

Pilgrimage to Mecca: An Industry Under Control

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By comparing the Muslim pilgrimage in its contemporary form with its past manifestations, Sylvia Chiffoleau shows how the control procedures established long ago have been strengthened and expanded by the Saudi dynasty in order to deal with a sharp rise in the number of pilgrims but also to increase its own legitimacy.

During the summer of 2013, the Saudi authorities abruptly announced that the annual quota for foreign Muslims authorised to make the pilgrimage to Mecca (*hajj*) was to be cut by 20% and by 50% for Saudi nationals. The decision was made public three months before the date of the pilgrimage, undermining the extensive administrative, state and private procedures put in place to manage quotas in those countries where Muslim pilgrims begin their journey. The authorities justified the measure by citing the construction work being done to expand the Grand Mosque where the Kaaba is housed and improve visitor facilities in Mecca, but the measure also tackled less acceptable political and social issues. The appearance in 2012 of a new coronavirus (MERS-CoV) in the region posed a threat to public health, and the political difficulties being experienced across the Arab world, particularly the war in Syria, were jeopardising the cohesive image of the pilgrim community of Hejaz that the Saudi authorities wished to project.

Mecca was an important crossroads on the caravan route and is the site of the Kaaba, an object of worship since time immemorial. It became the holy city of Islam through the will of the prophet Mohammed. In 632, shortly before his death, Mohammed made his Farewell Pilgrimage, through which he strived to Islamicise the ancient ritual by making it part of the Abrahamic tradition, which has provided the model followed by pilgrims ever since. As the fifth pillar of Islam, the pilgrimage has always been a requirement for Muslims to undertake once in their lives, if they have the physical and material means to do so (Koran III, 97). The pilgrimage to Mecca has been the cause of large-scale religious migrations and has become a central institution of Islam. By taking control of the holy cities and the holy pilgrimage, successive Muslim sovereigns have increased their own legitimacy. Until the 19th century, colossal funds and major military mobilisation were required for the organisation and security of the main caravans, which departed from Cairo and Damascus, the upkeep of the holy cities and the supplies needed during the annual influx of pilgrims, and these depended on the activity of a huge number of artisans and tradesmen.

In the 19th century, the pilgrimage ceased to be a strictly Muslim event. Colonisation, steam navigation and international public health surveillance profoundly changed the conditions of the journey to Mecca. It became integrated into the modern administrative system that controlled the flow of people and borders, kept tallies on the numbers of people and tried to impose a system in which travellers were identified and passports could be confiscated. In the 20th century, a drop in the number of epidemics, the loss of colonial power following the independence movements and the impact of Saudi Arabia's newfound power brought about changes, certainly, but the pilgrimage remained part of a pattern in which religious freedom had to give way to administrative and financial rationality. Pilgrimages constituted a space for

freedom and for manifestations of faith outside institutional religion and the usual social structure¹, but also a space for constraint. The recent lowering of quotas serves as a reminder that the Mecca pilgrimage is indeed a controlled event.

At the mercy of epidemics

Epidemics readily follow the path of human beings in motion. In regions crossed by pilgrims, the plague and cholera were rampant until the beginning of the 20th century. The journey time for caravans, which took several months to make the trip, used to constitute a natural means of prevention. If a caravan fell victim to an epidemic, the disease had time to run its course before the convoy reached an urban area, leaving a great many casualties behind in the desert.

From the mid-19th century onwards, the ancient caravan and its economic system gave way to steamships. At the time, some Muslim regions had fallen under colonial power. European navigation companies, particularly in England and Holland, quickly took control of the new pilgrimage market, which was reputed to be lucrative. The so-called "pilgrim" ships were extremely basic, but they enabled a greater number of Muslims to make the holy pilgrimage at a lower cost, particularly pilgrims from South and Southeast Asia, where the departure of sailing boats had previously depended on monsoon winds. The pilgrimage to Mecca was thus an integral part of the increased movement of people that came with early globalisation. By expanding the area in which pilgrims could travel, steam navigation then rail travel encouraged the mingling of populations, social encounters and integration processes. However, these new means of rapid transportation also caused a sharp increase in the risk of epidemics linked to mobility.

