

Umrah Worship During The Pandemic Covid-19: Responses From Residents In Northern Malaysia

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Abstract

The Covid-19 pandemic that hit the world has affected many things including social and economic activities. For Muslims, among the main effects are the barriers to perform Umrah and Hajj where Saudi Arabia is among the countries that close their country's border gates from the influx of travellers. When most countries started to show decreasing number of covid-19 cases, this is where Saudi government reconsider to reopen its borders to welcome Umrah and hajj travellers. This study concentrates on Northern Malaysia namely the state of Kedah and Perlis. Quantitative research methodology was employed where 1093 responses gathered from both states from population of 2 million Muslims. Responses were very good and very positive. It is suggested for future studies to include the population for all over Malaysia or shall be extended to other places to evaluate interest among Muslims to perform Umrah once the situation has recovered.

Keywords

Umrah Worship, Residents, Pandemic, Covid-19, Northern Malaysia.

1. INTRODUCTION

Umrah worship besides Hajj is the duty of Muslims with once a lifetime of ability. The covid-19 pandemic that has hit the world since the end of 2019 has recorded millions of positive cases and recorded high number of death cases in many countries. Various measures were taken to stop the spread of the covid-19 including practising social distancing, travel and mobility bans, community lockdowns, stay at home campaigns, self- or mandatory-quarantine, curbs on crowding (Sigala, 2020).

The outbreak has led the Saudi government to impose visa and travel restrictions on umrah since late February 2020 to curb the spread of the outbreak. The Government of Saudi Arabia has also decided on a similar ruling on the implementation of the 1441H hajj season and only a small number of selected pilgrims are allowed to perform hajj (Majeed, 2020). However, in the vicinity of October 2021, the travel ban began to be relaxed. Government of Saudi Arabia has begun to loosen the conditions for the Congregation especially umrah to perform umrah.

According to Buang (2017), at least 136,000 Malaysians performed their umrah in 2011. Nevertheless, the number of Malaysian umrah pilgrims dropped sharply to 90,000 in 2012. This number decreased due to the expansion of facilities at Mecca's Grand Mosque and the number of umrah visas issued by Saudi Arabia that year were reduced. In comparison, the number of Malaysian Muslim pilgrims going umrah back increased to 230,000 in 2013.

In 2014, the number of umrah pilgrims increased to 250,000 and in 2015, to 290,000. In the first half of 2017, the number of umrah pilgrims was about 230,000 and increased to 274,066 congregations for the first half of 2019. In recent years, Malaysia's umrah tourism industry has seen an explosion involving 573 licensed tour operators and Umrah tourism agencies (Ministry of Tourism, Arts and Culture Malaysia, 2020). In Kedah alone, there are 63 agencies that manages umrah travel and in Perlis, there are 4 travel agencies involved.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Within almost 2 years of the Implementation of Movement Control Order (MCO) implemented in Malaysia, many Malaysians were affected. Some have lost their jobs, some have been affected and more problems arise. Among the sectors severely affected are tourism-related sectors and this includes travel agencies that manage umrah and hajj travel (Sigala, 2020).

The Malaysian government has announced the authorization of cross-state movement including abroad after Malaysia achieved a vaccination rate of 90 percent of the adult population (Vincej, 2022). This was response by the Malaysia's Health Minister Khairy Jamaluddin which clearly stated that, when opening the border, people need to adhere to the standard operating procedure (SOP) developed by Health Ministry.

This news is a very good news for umrah pilgrims from Malaysia who have been forced to postpone their journey (Adnan, 2021) for almost two years due to the Covid-19 pandemic that has hit the world. This decision was made by the Malaysian Government following to the increase in daily cases of Covid-19 in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, apart from the spread of Omicron variant in Malaysia among the umrah pilgrims.

For tourism industry to recover, it is suggested by Helble and Fink (2020), a wise decision by the government is through introducing a phased approach. It is true that in the early stage of pandemic, strict lockdowns were required which makes impossible for tourism to occur. However, slowly tourism sector can be re-open gradually according to the latest situation (Sharma, Thomas, & Paul, 2021).

The latest information (on umrah requirements) is that the Saudi government required the third dose for Sinovac vaccine recipients. However, for recipients of Pfizer and AstraZeneca vaccines, it is not necessary for them (Halid, 2021). Recipient of sinovac vaccine can still perform the Umrah provided need to equip themselves with the third dose of vaccine (Halid, 2021). However, for this purpose, various precautions must be taken to ensure that the congregation's process of performing umrah (Basahel, Alsabban,, & Yamin, 2021) runs smoothly and the safety of the congregation are also guaranteed.

