# Millions of Pilgrims Begin Annual Hajj in Sweltering Mecca Heat



In Mecca's sweltering heat, Muslims began the annual Hajj pilgrimage on Friday, with millions of pilgrims gathering at a tent camp in the Mina desert. The pilgrimage commenced with ritual circumnavigations of the Kaaba in the Grand Mosque, Islam’s holiest site.

Over 1.5 million pilgrims from around the world have already arrived in Mecca, and Saudi authorities expect the number to exceed 2 million. This year’s Hajj occurs against the backdrop of the Israel-Palestine conflict, which has prevented Palestinians in Gaza from participating due to the closure of the Rafah crossing.

Palestinian authorities confirmed that 4,200 pilgrims from the West Bank made it to Mecca. Additionally, 1,000 family members of Palestinians killed or wounded in Gaza arrived for Hajj at Saudi King Salman’s invitation.

For the first time in over a decade, Syrian pilgrims traveled directly from Damascus to Mecca as relations between Saudi Arabia and Syria improve. In previous years, Syrians from rebel-held areas had to journey through Turkey.

Hajj, a pilgrimage required once in a lifetime for every Muslim who can afford and physically manage it, is one of Islam’s Five Pillars. This year's pilgrimage is expected to see harsh weather, with temperatures potentially reaching 48°C (118°F).

Security measures in and around Mecca include checkpoints to prevent unauthorized pilgrims. The initial Hajj phase began with pilgrims moving to Mina, followed by a vigil on Mount Arafat and the symbolic stoning of the devil in Mina, coinciding with the Eid al-Adha holiday.

Recent years saw the pilgrimage scale back due to the COVID-19 pandemic, but it has since returned to near-pre-pandemic numbers, with last year’s participation reaching 1.8 million.