



THE IMPACT OF THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC ON THE PILGRIMAGES OF KONYA PROVINCE INHABITANTS

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ABSTRACT

The article concerns the characteristics and assessment of the Mecca pilgrimage trends among the inhabitants of Konya Province (Türkiye) in 2017–2021, i.e. before and after the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic. Particular attention is paid to the impact of the pandemic on: (a) the tourism of the provincial inhabitants to Mecca, (b) the activities of local religious tourism operators, and (c) the sense of psychological discomfort in those who could not participate in a pilgrimage. The study concerned the inhabitants of Konya Province due to the deeply rooted conservatism and high religiosity distinguishing this society.

The study was conducted through the methods of investigating sources, expert interview and diagnostic survey. The interviews were conducted at selected Konya travel agencies that organise pilgrimages and at the Konya Valiligi Mudurlugu il Muftulugu. In addition, using an online survey questionnaire, inhabitants of the province were asked if and how their level of psychological comfort was affected by not being able to make the pilgrimage to Mecca during the pandemic.

The results showed that the pandemic significantly weakened the previously growing trend of pilgrimages to Islamic holy sites in the analysed community. It also elicited changes in the offers of local tour operators who were forced to open other destinations. To a lesser extent, it affected the feeling of discomfort of provincial inhabitants resulting from the lack of opportunity to make such trips.

KEYWORDS

religious tourism, Islam, Umrah, Hajj, COVID-19, Türkiye

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1. INTRODUCTION

The COVID-19 pandemic, which began on November 17 2019 in the Chinese city of Wuhan, has significantly affected the global political, economic, and social situation. Its effects have been faced by countries, communities and individuals. Virtually all spheres

of previous professional, social and personal life were changed and this exerted varying effects on people's physical and mental condition and the functioning of all areas of the economy (Skrabacz, 2021).

In addition to health problems, the COVID-19 pandemic significantly reduced the sense of security socially by reducing the existential basis of people's

lives and the realisation of their life's aspirations, and by preventing the fulfilment of individual material and spiritual needs. This was accompanied by the stress of being in quarantine and prolonged isolation (Dymecka, 2021; Skrabacz, 2021).

One dimension of social life that was severely affected by pandemic-related restrictions was the practice of religious worship. The restriction of such activity, enforced by the need to maintain social distancing, has resulted in a number of negative consequences in both individual and community dimensions (Świto, 2021). It should be emphasized that for adherents of various religions, participation in religious practices not only has a spiritual dimension but is also a way to maintain an internal balance. Thus, forced quarantine with deprivation of the opportunity to participate in services, rites and rituals resulted in a lack of access to methods of coping with stress for many believers (Świto, 2021).

Many Muslims, for whom the pilgrimage to Mecca is an obligation, one of the five pillars of Islam, found themselves in such a difficult situation unlike in other religions. Muslims should make a pilgrimage at least once in their lives if their finances and health allow them to do so. Such a journey is the strongest expression of their religious life and an act in which intimacy with Allah is an extremely important component (Luz, 2020; Wani, 2018).

Before the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, more than two million believers each year from around the world travelled to Mecca for the Hajj to perform this sacred ritual and demonstrate the mutual brotherhood, unity and equality of all pilgrims (Luz, 2020).

According to published sources, Turks form a significant component of the world's pilgrims going on a Hajj (Dłużewska, 2012; Jackowski, 1998; Karabulut, Kaynak, 2016). Before the coronavirus pandemic, more than two million Turkish pilgrims of all types hoped to travel to Mecca each year, for instance 2,120,967 in 2018 (*Diyanet İşleri 2018 Hac kura çekiliş sonuçları sorgulama! – Hac kura sonuçları açıklandı*, 2018).

However, due to the annual restrictions on arrivals imposed by Saudi Arabia (Clingingsmith, Khwaja, Kremer, 2009), the number of pilgrims from Türkiye oscillated around 80,000 (Table 1). All those willing to go participated in a special lottery that selected the group of pilgrims for that year. Among them, the greater part chose the Umrah, i.e. the smaller pilgrimage.

This situation changed drastically in 2020. Due to the outbreak of the pandemic, Saudi Arabia temporarily closed its borders on February 27, 2020 (Ft/kg, 2020). As a result, international pilgrimage traffic to Mecca completely ceased. The Saudi Arabian government restricted it to Saudi pilgrims only.