In 1865, there was an exceptionally violent outbreak of cholera - which originated in Bengal - during the pilgrimage to Mecca, killing off one third of the 90,000 pilgrims who attended that year. When the pilgrims returned home, mostly using the new forms of transportation, the disease spread rapidly throughout the Mediterranean region and across to America. The pilgrims were immediately stigmatised and deemed a threat to public health in Europe. In a series of international health conferences, the European nations and the Ottoman Empire drew up strict health measures for controlling the pilgrimage, and the founding principles were included in international conventions. Until the early 1950s, all pilgrims travelling by sea from Asia to Mecca, and all those heading back home towards the north and west of the Muslim regions, were intercepted and placed in quarantine. The Camaran quarantine station, reserved for the former group, was established at the entrance to the Red Sea, in the Bab el-Mandeb strait, while the Tor quarantine station, reserved for the latter group, was located at the exit of the Red Sea, in the Sinai Peninsula, in order to prevent any potential epidemic from passing into Europe. Every year, several tens of thousands of pilgrims were stripped and, along with their luggage, subjected to strict disinfection procedures then detained in camps for several days, or several weeks if an epidemic had been declared in Hejaz during the pilgrimage, as was often the case. No other group of travellers, not even migrants, was subjected to such measures, which were usually implemented unceremoniously and without giving rise to any major protest. In return, establishing the pilgrims as a "high risk group" enabled the main European nations to relax the health restrictions that had hitherto impeded ordinary navigation and commercial flows².

Although these measures were softened in the 1930s once the risk of epidemics had decreased, Saudi Arabia would have to wait until 1957 before it could remove international

¹ See in particular V. Turner, "Pilgrimages as Social Processes", in *Dramas, Fields and Metaphors. Symbolic Action in Human Society*, Ithaca, Cornell University Press, 1974, p. 166-230.

² See S. Chiffoleau, Genèse de la santé publique internationale. De la peste d'Orient à l'OMS, Ifpo/Presses Universitaires de Rennes, 2012.

control measures for the pilgrimage and achieve complete sovereignty in the area of health. From then on, it had sole responsibility for health security during the pilgrimage, and the special measures applied to pilgrims at Mecca were removed from the World Health Organisation's International Health Regulation. Nevertheless, the threat of an epidemic continued to linger over the event. Meningitis and yellow fever now posed a constant challenge, countered by compulsory vaccination. However, the pilgrimage has frequently been in the spotlight when it comes to emerging viruses, because the pilgrims are so vulnerable to infection. The SARS virus in 2003, the H1N1 virus in 2009 and the coronavirus in 2013 all caused alarm. Without adopting any restrictive measures - at least not openly - the Saudi health authorities nevertheless discouraged people over the age of 65, children under 12, pregnant women and all those with an immune deficiency from making the journey. Despite fears, in the end the 2013 hajj did not cause the virus to spread, which proves the effectiveness of the Saudi medical controls established over a long period. The authorities must remain vigilant, of course, but the long-term stigma suffered by the pilgrims has now passed to illegal migrants. The images obtained in December 2013 at the Lampedusa immigrant reception centre, showing individuals being subjected to highly disrespectful disinfection procedures in violation of the IHR, were a disturbing reminder of the brutal measures inflicted on pilgrims in the past. At least they are no longer met with the same indifference.

Controlling numbers of people and regulating the pilgrimage industry

There has been an astounding increase in the numbers of pilgrims, particularly from Asia, as a result of the new means of transportation developed since the 19th century. In the 1850s, there were no more than 2000 pilgrims from modern-day Indonesia. This rose to around 10,000 at the end of the 1930s and 200,000 today. The overall number of pilgrims coming from other countries remained relatively constant in the interwar period but exploded in the 1960s and 1970s with the expansion of air travel and the general improvement of living conditions. Demand rose to such a degree that, in 1987, Saudi Arabia decided to impose a system of quotas, with the support of the Organisation of the Islamic Conference (OIC)³. The crowds were not only a potential threat to public health, but also a danger to public order, security and the demands of a properly organised event. Ever since, Muslim countries have been authorised to send no more than 1000 pilgrims per million Muslims each year.

Population growth, however, which is evident in most Muslim countries, means that this restriction cannot reverse the trend of a continuous increase in the number of pilgrims. There were just over one million pilgrims coming from abroad in 1995 compared with 1.8 million in 2010. In 2012, the total number of pilgrims present in Mecca⁴ passed the 3-million mark for the first time in history.

