

After The Pandemic Covid-19: Challenges to Malaysian Umrah Pilgrims and The Selection of Tourism Operating Agencies for Umrah

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Abstract

The number of Umrah pilgrims from Malaysia who perform Umrah in the Holy Land continues to increase from year to year. This high demand makes the offer of services by travel agencies as a good business opportunity to generate income while also helping Malaysians to perform Umrah. However, the Covid-19 pandemic that has spread throughout the world has had an impact on the Umrah pilgrims. Restrictions and regulations have been implemented by the Government of Saudi Arabia. Various other countries have implemented similar measures and even imposed restrictions on their citizens in an effort to control the spread of this virus. This discussion paper will discuss the challenges to Malaysian umrah pilgrims and the selection of travel agencies for Umrah after the pandemic.

Keywords: Covid-19, Regulations, Umrah, Challenges, Travel Agency

Introduction

Malaysia has a population of 29.8 million in 2020, and 63.5 percent of them are Muslim (Department of Statistics Malaysia, 2022). From the total number of Muslims, as of May 2022, 8.5 million people have become depositors of Tabung Haji, an organization that manages hajj and umrah services in Malaysia (Zarul, 2022).

Based on the decision that has been agreed upon in the Organization of Islamic States (OIC) Meeting with the Government of Saudi Arabia in 1988 in Amman, Jordan, the agreement decision has set a Hajj quota for each country is 0.1 percent of the country's total population (Tabunghaji, 2022). With this quota restriction and in line with the increase in the number of depositors every year, the waiting period for Hajj in Malaysia has also increased to 134 years (Tarmiji, 2021).

Although there is an effort from the government to apply for an additional Hajj quota for Malaysian pilgrims, the waiting period for the Hajj queue is still too long. Which logically makes this dream impossible to achieve, especially for the elderly. This causes many Malaysians to choose to perform umrah first because there is no umrah quota constraint compared to the hajj quota. Umrah can be performed at any time, while Hajj must be performed at a specific time (Hashim, 2011). Therefore, this discussion paper will discuss the challenges for Malaysian Umrah pilgrims as well as the selection of travel agency for Umrah after the pandemic.

Literature Review

Coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19), is a novel pneumonia disease originating in Wuhan, it was confirmed by the World Health Organization on January 12, 2020 before becoming an outbreak in all countries (Shah et al., 2020). Patients infected with Covid-19 will experience symptoms ranging from the light cold until severe pneumonia that can cause death (Ministry of Health Malaysia, 2020).

The World Health Organization (WHO) on March 11 declared COVID-19 a pandemic, pointing to the over 118,000 cases of the coronavirus illness in over 110 countries and territories around the world and the sustained risk of further global spread (Ducharme, 2020). Until this article was written, a total of 4,741,413 cases with a total of 36,102 deaths have been recorded for the country of Malaysia while the total number of cases in the world has recorded 597,276,789 cases with a total of 6,460,112 deaths worldwide (www.worldometers.info/coronavirus, 2022).

Covid-19 in Malaysia

The COVID-19 outbreak in Malaysia has occurred in two waves. The first wave started with three cases imported from China via Singapore on 24 January 2020, which are just 22 cases by mid-February. It was then followed by a second wave, which began on 27 February 2020. This second wave was greatly reinforced by transmission at a religious mass gathering in Sri Petaling, Kuala Lumpur, attended by approximately 14 500 Malaysians and 2000 non-Malaysians. The first death from COVID-19 in Malaysia was reported on 17 March 2020 (World Health Organization, 2020).