The aim of this article is to characterise the Turkish pilgrimage movement by analysing the example of the inhabitants of Konya Province in the period before

Table 1. Number of pilgrims from Türkiye travelling to Mecca in 2017–2019

Year	Number of pilgrims
2017	79,000
2018	80,000
2019	80,000

Source: IlmFeed (2017), Presidency of the Republic of Türkiye. Presidency of Religious Affairs (2018), *Some 72,000 Turkish pilgrims arrive in S Arabia for Hajj* (2019).

and during the COVID-19 pandemic, especially in 2017–2021. Special attention was paid to the effect of the pandemic on: (a) the pilgrimage movement of the provincial inhabitants to Mecca, (b) the activities of local religious tourism organisers, and (c) the sense of psychological discomfort in those who could not participate in the pilgrimage.

This group was chosen for the analysis due to the fact that it is one of the more conservative, religious and pilgrimage-involved communities in Türkiye. The issue undertaken in the study is relatively new and concerns an area poorly documented by research results. Therefore, the topic is interesting and innovative.

2. CHARACTERISTICS OF PILGRIMAGE TYPES IN ISLAM

Islam's most important pilgrimage centre is Mecca, located in the land of Hijaz in the western part of Saudi Arabia. It is the holiest city for Muslims and the birthplace of Muhammad. The Sacred Mosque (Masjid al-Haram) is located here surrounding the first house of God on Earth – the Ka'ba – a cubic granite structure covered with black cloth embroidered with gold. Muslims believe, it was built by Adam and rebuilt by Abraham and his son Ishmael (Basahel, Alsabban, Yamin, 2021). In the south-eastern corner of the Ka'ba is the Black Stone (al-Ḥajaru al-Aswad), the greatest and holiest destination of the Hajj – the pilgrimage of millions of followers of Islam (Maciak, 2017).

In Islam, there are three types of religious journey: the *Hajj* (major pilgrimage), the *Umrah* (minor pilgrimage), and the *Ziyarat* (visiting the tombs of prophets). The Hajj is the most important. It commemorates the story of Muhammad's flight from Mecca to Medina in 622, which he was forced to undertake as a result of the growing threat of persecution (Hosta, Limon, 2010). It represents a complex ritual involving physical, mental, spiritual and financial preparations (Sabiq, 1992) and brings spiritual balance to Muslims. It is seen as a rite of passage to a better life and purification from all sins (Al-Ajarma, 2021), and takes place only once a year, between the

eighth and 12th (sometimes 13th) days of the month of *zu al-hijjah*. It should be noticed that the Muslim calendar is a lunar calendar, eleven days shorter than the Gregorian one. Although they have a fixed order, Muslim holidays fall at different times in successive years. Each year, the Hajj always begins earlier than in the previous year (Pawlic-Miśkiewicz, 2019).

The prerequisites for participation in the Hajj include *niyyah* (intention) and *ihram*, a state of spiritual and physical ritual purity. The pilgrimage involves several stages:

1. It begins on the morning of the eighth day of *zu al-hijjah* in Mecca, from where pilgrims travel to the Mina Valley after prayers, where they again participate in prayers (Figure 1).
2. On the second day, pilgrims participate in prayers around Mount Arafat after sunrise and, after sunset they go to Muzdalifah where they participate in more prayers, collect pebbles (necessary for throwing at the stelae), spend the night in Muzdalifah, and go to Mina at dawn.
3. The third day of the pilgrimage is called the Day of Sacrifice. In Mina, after throwing pebbles at the last of the stelae with seven pebbles, pilgrims usually proceed to make an offering. This is followed by the ritual shaving of heads. The final element of the rituals of this day is a visit to the Sacred Mosque and a seven-fold circumambulation of the Ka'ba (*tawaf al-ifadah*), followed by *sai*, 'running' between the hills of As-Safa and Al-Marwa, (circumambulation of the Ka'ba can also be performed on the other days of the pilgrimage) (Hajj and Umrah Planner, n.d.; Pawlic-Miśkiewicz, 2019).
4. The Hajj is completed after the *tawaf al-ifadah* is celebrated. The faithful are then no longer bound by the prohibitions they were subject to while in the state of *ihram*. However, this does not mean that they return home immediately. They remain in Mecca at least until the 12th day of *zu al-hijjah*, celebrating the Feast of the Sacrifice together.

The last days of the Hajj are called the days of Tashreeq, which is a time of rest and joy during which individuals pray and throw stones at the three stelae. Before finally leaving Mecca, pilgrims make a farewell circumambulation around the Ka'ba (*tawaf al-wada'*). Those who have participated in the Hajj pilgrimage are given the name *haji* (Pawlic-Miśkiewicz, 2019; Perform Hajj, n.d.).