While these massive flows of people cause logistical problems for the Saudi authorities, they must also be managed upstream in the pilgrims' home countries. In the 19th century, the colonial authorities played an active role in transporting pilgrims as well as establishing an administrative system to manage the holy pilgrimage. In a move that combined a desire to establish control (the pilgrimage was deemed potentially subversive from a political point of view) and an eagerness to demonstrate their benevolent authority, the colonial powers implemented administrative control of the numbers of pilgrims, using methods that varied in severity. Great Britain was not overly controlling in comparison with Holland and especially

³ The OIC, created in 1969 and now known as the Organisation for Islamic Cooperation, is an intergovernmental body made up of 57 member states. It aims to promote Islamic solidarity and cooperation and to protect Islam's holy sites. Its new logo features the Kaaba at the centre of the globe.

⁴ In other words, pilgrims travelling from abroad and from within Saudi Arabia (the latter number between 600,000 and 700,00 annually, according to the official figures of the Saudi Ministry of Hajj).

France, which frequently announced travel bans, citing public health concerns that in fact concealed political motives. Following the independence movements, most of the Muslim countries opted to organise the pilgrimage at national level, and often slipped into bureaucratic systems inherited from colonial times. On top of the administrative management involved in issuing passports and carrying out health checks (medical consultations and compulsory vaccinations), as well as providing training so that pilgrims could perform the rituals without making mistakes, they soon had to deal with the awkward issue of quotas.

Of course the rule of 1000 pilgrims per million Muslims has different repercussions in each of the countries concerned. Morocco, with a population of 32 million, has to manage 32,000 departures a year, whereas Indonesia must deal with a quota of 200,000 pilgrims. Each country has an administrative or governmental service appointed for the task of organising the pilgrimage, which is usually linked to the Ministry of Waqfs (or Habous)⁵, in close conjunction with the Saudi authorities. One of their main tasks is to manage demand, which sometimes far exceeds the quotas allocated each year by Saudi Arabia. When demand is not too high, for example in Senegal, pilgrims are accepted on a first-come-first-served basis until the quota is filled. In other countries, demand is such that waiting lists have to be drawn up; in Indonesia, they currently cover a period of six years, with 1.2 million people registered. Elsewhere, in countries like Tunisia and Morocco, there is a lottery system based on lists drawn up annually. These systems, which cause many candidates to become frustrated from the outset, are sometimes criticised and viewed with suspicion. In Indonesia, the vast sums of money amassed from the deposits of registered pilgrims are said to fuel <u>corruption</u>.

The announcement that quotas for foreign pilgrims were to be reduced by 20% for the year 2013 therefore did nothing to improve an already tense situation. In many cases the official lists had already been published, and so a number of those selected had to give up their pilgrimage, either through voluntary withdrawal or in a draw. The restrictive measure, which was renewed for 2014, will no doubt continue to affect the numbers of people travelling to Hejaz in the coming years.

In addition to the administrative support given upstream, national agencies in Muslim countries take charge of the logistical planning for those making the pilgrimage within the official framework. The journey is usually made with the national air carriers, and accommodation in the holy cities is negotiated at a lower price. Furthermore, a share of the quotas granted to each country is allocated to private travel agencies, which are accredited by the government and are becoming increasingly aggressive in this lucrative market. Their share varies, but is now the majority in some regions. In 2013, Moroccan private travel agencies controlled two thirds of the places granted in the quota, and in Senegal only 2400 people made the trip within the governmental framework, whereas 6000 pilgrims went through private operators. In Indonesia, on the other hand, only 17,000 pilgrims made the trip privately. It is clear that private services are far more expensive than government packages, which penalises pilgrims from Asia in particular as they come such a long way. Generally speaking, the increase in private supply meets a growing demand from the middle classes who are increasingly keen to make the trip independently. However, all aspiring pilgrims of modest means still rely heavily on the official organisation established in their country.

Non-Muslim countries with Muslim populations are not bound by the rule of 1000 pilgrims per million Muslims. Saudi Arabia grants them quotas in far more advantageous ratios. France is given 22-25,000 places a year for a Muslim population of around 5 or 6 million.

⁵ A system of inalienable goods whose usufruct is granted to a religious institution or an institution of public interest.

