

The Saudis Are Not Alone in Religious Stampedes.
Posted On:December 31, 1969

When I was a child, my father said: "never chase an ambulance!" He warned that mobs of people can quickly turn lethal, something that he remembered as a child himself when pogroms roiled Russia. I have a life-long horror for crushes of people, and, apparently, with good reason.

In September, Saudi Arabia hosted the annual Hajj, an event that they should have by now learned how to manage. Millions of people descend upon Mecca and reenact a Koranic story about Abraham's concubine, Hagar, who had to flee the jealousy of Abraham's wife. She and her boy fled to the desert and nearly perished from thirst when miraculously an angel pointed her to a spring of water. Muslims believe that Hagar was the mother of all Arab people.

The Hajj is one of the mandated practices throughout Islam: that those who can afford it should make a pilgrimage to Mecca once in their lifetime. Muslims throughout the world scrape up the money to do this Hajj. And more often than not, things happen when so many people gather in one place, sometimes in the mindlessness of religious passion. One facet of this pilgrimage requires casting stones at a rock representing Satan (which creeps me out when I remember how many women are given this same treatment in Islam).

Another problem with the Hajj is the Muslim calendar. Unfortunately it is lunar, and this means that the pilgrimage time moves around the calendar, sometimes in the hottest summer months. Once, in the 1930s, an Iranian pilgrim vomited and the Saudi guards struck off his head. Iran lodged a protest and for several years, forbade Iranians from going on pilgrimage. There are few places more hellish than Saudi Arabia in summer. Again, in 1990, 1,426 died in a stampede.

This year, there were more indications of sloppy Saudi management, two of them in September. The first was the collapse of a building crane in the Great Mosque that crushed a number of attendees to death. Two weeks later, during the Hajj, crowd control was so poor that a mob of people who should have been going to an exit instead found themselves going up an entrance ramp, where 1,470 of them died in the panic. It appears that one source of the error was the diversion of people when a royal entourage pushed the crowd aside.

There was an additional problem in this year's Hajj: a shortage of housing for those coming with little money. In Mecca's push to "modernize," traditional neighborhoods with simple houses have been bulldozed and replaced with hotels with rooms going for \$1,000 per night. Despite the price, many of these new buildings are just waiting for disaster, as already seen in the crane collapse at the Great Mosque. The Bin Laden construction company (yes, that Bin Laden family) was told to get all this construction done in time for Hajj. They did, having speed trump quality or safety. Buildings often collapse in Saudi Arabia, but the controlled press does not make the fuss that a free society would. India, Pakistan, and Iran have lodged bitter complaints.

The Saudis, unfortunately, don't seem to learn. This has happened before, and their handling is wretched. Because so few Saudis themselves are guards and ushers in this pilgrimage (Saudi men don't like work), they outsource it to those from poorer Muslim countries. In addition, with a multi-lingual mob, understanding instructions is no small issue. Crowds, particularly fanatical ones, as my father noted, become cattle.

India joins the Saudis in horrible mob management. India's annual religious events are attended by unimaginable mobs. In 2014 alone, three events resulted in stampedes that killed 22, 32, and 27, not rising to Saudi standards, but bad enough. In 2015, another stampede accompanied a crowd turning mindless as they wanted to catch the first glimpse of some new idols replacing some old ones. Hard to believe in 2015.

In the US, crowd management, even in a time of terror threats, was done during Pope Francis' visit to the United States. Full credit to our authorities! Well done!

680 words.

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