Within the Hajj, there are three types of great pilgrimage established as early as the beginning of Islam.

Hajj ul-Tamattu represents a combination of Umrah and Hajj, with a break between these two. The pilgrim enters the state of *ihram*, arrives in Mecca, where he performs the rituals of Umrah (circumambulation of the Ka'ba, walking between the hills of As-Safa and Al-Marwa, shaving or cutting his hair), and leaves the state of *ihram*. In this way, he completes his Umrah. On the eighth day of the month of *zu al-hijjah*, the pilgrim re-enters the state of *ihram* at the place where he is currently located and performs the rituals of the pilgrimage. At its end, he makes a sacrifice or, if he is unable to do so, fasts for 10 days (three days during the pilgrimage and seven after returning home). Upon completing this ritual, he is given the name *Mutamatti*.

Hajj ul-Qiran is a combination of Umrah and Hajj (without interruption). The *Qarin*, or the person performing this type of pilgrimage, must perform the Hajj and the Umrah in the same *ihram*. The pilgrim enters the state of *ihram* at the designated place and arrives in Mecca, where he performs a circumambulation called *tawaf al-kudum* (Pilgrim, n.d. b). Then, being in the state of *ihram* the whole time, he begins to perform the pilgrimage rituals on the eighth day of *zu al-hijjah*. He is not required to perform the circumambulation pertaining to the Umrah or walk between the hills. At the end of the pilgrimage, he makes an offering or, if he is unable to do so, fasts for 10 days.

Hajj ul-Ifrad implies making only a Hajj pilgrimage. The pilgrim enters the state of *ihram*. He arrives in

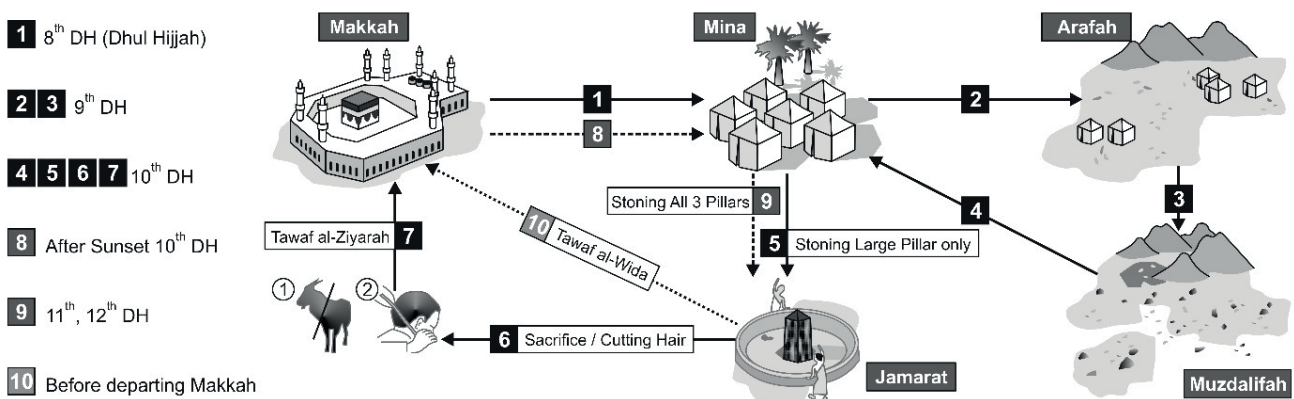


Figure 1. Diagram of the course of the Hajj pilgrimage
Source: SiblingsOfIIm [@SiblingsOfIIm] (2019)

Mecca, where he performs a circumambulation called *tawaf al-kudum*. Being in the *ihram* state all the time, he begins performing the pilgrimage rituals on the eighth day of *zu al-hijjah*. There is no obligation to sacrifice animals. A person who has participated in such a pilgrimage is called a *Mufrid* (Pawlic-Miškiewicz, 2019; Pilgrim, n.d. a).

Another type of pilgrimage is the *Umrah*, i.e. the smaller pilgrimage to Mecca. It has an individual character and, unlike the *Hajj*, its duration is not fixed (Erbaş, 2002). During this religious journey, pilgrims make seven ritual circumambulations around the *Ka'ba (tawaf)* and kiss the Black Holy Stone (*al-Ḥajaru al-Aswad*). The next stage of the *Umrah* is the *sai*, the “run” between the hills of *As-Safa* and *Al-Marwa*. The faithful complete the pilgrimage with *halq*, which is a partial or complete haircut. Unlike the *Hajj*, which is more time-consuming and involves many rituals, the *Umrah* can be completed in a matter of hours. The smaller pilgrimage provides an opportunity to pray and ask for forgiveness and absolution of sins. It is worth noting that, unlike *Hajj*, *Umrah* is a recommended but not obligatory act of worship (Akbulut, Ekin, 2018).