2.1 Problem Statement

Currently, there is an increase in the price of umrah packages (Hassan, 2022) offered by travel agencies that have permission to bring umrah pilgrims. The increase in the price of umrah packages is due to the SOPs that have been set. The situation happens when only two congregations are allowed to be in one room. Secondly, the cost must be shared between the six congregations in the pre-pandemic period.

Some additional costs to be considered include hotel Value Added Tax (VAT) in Saudi Arabia, Covid-19 screening test for pilgrims before leaving for holy land and while in Saudi Arabia and before returning home. However, the number of pilgrims assigned in one trip is still the same as before which 30 to 40 pilgrims aged 12 years and above besides requirement for the complete dose of vaccination.

With introduction to the additional conditions, there is an increment of RM1,000 where the additional costs included of an increase of visa fee, cost of the self-testing kits, accommodation and transport. This makes the cost to perform the umrah saw an increment up to RM8,500 as compared to RM5,500 before the pandemic, as reported by chairman of Association of Umrah and Haj Travel Agents (Papuh) Datuk Seri Razali Mohd Sham (Halid, 2021). The Malaysian government, through the tourism, arts and culture ministry, has decided RM6,900 as a floor price for an umrah package of 12 days and 10 nights (Bernama, October 17, 2021). The initiative introduced by the government as a means of retaining and controlling the price hike for the Umrah packages.

Issues on Umrah worshippers is becoming a hot news since many potential clients are not clear with the travel guidelines provided by the government. Therefore, a lot of misunderstanding occurs and create unhealthy situation for the client as well to the government. From another point of view, background factors such as desire to achieve, accept responsibility, hard work and risk orientation (Tong & Anuar, 2018) of the tourism business becomes the key to successfully flourish the tourism industry in particularly umrah travel packages.

As for the Malaysian government, miscommunication occurs between Ministry of Foreign affairs and Ministry of health. Proper coordination between both is compulsory for Ministry to avoid any conflict arises. After all, it is understood managing crises during this pandemic era is difficult (Kaul, Shah, & El-Sherag, 2020) since this is the first time everybody experienced such situation. Kaul, et. Al (2020) highlighted that during the crisis, communication must be clear and consistent, nevertheless should be adaptive as well.

Chairman of National Recovery Council (MPN), Tan Sri Muhyiddin Yassin highlighted that the Malaysian government will announce the reopening the borders soon. Health Ministry is finalising the Standard Operating Procedures for the full reopening of the borders since the first lockdown on March 18, 2020. In the meantime, Cabinet will decide that the SOPs needed to be established before a date for the reopening can be announced. Furthermore, the longer the country's borders were closed, the worse it would be for the economy (Zainuddin, 2022).

From the above argument, it provided a strong justification to look into UMRAH WORSHIP among the Northern Malaysia Muslim population. Their responses on Umrah Ibadah DURING THE PANDEMIC COVID-19 will become a guideline for the government to look into the matter seriously. This doesn't reflect on the government policy alone but affects the tourism industry, umrah travel operator, agencies, as well as the airline industry.

2.2 Research Objectives

The main objective is to identify responses of the Muslims from the northern states of peninsular Malaysia which are the states of Kedah and Perlis to perform umrah during the pandemic period of Covid-19. It is important to assess the capabilities of prospective umrah pilgrims and the findings will help tourism industry players, government, airline industry and many other stakeholders.

In terms of umrah and hajj affordability, there are two types of capabilities that can be discussed. Capable is divided into two, namely affordability in terms of physical and mental health and financial health as well as having a vehicle to go to and from.

While in other aspects of ability, indirect ability and umrah or hajj can still be performed by hiring others to perform Hajj or Umrah for illness or death (Mustafa al-Bugha, 2013). It can be concluded that the ability can be translated in several aspects. Firstly, ability is described as ones' healthy body condition, thus not affecting the journey to and from performing umrah or hajj.

Secondly, the ability is measured in terms of adequate financial resources to go to and from the family beyond the needs of oneself and the family. Thirdly, having the facility of good and last vehicles, involving peaceful travel to or from back, such as no war, riot or emergency (Ibrahim, 2009).

3. METHODOLOGY

Survey questionnaires were used as a strategy to collect the data. The survey questionnaires were distributed to all respondents. It was distributed to Muslim residents around the state of Kedah and Perlis to evaluate their response to perform Umrah. This is done soon after the Government of Saudi Arabia start to loosening the conditions for travelers to visit the two Holy Place of Muslims.

Population of the study were 2 million Muslims for both states, Kedah and Perlis. According to Krejcie and Morgan (1970), the sample needed are 384. Since the study is religiously related, it manages to catch the eye of the Muslims where a total of 1093 responses received. All the responses were complete responses and fit to be analyzed. This indicates how serious Muslims in both states responses to issues related to their religion. Sample which is more than 384 required responses increase the reliability of the responses. This improves the reliability of the data gathered.

