 12 providers operates under a **fixed, predefined quota** system. This means that the number of seats they offer directly matches the number of visas physically available to them. Consequently, if a package appears as available on the Nusuk platform, it already has a guaranteed visa attached to it, eliminating the speculative booking and subsequent disappointment that plagued legacy systems.

To reduce market confusion, these providers are mandated to launch their offerings in a single, coordinated release phase. Pilgrims use the platform to micro-configure their journey, transparently choosing between premium camps (Majar Al Kabsh, limited to approximately 5,500 spots) and standard camps (Mina Al-Muaisim, offering around 52,000 spots), selecting specific hotel beds in Makkah and Madinah, and opting for specific airline integration.

## Digital Transformation, Smart Hajj, and Fintech Integration

The Ministry's ability to flawlessly process millions of visas, manage cross-border multi-currency payments, and track the spatial movement of unprecedented crowds relies entirely on its newly deployed digital architecture. The "Smart Hajj" initiative represents the vanguard of Saudi digital governance, utilizing the Internet of Things (IoT), artificial intelligence (AI), and secure financial technology to map the physical world into a manageable digital twin.

### Biometrics and the Nusuk Gateway

Through the Nusuk B2C portal, pilgrims undertake a comprehensive, self-directed digital journey. The requirement to utilize the companion "Saudi Visa Bio" smartphone application forces pilgrims to upload their biometric passports, capture facial recognition telemetry, and execute a ten-fingerprint optical scan using their device's camera. This data interfaces directly with Saudi security and immigration databases, allowing automated, pre-flight verification and drastically reducing wait times upon arrival.

## Fintech Innovations: Nusuk Wallet by NEO

A critical vulnerability in past pilgrimages was the systemic reliance on physical cash, which exposed pilgrims to theft, loss, and predatory currency exchange rates, while depriving the state of visibility into the shadow economy. To mitigate this, the Ministry partnered with the Saudi National Bank (SNB) to develop and launch the **Nusuk Wallet by NEO**, the world's first international digital wallet dedicated specifically to serving pilgrims.

Operating natively within the Nusuk application and supported by SNB's advanced banking infrastructure (approved on a trial basis by the Saudi Central Bank), the wallet acts as an embedded open-loop financial instrument. It utilizes advanced AI, biometric identity verification, and end-to-end encryption to secure user funds. Pilgrims fund this e-wallet via credit card or international bank transfer (IBAN) before their arrival. It allows them to store funds securely, manage daily expenses, and conduct cashless micro-transactions throughout the Kingdom without the logistical burden of carrying physical cash. This initiative not only protects the consumer but also provides the Saudi central banking system with regulated, transparent oversight of foreign capital inflows during peak religious seasons.

## The Smart Hajj Card and Wearable IoT Devices

Spatial tracking and identity verification are managed through the deployment of the **Hajj Smart Card** and demographic-specific wearable IoT devices. Activated comprehensively for the upcoming seasons, the Smart Card serves as a pilgrim's definitive digital identity. Integrating Near Field Communication (NFC) and scannable barcode technology, the card allows rapid processing by security personnel and automated self-service kiosks.

The data payload of the Smart Card is highly dense. It links directly to the precise geographical coordinates of the pilgrim's designated accommodation within the labyrinthine Holy Sites, drastically reducing the incidence of lost individuals. Furthermore, it stores critical medical histories, group numbers, bus allocations, seat numbers, and algorithmically generated scheduling protocols for gathering points and departure times, ensuring the individual remains synchronized with the macro crowd movements.

Recognizing that a purely smartphone-dependent strategy alienates vulnerable demographics—such as the elderly or those from regions with lower technological literacy—the digital strategy is highly adaptable. For the 2026 Hajj, the Haj Committee of India (HCoI), in tight coordination with Saudi authorities, will distribute the **Haj Suvidha Smart Wristband** to all Indian pilgrims. Issued free of cost, these wearables circumvent the need for smartphone app interaction. They feature active location trackers, pedometers, SOS emergency buttons, Qibla compasses, and basic health parameter monitoring. Linked directly to the Indian Consulate General's control room in Saudi Arabia, these wristbands provide real-time telemetry, ensuring rapid emergency response for populations most at risk of disorientation or medical distress.