After official completion of their pilgrimage to Mecca, many Muslims take the opportunity to visit Islam's second holy site, Medina, where the Prophet's Mosque (*Al-Masjid An-Nabawi*) with Muhammad's tomb is located (Maciak, 2017).

The last type of the religious journey is the *ziyarat* or *ziyara* whose purpose is to visit Islamic holy sites or graves (Maciak, 2017), mainly Muhammad's tomb in Medina, but also members of his family, friends, scholars and prophets. During this journey, Muslims visit mosques, battlefields, mountains and caves.

3. CHARACTERISTICS OF THE RESEARCH AREA

The analysed community lives in Konya Province, which is located on the Anatolian Highlands in the Central Anatolia region in the Asian part of Türkiye. It is the largest administrative unit of the country (Figure 2), covering an area of 38,873 square kilometres. It had a population of 2,296,347 with a population density of 59.07 per square kilometre in 2022 (*Turkey. Administrative division, 2021*).

The area is mainly inhabited by the indigenous Turks who make up more than 90% of the population. In addition, its community consists of Balkan, Nogai and Tatar Turks while the Kurdish population represents about 8% (Etnikce, n.d.).

The capital of the province is the city of Konya – the seventh most populous in Türkiye. It is an important educational, religious and industrial centre (Sakar, 2022). Both the city and the province are considered the most conservative in the country and the local community is characterised by high religiosity and deeply rooted traditions. The conservatism of the locals influences the high popularity of pilgrimage.

The *Mevlana Mausoleum*, which contains the tomb of *Jalaladdin Rumi (1207–1273)*, has a great influence on the religiosity of the people of both the city and the Province of Konya. He was the Islamic theologian and Persian mystic who founded the *Order of Dancing Dervishes*. He is also regarded as one of the most famous and celebrated *Sunni* poets. For this reason, Konya is an important religious centre in Türkiye, to which many pilgrimages are made. The city also hosts an annual festival dedicated to *Mevlana* (Sakar, 2022) while in 2016 the city was proclaimed the capital of Islam.



Figure 2. Administrative division of Türkiye
Source: *Turkey. Administrative division (2021)*

4. RESEARCH METHODS AND DATA SOURCES

Secondary and primary sources were used in this study. The first group consisted of thematic publications in Polish, English and Turkish, from which the following data were obtained: statistical data on the pilgrimage movement in the country and the province, information on the characteristics of the issue in question, and a description of the situation related to the course of the pandemic in Türkiye.

Primary sources were obtained during research conducted in the provincial capital in 2020–2022 consisting of: (a) an interview with an employee of the Konya Valiligi Mudurlugu il Muftulugu, (b) expert interviews conducted with the owners of selected travel agencies specialising in organisation of Hajj and Umrah pilgrims to Mecca and operating in Konya city, and (c) a diagnostic survey among the inhabitants of the province, using an online survey questionnaire research tool. During the visit to Konya Valiligi Mudurlugu il Muftulugu, information was obtained on the nature and number of pilgrimages made by Konya inhabitants in 2017–2019.

In selecting experts for the interviews, offices specialising in pilgrimage trips which operate near the Mevlana Mausoleum in the city of Konya were taken into account. They only organise Hajj and Umrah pilgrimages and a few were found that had not suspended their activities during the pandemic. Ultimately, the owners of only four travel agencies (Gonyalı Turizm, Boyut Turizm, Hudaverdi Turizm and Sufi Turizm) agreed to take part in the survey. They provided information on the number of pilgrims before and after the outbreak of the pandemic, preferred type of trip, age of pilgrims, duration of trip, preferences regarding their organisation, and changes in their functioning after the pandemic outbreak.

The online survey allowed compilation of information which facilitated assessment of the extent to which the inability to make the pilgrimage to Mecca due to the pandemic outbreak affected the religious feelings and sense of psychological discomfort among Konya Province inhabitants.

