

HAJJ STORIES

TIMES, THEY ARE CHANGING

FEBRUARY 2026

She was nearly eighty years young. I knew it as her date of birth was written on her medical folder which I was quickly scanning. After a brief introduction and cursory medical questioning session, I asked her the reason for her visit to my rooms. 'I am going to leave for Umrah in a few weeks and need the required vaccines please,' she said. We chatted about her general health, and it was evident that she had the physical attributes of a fifty-year-old. She takes weekly long walks of over ten kilometers, takes public transport to two religious classes weekly and was involved in a feeding scheme. Her mind combined the accumulated wisdom of her age with razor sharp wit. It was going to be her first ever journey overseas, and we spoke about her health, about flying, and of course about Umrah. 'I don't think I'll ever perform Hajj, so I am using my savings for Umrah,' she suddenly said.

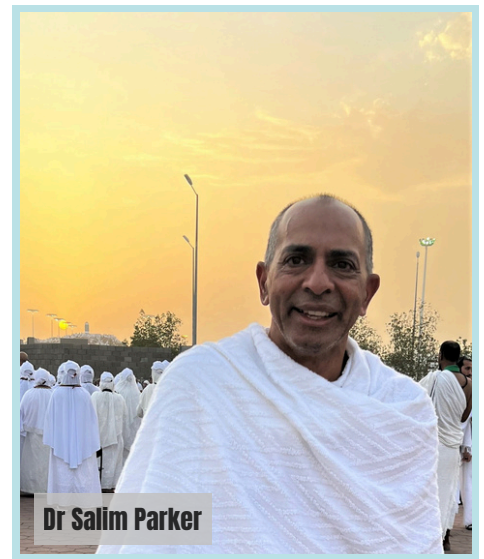
I could see the dejection in her eyes. She was enthusiastically preparing for her Umrah, the minor pilgrimage, and now indicated that Hajj, the major compulsory pilgrimage that we are indebted to repay to our Creator, was out of her reach. Her story filled my eyes with tears. She was accredited to perform Hajj by the South African authorities in 2025 and had all plans in place. Her savings of over fifteen years, diligently deposited into a Hajj account on a monthly basis, was more than adequate for a six-week journey. 'After my Hajj I was going to Aqsa, my last wish before Allah recalls me Doc,' she informed me. 'My ticket was booked, package was paid and my greetings cards were printed. My family, friends and neighbours had arranged the catering for the many visitors that were expected to come and greet me. In fact, I only still needed to come to you for my vaccines!' she smiled ironically.

'What happened that you could not visit me?' was my obvious question. 'Three weeks before my departure I had an emergency medical operation. The doctors assured me that I would be fine to fly. They said that even though I was old, my excellent medical condition was such that I would recover within a few days. However, my recovery was complicated. Some hospital germ seemed to have liked me and invaded my bloodstream. It affected my organs and I had to stay in hospital to get antibiotics through a drip for nearly two weeks. I was physically weak thereafter and it took another few weeks before I was back to my normal self. By that time most Hujjaaj had left for Saudi Arabia already. The Hajj authorities and my agent were very understanding, and I received a full refund. I was assured that I would be first on the list for the 2026 pilgrims,' she continued.

'I don't think I'll ever perform Hajj,'

The penny dropped, but I did not utter a word. Instead, I reflected on the sequence of events that still fill me with sadness, anger and frustration. Events where everyone lost. It was so much of a consequence that the hajj authorities lost. And there were really good people amongst them. Neither was it a great catastrophe that the hajj agents lost. And yes, there were good people amongst them too. But it was devastating that the South African pilgrims lost out. It was supposed to be so easy. Put the pilgrim first. Let the authorities and agents work in the best interest of the pilgrim. However, power-hunger and mistrust prevailed. Cooperation, common sense and the purpose of the greater good flew out of the window. I was reminded of what my beloved Sheigh once said: 'If two children fight over a pet, the parents just may give it away for someone else to look after it. Everyone loses; the children, and the pet that is separated from them.'

The Saudi Hajj authorities decided that they would stop the parties from squabbling. They transferred all powers to Saudi agents who were to be aided by digital technology. And they reduced the number of South Africans pilgrims by more than half. Order and structure disappeared. Some, like my patient, who had waited decades in a secure queue, had their security of travel dissipated. Everyone now had an equal chance of going this year. Those who never applied before and those who had performed Hajj twenty times had the same chance in the lottery that the Hajj application has become than those who had patiently waited for decades on the waiting list. Actually, that is not true. Those who are tech savvy and had a substantial amount of money have a higher chance of being successful. 'Doc, it would cost me at least fifty percent more this year for a three-week basic package than it would have cost me for a six-week relatively luxury one in 2025,' she said. I do not have that type of money this year. My children indicated that they'll assist me next year Insha-Allah and insisted that I should go for Umrah now,' she added.



I spoke to a friend of mine in Saudi Arabia. He told me that only about two million people can perform Hajj every year out of two billion Muslims on this earth. Most countries, including South Africa, adopted a waiting list. Only those who have never been on Hajj, with very few exceptions, were placed on this list on a first come first to go system. The typical wait for South Africans was ten years. In one part of Malaysia, it is more than fifty years. This system fell away for South Africans for 2026, and it is a free for all lottery favouring the tech savvy with deep pockets. 'If someone cannot afford it then it is not incumbent on them to perform Hajj,' my friend tried to reassure. 'How do I explain that to someone who has been waiting for decades, patiently, hopefully, faithfully, for their turn to finally materialize?' I asked.

I chatted extensively to my patient about what she could expect during her Umrah. It was going to be winter in Makkah when she was going to be there. We contrasted it to what she would have experienced during Hajj. The incredible heat of that summer season, the first day stay in Mina, Wuqoof on Arafat, then the soundest sleep on Musdalifah before returning to Mina. None of it was part of Umrah. She left my rooms, enthusiastic about the journey ahead. I was glad that she would be able to circumambulate the Kaba'a and traverse between the hillocks of Safaa and Marwa. But I was sad as well. Sad that the greater journey was delayed (Insha-Allah, not denied) by those who did not put the right and honour of the pilgrim above their own issues.

There will be of those who would rejoice at the demise of the local hajj authority. Others will point fingers at the travel agents accusing them of making obscene amounts of money. The reality was that whilst the two entities co-existed and grudgingly worked together, the South African Hajj benefited. Now that both are mere spectators due to their own doings, our numbers have been halved and prices increased by at least fifty percent amidst a sea of uncertainty. Everyone lost. The long waiting South African Hajj the most.



Some who waited an eternity to set foot on Mina for Hajj may have to wait longer.