4. RESULTS

The article below analyzed the data from the perspectives of demographic of respondents. Data is presented in the form a table. The demographic profile for respondents includes their age, household income, marital status, states where they are residing, experience performing Umrah/ Hajj before, barriers to travel abroad, and have they registered for Umrah during pandemic season.

4.1 Demography

Below are the table based on the data received.

Table 1. Respondents' Demography

No.	Items	Percentage (%)	Total Respondents'
Age			
1	20-30 years old	6.45%	67
2	31-40 years old	19.63%	204
3	41-50 years old	29.36%	305
4	more than 51 years old	44.56%	463
Household income			
1	RM1,000-RM3000	24.35%	253
2	RM3,001-RM5,000	25.22%	262
3	RM5,001-RM10,000	33.30%	346
4	More than RM10,000	17.13%	178
Marital status			
1	Single	7.41%	77
2	Married	87.10%	905
3	Others (Widower/Single Mother/Divorced)	5.49%	57
State			
1	Kedah	88.45%	919
2	Perlis	11.55%	120

Experience performing umrah/haji worship		
1	Have experienced performing Umrah/Haji Worship	52.26% 543
2	Have not experienced performing Umrah/Haji Worship	47.74% 496
I have no barriers to go abroad		
1	Yes	88.35% 918
2	No	4.04% 42
3	Not Sure	7.60% 79
I signed up for Umrah Package but failed to get there due to Covid-19 pandemic		
1	Yes	12.51% 130
2	No	87.49% 909

Respondent's Age

In total, 1039 respondents were involved in this study. In terms of age, the majority of the respondents were from those between the ages of 51 years and above where their total comprised 44.56% of the respondents and the second highest were those aged 41 to 50 years.

Household Income

In terms of household income, majority of the respondents with 33.30% had household income between RM5001 and RM10,000 and 25.22% of the respondents had household income between RM3,001 and RM5,000 and 17.13% of the respondents had household income in excess of RM10,000.

Marital Status

In terms of marital status, the majority of the respondents were married with 87.10 %, 5.49% consisted of single parents and the remaining 7.41% were unmarried.

State

From the total respondents involved, 88.45% were from Kedah and 11.55% were from Perlis.

Experience Performing Umrah/Haji Worship

Based on the respondents' feedback, 47.74% of the respondents had experience performing hajj or umrah while another 52.26% did not have experience of Hajj or Umrah.

Barriers to Go Abroad

In terms of overseas barriers, 88.35% of respondents stated that they have no barriers to going abroad, 4.04% have obstacles abroad and the remaining 7.06% are unsure whether or not they have obstacles to travel abroad.

Registered for Umrah During the Covid-19 Pandemic

A total of 12.51% of respondents stated that they had actually registered to perform umrah but failed to make it to the Holy Land due to the Covid-19 pandemic while the majority of respondents did not register to perform umrah during the Covid-19 pandemic.

5. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

As a conclusion, even due to the pandemic covid-19 crisis, there are still a high demand for the Muslims in Northern Malaysia to perform Umrah ibadah. They showed great interest in performing umrah despite the increase in floor prices of umrah packages provided due to the increased cost of umrah management. Majority of the respondents still have the intention to perform umrah in the near future and have special savings for this purpose.

Muslims in the age category on 30 years old and above indicates more than 93.55% willing to perform Umrah Ibadah. Findings of the study showed that 75.65% of Muslims who intend to perform Umrah has household income of RM3000 and more. Financial stability aspects are vital in performing such ibadah.

Interestingly, it was reported that 87% of potential umrah worshippers are married couple. This signifies that performing ibadah with spouse and families have more family bonding which in return strengthen the family ties. 88.45% respondents were from the state of Kedah whereas the balance came from the state of Perlis. It happens because the State of Kedah has a higher population of Muslims as compared to the state of Perlis.

Inexperience potential of Umrah worshippers interested to perform it with 52.26% while remaining of them wants to continue returning performing Umrah. They are willing to invest to visit the Holy land due to passion in doing the ibadah. 11.1% respondents mentioned about their travel restrictions. The rest are confident with their condition to perform the Umrah ibadah.

87.49 % of respondents mentioned that they have not registered yet with Umrah Travel Agency due to the uncertainty that is happening right now. They are in the category where the moment the travel restriction being uplifted by both governments, they will surely register.

In a nutshell, for whatever situation that happens, strong interest still exists among Northern Malaysia Muslims to perform umrah and Hajj. It is their hope that the pandemic covid-19 to be over and they are willing to sacrifice to adhere to any Standard Operating Procedure provided by the authorities. Their main goal is only one, to be able to perform Umrah Ibadah and Hajj.

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