5. RESULTS

5.1. PILGRIMAGES FROM KONYA PROVINCE IN 2017–2019

Konya inhabitants, with deep-rooted religiosity, actively solicit applications for Hajj and Umrah pilgrimages. The number of applications from interested people each year exceeds 80,000, for example it was 85,000 in

2017 (data from an interview with the Konya Valiligi Mudurlugu il Muftulugu employee).

However, as shown by the tabulated data (Tables 2 and 3), due to the restrictions in place (each country receives a certain number of Hajj and Umrah visas from the Saudi authorities for a given year), a much smaller group of believers can participate.

Table 2. Number of pilgrims from Konya Province participating in the Hajj pilgrimage in 2017–2019

Year	Total number	Women	Men	Age range
2017	3,156	2,151	1,005	over 50 years of age – 75% under 50 years – 25%
2018	3,232	1,761	1,571	over 50 years of age – 60% under 50 years – 40%
2019	3,200	1,800	1,400	over 50 years of age – 65% under 50 years of age – 35%

Source: according to data from the interview with the Konya Valiligi Mudurlugu il Muftulugu employee.

In 2017–2019, the participation of inhabitants from Konya Province in the Hajj pilgrimage remained stable at around 3,200 per year, as this was the number of permissions was issued. Taking into account gender, women slightly predominated among the participants and in turn, the share of those aged over 50 was definitely higher (Table 2). This may be related to certain preferences for issuing visas to the elderly, who have less chance to still fulfil this religious obligation than younger people. Equally important is their greater inability to adapt to a specific date of the pilgrimage and its long duration as well as their financial status. It should be mentioned here that the cost of the annual Hajj pilgrimage is high (ranging from a few to several thousand USD). The faithful often spend their life savings, or whole families often borrow or sell property to pay for the Hajj of one of their members (Accor, n.d.; Baczała, 2022).

Table 3. Number of pilgrims from Konya Province participating in the Umrah pilgrimage in 2017–2019

Year	Total number	Women	Men	Age range
2017	2,894	1,748	1,146	over 50 years of age – 25% under 50 years of age – 75%
2018	1,286	484	802	over 50 years of age – 35% under 50 years of age – 65%
2019	1,383	376	1,007	over 50 years of age – 60% under 50 years of age – 40%

Source: according to data from the interview with the Konya Valiligi Mudurlugu il Muftulugu employee.

In the case of the Umrah pilgrimage data (Table 3) where its date is not specified, a decrease in the number of trips can be seen among the Konya community during the period under review. In addition, the gender balance has changed, i.e. the proportion of men has increased significantly in recent years while the number aged over 50 has also increased.

5.2. DETERMINANTS OF THE FUNCTIONING OF PILGRIMAGE TRIPS IN KONYA PROVINCE IN 2020–2022

The coronavirus pandemic, which has wreaked havoc around the world, also affected Türkiye. The first case of infection in this country was recorded on March 11, 2020 (Yaman, 2021). All precautionary measures were then implemented and checks on travellers were carried out at airports.

Soon, the travel restrictions were extended to pilgrims as well. During Hajj and Umrah, the risk of infection was particularly high due to the size of the gatherings during the rituals which favoured the rapid transmission of the virus (Atique, Itumalla, 2020). The only way out of this situation was to close Mecca and other pilgrimage sites for visitors from countries that could not cope with the pandemic, including Türkiye, at the end of February 2020 (Hoang et al., 2020).

More than two million Muslims come to Mecca every year. In 2019, just before the outbreak of the pandemic, Mecca was visited by 2,489,406 pilgrims (General Authority for Statistics. Kingdom of Saudi Arabia [GASTAT], n.d.). In 2020, their number declined to only a thousand, as the Saudi Arabian government allowed access to Mecca only to its own citizens. The pilgrims had to strictly observe the rules of social distancing and were not allowed to touch the Ka'ba (Baczała, 2021). Islamic communities from other countries lost the opportunity to fulfil this religious duty and this also affected Turkish citizens who had to give up this important trip in 2020 and 2021 (*Bu yıl hacca gidilecek mi? 2021 Hac iptal mi, olacak mı? Diyanet'ten 2021 Hac açıklaması*, 2021). A partial but at the same time the only solution to this problem was the possibility of virtual participation in the pilgrimage to Mecca.

The suspension of the pilgrimage contributed to a significant religious crisis in Muslim communities, with long queues of citizens waiting to be part of the quota for the Hajj (e.g. waiting times in Indonesia, home to the largest Muslim population in the world, range from 7 to 37 years) (Baczała, 2022). Many people, especially the elderly, were concerned about whether they would be able to make the postponed pilgrimage in future years due to the limits (Muneeza, Mustapha, 2021).