## Tawakkalna and AI Crowd Control

Initially deployed during the COVID-19 pandemic strictly for health tracking, the **Tawakkalna** application (developed by the Saudi Data and Artificial Intelligence Authority - SDAIA) has been permanently woven into the Smart Hajj ecosystem. It dynamically issues, verifies, and revokes Hajj and Umrah permits, ensuring compliance with spatial capacity limits. The app also integrates with municipal transport networks, allowing pilgrims to pre-book high-frequency

transport between their residences and the Grand Mosque, smoothing out peak demand curves. At the macro level, crowd control is managed through the **Smart Makkah Operations Center**, which leverages vast AI-powered surveillance grids. During peak seasons like Ramadan and Hajj, digital boards deployed at the entrances of the Grand Mosque display real-time capacity metrics (green for open, red for full), using predictive algorithms to physically route crowds away from areas nearing critical density, thereby preventing fatal bottlenecks and stampedes.

## **Spatial Engineering and Mega-Projects: Kidana Development Company**

The physical topography of Makkah and the surrounding Holy Sites presents unparalleled logistical and engineering challenges. The valleys of Mina and Muzdalifah offer strictly confined geographical boundaries that cannot be expanded, yet they must safely accommodate millions of individuals simultaneously. To address this spatial inelasticity, the Royal Commission for Makkah City and the Holy Sites established the **Kidana Development Company** to serve as its executive development arm.

Headquartered directly in Mina and established with an authorized capital of SR 1 billion (\$270 million), Kidana is a closed joint-stock company uniquely mandated to ensure the long-term sustainability, physical renovation, and spatial capacity expansion of the Holy Sites. Kidana's operations are foundational to achieving the Vision 2030 target of safely hosting exponentially larger crowds.

### **The Double-Story Tent Initiative in Mina**

In preparation for the 1446/1447 AH Hajj seasons, Kidana successfully executed the first phase of a revolutionary architectural mega-project: the **double-story tent infrastructure in Mina**. Covering an initial footprint of over 20,000 square meters, this initiative involves the construction of robust, weather-resistant, multi-level structures. By utilizing the vertical axis, Kidana exponentially increases the housing capacity of Mina without expanding the unyielding horizontal boundaries of the valley.

Constructed in a highly compressed 100-day window using advanced prefabricated techniques designed to withstand severe weather fluctuations, the initial phase delivered over 40 multi-story buildings and 550 integrated restroom facilities. For the current testing cycles, these structures are undergoing critical stress testing by an initial cohort of 8,000 domestic and international pilgrims. Upon full rollout scheduled for completion by the 2026 season, these double-story complexes aim to safely accommodate up to 20,000 pilgrims per complex, radically improving land-use efficiency and providing a highly organized, climate-controlled residential environment.

### **Sanitation Overhauls and Cloud Engineering**

Kidana's infrastructure upgrades extend far beyond accommodation, targeting foundational public health vectors. In a massive overhaul, the company systematically dismantled 2,116 outdated sanitary units and replaced them with 5,628 modern, multi-floor restroom facilities across Mina. Mobility within the sites is being physically streamlined through the construction of the "Mashaar Pathway" in Muzdalifah, alongside dedicated rest areas positioned strategically between ritual locations to mitigate heat exhaustion.

To manage the complex geospatial logistics of these developments, Kidana entered a strategic,

first-of-its-kind collaboration with iSolution and Google Cloud. Kidana became one of the first organizations in the Middle East to implement Cloud Graphics Processing Units (GPUs) on Google Cloud. This state-of-the-art ArcGIS infrastructure allows Kidana to process massive datasets of geospatial topography and fluid human movement with ultra-low latency. The integration of a transformative Data and AI Framework enables the company to utilize machine learning models to simulate crowd dynamics, optimize future infrastructure placement, and automate facility management across the Holy Sites in alignment with Vision 2030.

## Security, Health Protocols, and Crisis Management

The devastating heat conditions experienced during the 2024 Hajj season, which resulted in over 1,300 pilgrim fatalities globally, have catalyzed a severe tightening of safety, health, and legal protocols for the 2025 and 2026 seasons. The Ministry's regulatory approach is now defined by absolute zero tolerance for administrative violations and hyper-vigilance regarding the physical safety of the crowds.

### The "No Permit, No Hajj" Imperative and Umrah Deadlines

The bedrock of the Ministry's security apparatus is the strict, unapologetic enforcement of the "No Permit, No Hajj" policy. Collaborating deeply with the Ministry of Interior, the state deploys vast mobile exhibitions and public awareness campaigns (such as recent activations in Madinah) to communicate the severe legal ramifications of unauthorized pilgrimage. Individuals attempting to bypass the Nusuk authorization system or arriving on invalid tourist/visit visas face immediate deportation, detention, thousands of dollars in fines, and permanent biometric bans from re-entering Saudi Arabia.