In order to contain and overcome the Covid-19 pandemic, the Malaysian government has taken several steps. Among the steps taken by the Malaysian government is to implement the Movement Control Order (MCO) for 14 days from 18 to 31 March 2020 throughout the country. This order is implemented in accordance with the provisions under the Prevention and Control of Infectious Diseases Act 1988 and the Police Act 1967 (Hasnan, 2020). Under this order, there are six prohibitions or restrictions that have been enforced, namely (1) restrictions on mass gatherings throughout the country covering religious, sports, social and cultural activities. (2) travel restrictions for Malaysians abroad. (3) restrictions on the entry of all tourists and foreign visitors from abroad into the country. (4) Closure of all nurseries, government and private schools including day schools, boarding schools, international schools, *tahfiz* centers and other primary, secondary and pre-university educational institutions. (5) Closure of all public and private higher education institutions (HEIs) and skill training institutes throughout the country. (6) Sixth, the closure of all government and private premises except those involved in essential national services (or essential services) namely

water, electricity, energy, telecommunications, post, transport, irrigation, oil, gas, fuel, lubricants, broadcasting, finance, banking, health, pharmacy, fire, prison, port, airport, security, defense, cleaning, retail and food supply (Alyasa, 2020).

This MCO has been extended 3 times, namely on 1 - 14 April 2020, followed by 15 - 28 April 2020 and 29 April - 12 May 2020. However, on 4 May 2020, the government has given some relaxation by implementing the Conditional Movement Control Order (CMCO). Under the CMCO, almost all sectors and economic activities are allowed to operate provided they comply with the Standard Operating Procedures (SOP) of businesses which include social distancing and recording the names and phone numbers of customers and the dates of their visits (Izhar, Abd Rahman and Aziz, 2021). This CMCO has been enforced until the government made a decision to change to the Recovery Movement Control Order (RMCO) phase for some states from June 10, 2020 until March 31, 2021 (Fuad, 2021). However, there are some states that have re-imposed MCO starting January 13, 2021 (Amin and Roslan, 2021). However on June 1, 2021, the MCO was re-enforced across the country due to the emergence of a new, more violent variant with a high and fast infectivity rate (Teoh, 2021).

Although the government has eased some restrictions by changing the phase from MCO to CMCO or to RMCO, the restrictions at the border gates still remain enforced except for some permitted purposes, there is a ban for Malaysian citizens and foreign citizens to enter and exit the country. The ban for Malaysian citizens to leave the country but has been relaxed for those who have met the conditions from 11 October 2021 (Muhamad, 2021). Indirectly, Malaysian Umrah pilgrims who plan to perform Umrah have also been given permission effective October 18, 2021 (Ibrahim, 2021). However, permission to perform Umrah has been postponed again from January 8, 2022 to help reduce the risk of Omicron transmission in the country and the increase in Covid-19 cases (Sukaimi, 2022). However, the government once again gave permission to Umrah pilgrims to perform Umrah starting on February 8, 2022 until this article was written (Yusop and Priya, 2022). These border restrictions ended when the government announces that Malaysia will enter the Endemic Transition Phase starting on 1 April 2022 (Parzi and Fuad, 2022).

Covid-19 in Saudi Arabia

On March 2, 2020, Saudi Arabia reported its first COVID-19 confirmed case in a traveler returning from Iran through Bahrain without declaring travel history to Iran. In its continuous effort to minimize the devastating effects of COVID-19 and to curb the spread of the pandemic, Umrah was completely suspended by March 4th and the two holy mosques in Makkah and Madinah were put to daily closure for cleaning and disinfection by March 5th. On March 8th, the Saudi government announced to change of the common method of schooling and universities to remote learning and virtual classrooms. This was followed by a travel ban to all affected countries and putting in place mandatory quarantine for passengers who already arrived from these countries. At March 12th, 2020, all social and governmental gatherings and events were suspended including the Saudi-African and Arab-African summits. Subsequently, all international and domestic air travels, sports events, workplaces (except security and health sectors) were suspended as well. Saudi Arabia government issued a lockdown on major cities such Riyadh, Makkah, Madinah and Jeddah and banned travels between all of its 13 provinces. By April 2020, Saudi Arabia government implemented a 24-h curfew in most of the country, enforced lockdown and isolation of several suburbs and

districts in major cities, and started mass and extensive testing in communities (Algaissi et al., 2020).