Naturally the countries concerned do not intervene, and the job of organising the trip is entrusted to private agencies that established themselves in this emerging market during the 1990s. Recurrent scandals linked to poor or even downright fraudulent organisation nevertheless led some European countries to try to regulate the market. Under pressure from associations working to defend pilgrims, in the year 2000 the United Kingdom sent an official delegation the British Hajj Delegation⁶ – during the pilgrimage, composed essentially of a medical team and placed under the supervision of a Muslim Lord. Since 2005, France has also taken steps. Preparations for the pilgrimage to Mecca are now coordinated jointly by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Ministry of the Interior and the French Council of the Muslim Faith, with the assistance of associations for the defence of pilgrims. The two ministries publish an information leaflet warning people of the abuses to which pilgrims can fall victim, and the consular team in Jeddah is strengthened during the pilgrimage. These initiatives prove that European countries are keen to improve relations with Muslim communities, and they are reviving a duty to protect that figured widely in the colonial era. Even so, the abuses continue. Quotas are allocated to agencies which, in theory, are accredited by Saudi Arabia (there are currently 53 in France compared with over 80 in the United Kingdom), but these bring in their wake a whole host of sub-contractors and touts who organise unofficial aspects of the trip. Due to a lack of controls or charter of good practice - currently being drawn up in both countries - stories of fraud continue to be a feature of the annual pilgrimage.

These are all the more scandalous if one considers that the already high cost of services is increasing all the time. From France, a three-week pilgrimage comes to around \notin 5-6000 in a three-star hotel, and \notin 8000 in a five-star hotel. While Saudi hotels lure clients with promises of luxurious conditions, once they arrive the pilgrims are often crammed several to a room. The costs are slightly lower in the United Kingdom where there is stronger competition between travel agencies. However, they are a far cry from the rates charged for official services provided by Muslim countries. From Indonesia, a government package comes to \notin 2400, while from Tunisia the same package costs \notin 1700. This range of prices ensures a certain social diversity during the pilgrimage, but most people can only make the journey after they have saved up over a period of many years. Some of this money benefits the international tourism market, and some fuels the Saudi economy as a result.

Saudi Arabia, guardian and demiurge of the holy sites

The protection of the holy sites of Islam was entrusted to descendents of the prophet's family (the sherif). No matter which branch of the family was responsible for the task, which had to be shared with a governor during the Ottoman Empire, the shameless exploitation of pilgrims was almost a permanent feature and, for a long time, was the only source of income in Hejaz. This peaked under the rule of Sharif Hussein (1908-1925). Incidentally, it was to ensure safety and respect for the pilgrims that Abdel Aziz Ibn Saoud conquered Hejaz with the blessing of the British. In 1926, the new sovereign tried to improve conditions for pilgrims and control the taxes and activities of the many agents that were making a living from the religious event. His investment in the issue of public health reflected his desire to bring the pilgrimage into a new era.

After the Second World War, this political motivation came into its own thanks to oil revenue. Injecting part of these colossal sums into the organisation of the pilgrimage enabled the Saudi authorities to strengthen their legitimacy, which had initially been fragile. Unlike the lineages that had governed the region up to that point, Ibn Saoud had no ancestral link to the prophet Muhammad. The new dynasty had to prove that its control over most of the provinces in the Arabian Peninsula was not accompanied by a desire to privatise the holy sites, which were

⁶ After carrying out its activities over a ten-year period, the delegation was disbanded by the Conservative government elected in 2010. It was relaunched privately in 2012.

supposed to belong to the *Ummah* as a whole. Finally, the Saudis adhered to Wahhabism, a marginal doctrinal position imposed by force in the holy land, particularly by controlling people's behaviour and levelling the tombs of saints whom many pilgrims worshipped devotedly. Furthermore, in order to highlight his commitment and responsibility when it came to managing the holy sites for the benefit of all Muslims, in 1986 King Fahd adopted the title of Custodian of the Two Holy Mosques, which became the official title for the head of the Saudi dynasty.