Similarly, to ensure the spatial environment is entirely cleared and reset for the incoming influx of Hajj pilgrims, the Ministry enforces a strict "hard exit" deadline for the preceding Umrah season. For 2026, all Umrah pilgrims must depart the Kingdom by **April 18**. Overstaying beyond this highly publicized deadline triggers immediate financial penalties of up to SAR 10,000 and initiates automatic deportation procedures.

### Health Security and Demographic Safeguards

To systematically mitigate the physiological risks associated with performing strenuous rituals in extreme Middle Eastern heat, mandatory health and fitness screenings are stringently enforced prior to any visa approval. All pilgrims must present officially verified, complete vaccination records—including immunizations against *Neisseria meningitidis*, COVID-19, and routine global requirements like polio, measles, and diphtheria—as strictly dictated by the Saudi Ministry of Health.

Crowd management protocols on the ground have been radically updated to protect vulnerable demographics. The elderly and individuals with disabilities are now strictly segregated from the kinetic crush of the general crowds, provided with separate prayer areas, priority pathways, and dedicated electric carts for performing the Tawaf. Furthermore, new regulations strongly advise families against bringing children into crowded areas during peak hours, prioritizing child safety. Domestic logistical rules within the camps have also shifted aggressively in favor of safety. To prevent catastrophic fire hazards in the densely packed tent cities, the use of gas cylinders by pilgrims for cooking has been outright banned; moving forward, all meals must be strictly

provisioned and distributed by licensed, regulated catering services.

## International Diplomacy and the Makkah Route Initiative

The Ministry of Hajj and Umrah functions not only as an administrative body but as a potent instrument of Saudi soft power, leveraging its unparalleled logistical capabilities to foster deep bilateral relationships across the Islamic world. The most prominent and globally appreciated manifestation of this diplomatic-logistical synergy is the **Makkah Route Initiative**.

Launched as a pilot program in 2018 and fully activated by 2019, the Makkah Route Initiative fundamentally alters the jurisdictional and logistical flow of international travel. By deploying Saudi immigration, customs, and health officials directly to the departure airports of participating foreign nations, pilgrims complete their entry procedures into Saudi Arabia before they even board their flights.

Upon landing in Jeddah or Madinah, these pre-cleared pilgrims bypass passport control entirely. They spend mere minutes at the airport before transferring directly to dedicated buses that transport them to their accommodations. Simultaneously, their luggage is algorithmically coded at the departure airport, sorted upon arrival, and delivered directly to their hotel rooms by specialized service agencies. Data indicates that this streamlined process reduces immigration processing time upon arrival to an astounding average of 1:48 minutes, resulting in a nearly perfect beneficiary satisfaction rate of 99.45%.

For the 1447 AH / 2026 operational season, the Ministry of Interior, in partnership with the Ministry of Hajj and Umrah, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and the General Authority of Civil Aviation, has expanded the initiative to operate from 12 dedicated airports across eight strategically vital nations.

Participating Countries: Makkah Route Initiative (2026 Season)
1. Morocco
2. Indonesia
3. Malaysia
4. Pakistan
5. Bangladesh
6. Türkiye
7. Côte d'Ivoire
8. Republic of Maldives

Since its inception, the initiative has successfully served well over a million pilgrims—processing 314,337 individuals in the 2025/1446 season alone—generating immense diplomatic goodwill for the Kingdom. The operational shift to the "Makkah Route" represents a profound logistical restructuring, enabling the Ministry of Hajj and Umrah to externalize the bureaucratic burden of entry procedures, thereby drastically reducing the domestic strain on Saudi Arabia's primary international gateways (King Abdulaziz International Airport in Jeddah and Prince Mohammad bin Abdulaziz Airport in Madinah).

## Inter-Agency Synergies: Transportation and Mosque Care

The seamless execution of the Ministry's strategic vision relies on tight, heavily regulated coordination with independent syndicates and parallel authorities that manage specific micro-environments within the pilgrimage journey.

## **The General Syndicate of Cars (Naqaba)**

For ground logistics, the Ministry heavily regulates and delegates authority to the **General Syndicate of Cars (Naqaba)**. Established via Royal Decree No. 11501 in 1372 AH (1953), the Syndicate is the sole official authority tasked with supervising the organization of transport companies moving pilgrims. Operating under the general supervision of the Ministry of Hajj and Umrah, the Syndicate translates the Ministry's macro-routing plans into kinetic reality. For operational windows surrounding the 2025/2026 seasons, the Syndicate commands a staggering fleet of over 22,000 buses and 1,000 cars, operated by 72 registered transport companies. Supported by 16 maintenance centers, 400 mobile workshops, and over 2,000 dedicated administrative employees, the Naqaba ensures the continuous, unbroken flow of roughly 1.5 million pilgrims between the Holy Sites.