Hope for improvement came in 2022, when Saudi Arabia agreed to accept pilgrims from Türkiye and

the first group of Turkish pilgrims set out for Mecca again on May 2, 2022. An estimated number of 37,770 pilgrims went from Türkiye to Saudi Arabia in 2022 (*Hacı adayları Arafat'ta*, 2022). Many Turks had waited for this opportunity for more than two years.

A dual immunisation certificate was required for foreign pilgrims to be allowed to make the Hajj and Umrah pilgrimage. The Saudi Arabian government recognised only four types of vaccines: Pfizer, AstraZeneca, Moderna, and Johnson & Johnson. Before entering Mecca, pilgrims from Türkiye and other countries had to undergo 14-day quarantine in a third country (Zuardin, Akfan, 2022).

5.3. FUNCTIONING OF RELIGIOUS TOURISM OFFICES IN KONYA CITY BEFORE AND DURING THE PANDEMIC

Before the outbreak of the pandemic, many travel agencies organised pilgrimages to Mecca and Medina for the inhabitants of Konya. They offered the flight, on-site transport, meals, health insurance, various types of accommodation and a guided tour program.

Hajj pilgrimage offers differ from those for Umrah. In addition to the strictly defined dates, Hajj is much more expensive and significantly longer. Although the pilgrimage and its rituals last only five or six days, many pilgrims arrive in Saudi Arabia earlier and stay longer. They are aware that this may be a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to visit the holy places of Islam. For this reason, travel agencies offer packages ranging from five-six-day to even 40-day stays.

To study this phenomenon and present the functioning of the religious tourism market in Konya in the analysed period, experts, i.e. the owners of four local travel agencies (Table 4), were asked the following questions:

1. Which pilgrimage destinations do inhabitants of Konya Province most often choose?
2. What proportion of all tours sold by the travel agency are pilgrimages?
3. How many tourists wanted to visit Mecca and Medina in the last 3–5 years?
4. Which pilgrimage – Hajj or Umrah – was more popular among Konya inhabitants?
5. What length of trip to Mecca and Medina was chosen most often and how did this situation differ by age group?
6. Which age group had the highest number of pilgrims?
7. What was the pilgrimage trend before the pandemic?
8. What form of travel is the most popular among pilgrims from Konya?
9. Do pilgrims pay attention to the standard of hotels and restaurants during their pilgrimage?
10. What was the coronavirus impact on the functioning of the travel agency?

Table 4. List of Konya travel agencies included in the study

No	Name	Address	Website
1.	Gonyalı Turizm	Aziziye Mah. Kadılar 1 Sok., N° 8/202, Sözen İş Merkezi Kat, Karatay-Konya	https://haritane.com/d-detay/?utm_content=gonyali-turizm-detay5323941
2.	Boyut Turizm	Şereşşirin Mah., Şereşşirin Sok., Hacımahmut Çarşısı, N° 45/1, Karatay-Konya	http://enyakinsubesi.com/turizm-acentalari/106960-boyut-turizm
3.	Hudaverdi Turizm	Aziziye, Eşarizade 2. Sk., Kiliç Han İş Hani, N° 26/203, Karatay-Konya	https://www.hudaverturizm.com/
4.	Sufi Turizm	İhsaniye Mah. Vatan Cad. Adalhan İş Merkezi, N° 15/104, Selçuklu-Konya	http://www.sufitur.com/

Source: authors.

Table 5. Summary of tour operators' responses to selected questions

Name of the travel agency	Destinations most frequently chosen by pilgrims	Share of the number of sold pilgrimages in comparison to other offers of the tourist office	Number of pilgrims from Konya to Mecca in the last 3–5 years	Number of pilgrims from Konya to Medina in the last 3–5 years	Most common age range of pilgrims
Gonyalı Turizm	Mecca and Medina	3/4	250	200	26–40
Boyut Turizm	Mecca and Medina	1/2	200	200	41–60
Hudaverdi Turizm	Mecca and Medina	1/2	150	250	41–60
Sufi Turizm	Mecca and Medina	1/3	250	170	41–60

Source: authors based on survey results.

Some of the experts' responses are shown in Table 5. The obtained information shows that Mecca and Medina were the most popular pilgrimage destinations among Konya Province inhabitants.