The government of Saudi Arabia also limited the number of pilgrims for the year 2020 to only 1,000 people who are already in the country, 70 percent of whom are foreigners. Compared to the Hajj which was previously usually attended by more than 2.5 million Muslims from all over the world, in 2020 it carried out in an atmosphere of strict hygiene protocols with limited access to pilgrims under 65 years of age and without chronic diseases (BH Online, 2020). For the year 2021, the number of pilgrims is increased to 60,000 people across countries with a total of 45,000 places offered to pilgrims from outside Saudi Arabia while the rest are reserved for local pilgrims. Nevertheless, pilgrims need to comply with the standard operating procedures (SOP) set such as completing all documents related to their health status including having a vaccination certificate and needing to go through a visual inspection as a precautionary measure (BH Online, 2021). For the year 2022, Saudi Arabia raised the number of Hajj pilgrims from inside and outside the kingdom to 1 million, after two years of restrictions due to the coronavirus pandemic. The Ministry of Hajj and Umrah of Saudi Arabia released a statement that said Hajj is open to those under 65 years of age who have received approved COVID-19 vaccinations by the Saudi Ministry of Health. Pilgrims from abroad will be required to submit a negative PCR test taken within 72 hours from the time of departure (Geldi, 2022).

The government of Saudi Arabia began to accept Umrah worship to be performed again starting on October 4, 2020. However, to begin with, only about 6,000 of its residents are allowed to perform Umrah every day, the pilgrims from abroad are only allowed to perform Umrah started from November 1, 2020 with capacity increased to 20,000 people per day ((BH Online, 2020). On February 3, 2021, the government of Saudi Arabia enforced a temporary ban on the entry of visitors from 20 countries as a way to prevent the increase of the Covid-19 pandemic infection. The ban involves Egypt, United Arab Emirates (UAE), Lebanon, Turkey, Britain, France, Germany, Ireland, Italy, Portugal, Sweden and Switzerland, United States (US), Argentina, Brazil, Pakistan, India, Indonesia, Japan and South Africa The ban was made based on the continuous increase in Covid-19 cases as well as the dangerous variants that are contagious in these countries said (Sinar Harian, 2021). This ban, however, was lifted by the government of Saudi Arabia in August 2021 (BH Online, 2021).

Methodology

Content analysis is made of relevant secondary data from published sources including articles, books, newspapers and web sources that include scholarly, scientific and religious views on the issue under study. In addition, interviews with travel agency staff were also conducted to obtain the latest information.

Findings

Every job done must have its own challenges. Not to mention doing Umrah in the Holy Land where every person who passes through has a story of their own. Hence, this article will only focus on the challenge of performing Umrah after the Covid-19 pandemic only.

Challenges to Umrah pilgrims

The first challenge is none other than where the Umrah pilgrims being subject to permission from the government of Saudi Arabia. Even if you have planned and registered four or five months in advance, if the approval to perform Umrah is suspended at the last minute, then the Umrah pilgrims must comply. This is because any action taken by the government of Saudi Arabia is for the good of Muslims as a whole. This can be seen based on Astro Awani's article (2020) which reports that one of the initial steps taken by the government of Saudi Arabia is to temporarily stop the entry of Umrah pilgrims to enter the country to perform Umrah starting February 27, 2020. The government of Saudi Arabia also temporarily stopped the Pilgrimage program The Prophet's Mosque in Medina. These restrictions include individuals using tourist visas from countries affected by COVID-19. The government of Saudi Arabia also suspended travel to and from Saudi Arabia for citizens of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) who use national identification cards. Although Umrah pilgrims have registered and paid in advance, Umrah pilgrims are still unable to go and perform Umrah.