By claiming a duty to protect the holy sites, Saudi Arabia thereby seized the authority to maintain strict control over them. The powerful Ministry of the Hajj coordinates the annual organisation of the pilgrimage, expanding its international network across all the countries and travel agencies concerned. It establishes quotas and gives accreditation to foreign travel agencies and the local guides (*mutawwifs*) assigned to six agencies that divide the pilgrims up according to their region of origin. Visas for the pilgrimage are only valid in the area between Jeddah, Mecca and Medina, and are temporary; pilgrims must leave the country no later than one month after the rituals have finished. On their arrival at the airport in Jeddah, the pilgrims hand over their passports to their guides in exchange for a wristband that identifies their region of origin by colour (red for Europe). In Mecca and Medina, they stay in hotels booked far in advance by the travel agencies, but in Mina they are accommodated in tents. For three days and three nights, this narrow valley, where the pilgrims perform the ritual of animal sacrifice, is transformed into a vast campsite accommodating almost 3 million people. The tents are provided by the Saudi government; they are numbered and organised by country or region, and once again identified by colour. In order to enable people to move between the different sites where the rituals take place, Saudi Arabia also manages a vast car park for coaches, which must conform to a very tight schedule during the pilgrimage. Indeed, any delay can cause the pilgrimage to lose its validity.

This impressive logistical task is now computerised. However, despite efforts, there is a whole range of fraudulent ways to complete the pilgrimage outside the legal framework. Safety is also a recurrent problem. Fires, crushes and stampedes are common and claim victims every year. In an attempt to resolve this situation, a major security operation is mounted, involving no fewer than 80-100,000 police officers and civil defence agents (by way of comparison, 37,000 police and military were on duty for the Sochi Olympic Games) and 1500 surveillance cameras are trained on different corners of the holy sites. These measures are also aimed at preventing any vague attempts at political action or even speech. As a space in which the Ummah gather in all its diversity, the pilgrimage has long since been considered potentially subversive, particularly under the colonial authorities. The Saudi dynasty, however, has tried to keep political demonstrations within the limits that it gave itself the task of defining. The rhetoric of a united Ummah is drawn on abundantly during the pilgrimage, particularly during the Arafat sermon delivered by the Grand Mufti. Although they have not managed to prevent tensions from overflowing altogether - as seen from the clashes that took place between Iranian pilgrims and security forces in 1987, causing several hundred deaths⁷ and greatly souring relations between Sunnis and Shiites – these political controls have had a certain amount of success. The fact is that most of the pilgrims are focused primarily on their spiritual journey.

The Saudi dynasty also seeks to establish its legitimacy through construction. The holy sites have been expanded several times, and the traffic systems have already been completely changed, particularly through the addition of huge tunnels. However, the scale of the building work that started at the beginning of the 2000s is unprecedented. In Mecca, the first stage of the work, carried out from 2002 to 2012, saw an <u>area of skyscrapers</u> spring up, dominated by a hotel tower 601 metres tall topped with a clock six times larger than that of Big Ben. The second stage

⁷ The chronic tension between Sunnis and Shiites is also evident during the pilgrimage. On this question, see I. Leverrier, "L'Arabie saoudite, le pèlerinage et l'Iran", *CEMOTI* n° 22, 1996.

of construction work, which started in 2012 (and which was a justification for the lower quotas set in 2013), aims to increase the surface area of the Grand Mosque by 400,000 m², which would double its capacity and thereby the revenue generated by the pilgrimage, which for the time being stands at 20 billion dollars a year.

Saudi Arabia is looking to develop pilgrimage-related tourism, with a view to establishing a post-oil economy and providing an outlet for its employment nationalisation plans. The cost of these plans, however, where kitsch vies with excess, is the destruction of the original fabric of the city and its monuments. Although people have <u>spoken out</u> in condemnation of the patrimonial damage this building work is causing in sites that have been declared holy, protests are scattered and somewhat weak considering the profoundly disruptive circumstances in which pilgrims now carry out the unchanging rituals.

A changing existential experience

The Mecca pilgrimage is enmeshed in complex power systems. Between the detailed bureaucracy controlling pilgrims' departures and the religious, political and organisational standards imposed by the Saudi authorities, it is a far cry from the principle that makes the pious intention (*niyya*) of the faithful the only condition for carrying out the pilgrimage. The pilgrimage is therefore not only a spiritual quest but also a social phenomenon that is part of history and therefore vulnerable to change. The changes have been particularly marked since the beginning of the 19th century and continue to gather pace. While the core rituals remain the same, the existential experience of the pilgrims is evolving. In the space-time of the pilgrimage, the pilgrims oscillate between a Muslim identity embodied in the *Ummah*, a national identity based on their country of origin (and/or that of immigration), to which the material organisation of the *hajj* makes continual reference, and an individual dimension that is increasingly significant. In a context in which the sociological profile of the pilgrims is becoming more diverse, there is an ever-greater number of ways of experiencing the pilgrimage.