Religious trips made up a significant part of all tour operators' offers. Their highest share, i.e. as many as three-quarters of all trips sold, was recorded in the Gonyalı Turizm office. Sales were similar in the Boyut Turizm and Hudaverdi Turizm offices, where pilgrimages accounted for half of all the tours sold. Only the manager from Sufi Turizm provided information that pilgrimages accounted for just one third of all offers sold by the office.

According to the experts, their offices have sold more trips to Mecca than to Medina in recent years. During this period, the number of tourists purchasing these trips fluctuated from around 200 to 250 (Table 5).

All experts agreed that the clients of the offices most often chose the Umrah pilgrimage offer. This may be related to the fact that it is easier to make a smaller pilgrimage due to the lack of time limits, and it can also be carried out outside Ramadan. Moreover, it is shorter and cheaper than the Hajj.

In terms of the length of the trip preferred by Konya inhabitants from each age group, it was found that the longest 30-day pilgrimage was chosen by pilgrims aged over 60, the 14-day option was preferred by travellers aged 41–60 and 26–40, while the shortest 8-day option

was chosen by the youngest pilgrims aged 18–25, as reported by an expert from the Sufi Turizm office. In the case of the other tourist offices, the longest 30-day pilgrimage was most often purchased by clients aged 41–60.

The experts further claimed that, in general, clients with a stable financial and professional situation were able to afford to make a longer pilgrimage. On the contrary, those who are at the early stage of their career were unlikely to be able to go on a month-long trip. The responses from the owners of Sufi Turizm, Hudaverdi Turizm, and Boyut Turizm also show that the largest number of pilgrims were from the 41–60 age group. Only the Gonyalı Turizm expert specified the 26–40 age range in this respect. The trip duration, material status and age of pilgrims suggested by the respondents are consistent with the results reported by for instance Akbulut and Ekin (2018).

According to the sellers, clients of the tourist offices making a pilgrimage mostly chose to travel individually or in small groups. Only the representative of the Gonyalı Turizm office reported that most pilgrims chose to travel in a larger group. As shown by three experts, the standard of hotels and restaurants was not the most important factor in the pilgrims' choice of their offers and many people even prefer budget hotels to the most luxurious ones. Only the owner of the Sufi Turizm office gave a different answer. All

representatives of the analysed enterprises agreed that there was a noticeable growing trend of pilgrimage trips from Konya Province before the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic.

As indicated by the responses of the experts to the question about the effect of coronavirus on the economic situation of their tourist offices, the departures of pilgrim groups stopped completely due to the epidemiological situation and the decision of the Saudi Arabian government. To continue functioning, the travel agencies were forced to create offers to other domestic destinations on an ongoing basis, as they could not earn an income from the organisation of pilgrimages to Mecca and Medina.

5.4. IMPACT OF THE INABILITY TO MAKE PILGRIMAGES TO MECCA AND MEDINA ON THE FEELINGS OF KONYA INHABITANTS

Due to the serious pandemic situation in Türkiye and the border closure by Saudi Arabia, many religious inhabitants of Konya Province were unable to fulfil their pilgrimage obligation. They were forced to wait until the situation improved and trips resumed. It therefore seemed interesting to investigate whether and to what extent this impediment affected their religious feelings and level of psychological comfort. For this purpose, a short survey was conducted using an online questionnaire, carried out in the first half of 2022 covering the inhabitants of Konya city.

A total of 110 responses were received from respondents – 64 from women (58%) and 46 from men (42%). The surveyed group was dominated by those aged 26–40 with 51 respondents (46% of the total). There were similar numbers for inhabitants aged 41–60 (32; 29%) and 18–25 (25; 23%). The smallest group were province inhabitants aged over 60 (2% of the total). As many as 73 respondents (66% of the total) declared that the suspension of pilgrimages was not problematic and did not affect their psychological comfort (Table 6). This group of respondents did not include people over the age of 60, and the proportion of men and women was similar – 54% and 46%. The declarations obtained show that the suspension of pilgrimage trips during the pandemic was most calmly accepted by both women and men in the 26–40 age group (Table 6). This observation is in line with the findings reported by for instance Bilim and Ay (2022), who argue that the preferences of young Turkish tourists in Konya generally lean towards non-spiritual, secular motivations rather than religious travel. However, the opposite was declared by 37 members of the surveyed community (34%) who felt anxiety about the limitation (Table 7).

These were mainly respondents over the age of 40 (18, 49% of the total), who were aware of their age and the considerable length of time they had to wait for a visa

to participate in the obligatory Hajj pilgrimage. Taking into account gender, higher levels of stress prevailed among women (24, 65% of the total) (Table 7).