The second challenge that Umrah pilgrims have to face is getting permission from the Malaysian government. Apart from permission from the government of Saudi Arabia, Umrah pilgrims are also subject to approval from their government. This can be seen when Saudi Arabia allows attendance for Umrah from October 4, 2020, the Malaysian government only gives permission to Malaysian Umrah pilgrims to perform Umrah from October 11, 2021, which is one year after the return of permission by the government of Saudi Arabia. However, permission to perform Umrah has been postponed again from January 8, 2022 to help reduce the risk of Omicron transmission in the country and the increase in Covid-19 cases. However, the government once again gave permission to Umrah pilgrims to perform Umrah starting on February 8, 2022.

Apart from the permission from the government of Saudi Arabia and the government of Malaysia, Umrah pilgrims also need to be aware of the latest rules or SOPs that have been set by the government of Saudi Arabia. The rules often change according to the current situation. Rules are implemented to ensure the safety of the public. Because of this, there are times when rules are tightened, relaxed or withdrawn and there are times when new rules are introduced. Because of this, the Umrah pilgrims need to be aware of any changes in the rules that are implemented. For example regarding the need for a booster dose injection to all congregations. Although in some countries, the booster dose injection is not mandatory, but when Umrah pilgrims want to perform Umrah, then the Umrah pilgrims need to take the booster dose injection. This is as stated by the Minister in the Prime Minister's Department (Religious Affairs) Datuk Idris Ahmad, "The booster dose is one of the Saudi (government)'s wishes for Umrah pilgrims. They have issued a circular, so we have to follow" (BH Online, 2022).

Selection of Travel Agencies

Every Umrah pilgrim must book tickets, hotels and visas if they wish to perform Umrah. Some do it themselves and some use the services of a travel agency. These reservations are usually made two or three months in advance before the Umrah pilgrims' departure date. So here is a very big challenge for the Umrah pilgrims when the reservation has been made, the payment has been cleared but they fail to depart for the Holy Land when they are found to

be positive for Covid. When the reservation was made, the Umrah pilgrims were healthy and fit to go on Umrah, but on the day they wanted to leave, the Umrah pilgrims failed due to being positive and had to undergo quarantine. Therefore, Umrah pilgrims are not allowed to perform Umrah.

If it is outside of the Covid-19 pandemic season, Umrah pilgrims usually choose the services of a travel agency based on the price, the services offered and the location of the hotel. Appropriate prices, complete services and the hotel's location close to the Grand Mosque in Mecca and the Prophet's Mosque in Medina are usually factors in agency selection. However, after the Covid-19 pandemic, in addition to those three factors, Umrah pilgrims need to find the best deal that offers them a "guarantee" if they fail to leave due to positive factors and need to be quarantined.

Based on information obtained from different agencies, there are two offers that are commonly offered to Umrah pilgrims who fail to depart due to being positive for Covid-19. The first offer is that Umrah pilgrims can postpone their departure to the Holy Land by choosing a new date in the future. If the Umrah pilgrims chooses to postpone by choosing a new date, the additional payment rate charged to the Umrah pilgrims is different from one agency to another which is between RM250 - RM300.

The second offer offered is that Umrah pilgrims can continue to cancel their bookings. But if the Umrah pilgrims chooses to cancel the reservation, the refund amount they will receive also varies from one agency to another which is between RM0 - RM3000. Although the offer is the same by travel agencies, it differs in terms of financial implications. Therefore, the challenge for Umrah pilgrims in choosing the best agency for them.

Conclusion

The Covid-19 pandemic that hit the world from 2019 until now has affected individuals, organizations and countries around the world. Many activities have to be done according to new norms and rules. Permission from the government of Saudi Arabia, permission from the government of Malaysia and the need to know the latest information regarding rules or SOPs that have been set by the government of Saudi Arabia are main challenges for Malaysian umrah pilgrims to perform umrah after the Covid-19 pandemic. In addition, Umrah pilgrims need to find the best deals from travel agencies that can offer them a "guarantee" in case the Umrah pilgrims unable to perform umrah. Although there are various challenges, as human beings we need to continue to live life and as Muslims, worship also needs to continue to be performed. Challenges should be faced patiently. May the blessings of patience in the face of challenges today provide sweet results for our lives in the future.

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