Long overlooked by scholars, which may come as a surprise given its religious, political and social importance, the *hajj* is now the subject of growing interest. A desire to rationalise and improve the conditions in which the pilgrimage is made has given rise to numerous studies in Saudi Arabia, in collaboration with Western institutions. The social sciences have, in turn, seized on this fruitful subject matter, and research programmes are currently underway in several European universities. A major exhibition on the *hajj*, held at the British Museum in 2012, was a chance to carry out new research⁸. The increase in information support has also broadened people's knowledge: *manasik al-hajj* (guides to performing rituals) are now available on the Internet. Finally, more and more pilgrims are describing their experiences in published accounts⁹. While it is difficult to gain an insight into individual pilgrims' experiences from historical sources, it is now possible to understand current sociological transformations as well as changes in the way Muslims perceive this key pillar of Islam.

One of the most visible manifestations of recent changes is the growing participation of women. At the beginning of the 20th century, the number of women coming from the Maghreb was ridiculously low due to constraints placed by the French colonial authorities. On the other hand, women made up around 20% of pilgrims from Asia. The fact is that women can only make the pilgrimage if they are accompanied by a husband or male relative (*mahram*). In practice, this

⁸ Hajj. Journey to the Heart of Islam, V. Porter (ed.), The British Museum Press, 2012 (exhibition catalogue) and The Hajj: Collected Essays, V. Porter and L. Saif (ed.) The British Museum Press, 2013. A reworked repeat of this exhibition was shown at the Institut du Monde Arabe in Paris from 23 April to 10 August 2014.

⁹ On Malaysia, see E. Tagliacozzo, The Longest Journey. Southeast Asians and the Pilgrimage to Mecca, Oxford University Press, 2013.

rule is relaxed. For some jurists, women over the age of 45 can travel without a *mahram* as part of an organised group when they have the authorisation of a male guardian. The pressures of demand mean that the rules can often be negotiated, but the Saudi authorities remain vigilant. In 2012, they arrested and deported several hundred Nigerian women who had arrived without chaperones. The upset this caused in Muslim countries was such that Saudi Arabia was forced to reverse the policy. The increasing number of books and consultations on the role of women on the pilgrimage is proof of their growing participation. Unlike in mosques where women have little presence, the pilgrimage is a space for diversity, despite Wahhabi efforts to keep the sexes separate.

For all Muslims, the pilgrimage is a utopian space where the idea of unity is revived. However, while there is always harmony at one stage or another of the journey, this does not necessarily mean that people's expectations and experiences converge. Based on the hajj he performed in 2003, the political commentator Omar Saghi put forward a detailed sociology of French pilgrims¹⁰, whom he saw as precursors of trends that would soon involve all Muslims. Alongside the traditional profile of the elderly pilgrim - whose single hajj was the crowning moment of an entire lifetime, an archetypal figure since the 19th century – new profiles are emerging of younger - even very young - believers who are relatively well off and for whom the hajj has become a frequent, if not annual, event. They either follow or are close to the Salafi movement, and have ushered in new ways of experiencing the pilgrimage, which exist on a more utilitarian or, for some, even countable level (a hajj to wash away a year of sins¹¹), and undertaken as a tourist initiative. However, these groups' insistence on conforming to the norm and to a demanding Islamic ethos in fact hides positions and practices that blur the lines between holy and profane. They are less idealistic about their pilgrimage than their elders were, considering it part of the consumer world or even a therapeutic market that takes on other forms elsewhere. As well as establishing lower quotas, the Saudi measures adopted in 2013 state that the hajj can only be carried out once every five years. This will no doubt put a brake on people's compulsive relationship with the pilgrimage, but the *hajj* will nonetheless continue to reflect increasingly diverse ways of experiencing and practising the Muslim religion.

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¹⁰ O. Saghi, Paris-La Mecque. Sociologie du pèlerinage, Paris, PUF, 2010.

¹¹ *Ibid*, p. 206.