## **General Authority for the Care of the Two Holy Mosques**

While the Ministry of Hajj and Umrah regulates the macro-journey—visas, international transport, accommodation, and city-to-city routing—jurisdiction shifts when a pilgrim enters the immediate physical and spiritual environment of the holiest sites. This micro-environment is managed by the **General Authority for the Care of the Affairs of the Grand Mosque and the Prophet's Mosque**. The Authority is responsible for internal guidance paths, wheelchair ramp accessibility, managing the digital crowd-level screens on each floor of the Grand Mosque, and executing virtual media tours to educate pilgrims. The synchronized handover of responsibility between the Ministry (bringing the pilgrim to the gates) and the Authority (managing the pilgrim inside the gates) is critical to maintaining order in spaces accommodating upwards of 2.5 million worshippers simultaneously.

## **Global Engagement: The Hajj and Umrah Conference & Exhibition (Hajj Expo)**

To continually innovate its service delivery models, identify blind spots, and foster private sector investment, the Ministry utilizes the **Hajj and Umrah Conference and Exhibition (Hajj Expo)** as its central global hub for technology transfer and policy coordination.

Returning for its 5th edition from November 9 to 12, 2025 in Jeddah (serving as the primary planning crucible for the 2026/1447 Hajj), the Hajj Expo convenes under the ambitious theme "From Makkah to the World". This event solidifies the Ministry's role as the preeminent global thought leader in mass-gathering logistics and religious tourism. The conference draws ministers, ambassadors, and corporate officials from over 95 countries, featuring more than 80 scientific sessions, 60 specialized workshops, and over 260 exhibitors spread across a massive 52,000 square meter interactive platform.

The strategic agenda of the Hajj Expo is rigorously structured around three core tracks:

1. **Empowerment and Synergy:** Focusing deeply on the integration between government security entities and private healthcare providers. Key panel discussions center on the deployment of artificial intelligence and predictive analytics to support operational

decision-making during peak crisis moments.

2. **Infrastructure and Operational Services:** Addressing critical physical bottlenecks in transportation, housing, facilities management, and catering. This track brings together urban planners and logistics firms to pitch tangible solutions for the unyielding spatial constraints of Makkah and Mina.
3. **Development and Sustainability:** Highlighting entrepreneurship and training within the "Third Sector" (non-profits and volunteer organizations), ensuring that the Hajj ecosystem is economically, socially, and environmentally sustainable over the long term.

By hosting this conference, the Ministry effectively crowdsources solutions to its most pressing operational challenges while simultaneously signaling market opportunities to global investors. The event culminates in the signing of high-impact bilateral agreements and commercial contracts with the 12 authorized service providers and numerous other international tech and logistics firms. This proactive engagement strategy guarantees that the Ministry is continually adopting the absolute latest global innovations in smart city management, geospatial mapping, and fintech.

## Operational Readiness and the Future Trajectory

The Ministry of Hajj and Umrah's preparations for the 1447 AH (2026) season have been characterized by an unprecedented level of proactivity and data-driven foresight. As early as eight months prior to the core rituals, the Ministry had already initiated deep coordination with representatives from over 60 countries and held extensive operational meetings with global Hajj Affairs offices. This highly accelerated timeline facilitated the early launch of the "Saudi Buses" initiative—aimed at totally overhauling the transportation experience—and completed the complex automation of the Services Guide for more than 75 nations via the Nusuk Masar platform.

Furthermore, the Ministry's proactive strategy involves activating over 189 distinct hospitality centers, qualifying 24 international service companies beyond the core 12 Nusuk providers, and launching more than 25 innovative initiatives approved strictly for execution in the upcoming season. By establishing a dedicated, centralized database to register and vet volunteers well in advance, the Ministry ensures that human resources are optimized to complement its high-tech infrastructure.

The continuous, aggressive refinement of the Nusuk platform—which now boasts over 30 million active users globally and possesses the capability to function entirely offline to serve pilgrims without reliable internet access—demonstrates the Ministry's unyielding commitment to inclusive, resilient technological solutions.

The trajectory of the Ministry of Hajj and Umrah clearly indicates a future where the friction of international travel, the physical limitations of geography, and the linguistic barriers of a global pilgrim base are entirely mitigated by ambient technology and rigorous corporate governance. By dismantling archaic guild structures in favor of regulated corporate hospitality, replacing physical cash with biometric e-wallets, and managing unyielding physical geography with multi-story, AI-modeled infrastructure, the Ministry ensures that the profound spiritual journey of the pilgrim is supported by the most advanced logistical framework on the planet.

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