Table 6. Characteristics of respondents who did not experience discomfort related to the inability to make the pilgrimage due to the COVID-19 pandemic

Gender	Number	Age range			
		18–25	26–40	41–60	above 60
Women	40	8	24	8	0
Men	33	10	17	6	0
Total	73	18	41	14	0

Source: authors based on surveys.

Table 7. Characteristics of respondents who felt discomfort related to the inability to make the pilgrimage due to the COVID-19 pandemic

Gender	Number	Age range			
		18–25	26–40	41–60	above 60
Women	24	4	10	8	2
Men	13	3	0	10	0
Total	37	7	10	18	2

Source: authors based on surveys.

As can be seen from the compilation of opinions of the entire group of respondents (Tables 6 and 7), young women (aged 26–40) had the most diverse attitudes towards the impossibility of making pilgrimages to Mecca. It should be noted, however, that the number of women who did not feel the related stress (24) was over twice as high as those who experienced such discomfort (10).

The respondents were also asked whether they planned to make Hajj or Umrah pilgrimages in the near future. The answers obtained showed that 37 respondents (34%) planned such a trip (Table 8), while as many as 73 (66% of the total) declared otherwise (Table 9). It is interesting to note that the number of the declarations of going on a pilgrimage was identical to the number of people who felt discomfort about the impossibility of fulfilling the obligation. On this basis, it can be seen that more than one third of the respondents in the analysed group exhibited a lifestyle reflecting the conservative traditions of the Konya Province community.

In addition, a detailed analysis of the responses shows slightly greater eagerness to go on the pilgrimage declared by men (21 individuals, 57% of the total), mainly those aged 41–60 (Table 8). In contrast, women (48, 66% of the total), especially those in the 26–40 age group, reported a definitely greater lack of desire to participate in the pilgrimage (Table 9).

Table 8. Summary of characteristics of those who want to make a pilgrimage to Mecca in the future

Gender	Number	Age range			
		18–25	26–40	41–60	above 60
Women	16	4	7	3	2
Men	21	3	7	11	0
Total	37	7	14	14	2

Source: authors based on surveys.

Table 9. Summary of characteristics of those who do not plan to make a pilgrimage to Mecca in the future

Gender	Number	Age range			
		18–25	26–40	41–60	above 60
Women	48	8	26	14	0
Men	25	10	11	4	0
Total	73	18	37	18	0

Source: authors based on surveys.

6. SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

The COVID-19 pandemic, which has changed the global political, social, and economic situation, did not spare tourism which was one of the industries that suffered huge losses during this time. Border closures and imposed sanitary restrictions almost completely curtailed international tourism (Korinth, 2022), as it was regarded as one of the main factors responsible for the spread of the pandemic (Hoarau, 2022).

The COVID-19 outbreak also had a huge economic and social impact on Muslim pilgrimages, as gatherings of millions of worshippers could have led to the rapid spread of the pandemic to almost every corner of the world. This important argument determined the decision to close Saudi Arabia's borders to foreign pilgrims as early as the end of February 2020 (Razaq, Bozonelos, 2020). Then, for more than two years, pilgrims from countries with high infection rates were not allowed to enter Mecca. This included Türkiye, which had the fifth highest rate of coronavirus infection in the world (Genç, 2021).

As reported by Piwko (2021), almost all religious activity during this time was transferred to television and the internet. The faithful were forced to replace the pilgrimage to Mecca with virtual participation in prayers. However, this was not easy, as the pilgrimage is the goal in life for many religious Muslims (Dłużewska, 2012). Moreover, for many followers of Allah, a religious journey made virtually is not the same as being physically present in Mecca. Only visiting the holy

site in person is the fulfilment of one of the five pillars of Islam.

As reported by Muneeza and Mustapha (2021), in this context, the psychological state of the religious part of Turkish society, i.e. the discomfort resulting from the inability to make the trip to Mecca – turned out to be an important problem. Unable to fulfil the most important duty, the faithful lost one of the methods of maintaining internal spiritual balance at the same time (Świto, 2021).

This problem has also affected the followers of Islam in Konya Province, which is distinguished from other regions in Türkiye by its conservative and religious society. Prior to the pandemic, numerous Konya inhabitants participated in Hajj and Umrah pilgrimages, but they were unable to go to Mecca in 2020 and 2021. This changed only in 2022 when the Saudi Arabian government eased the restrictions and opened its borders to foreign pilgrims. The first Turkish groups went to Mecca in early May.

Based on the data analysis and the results of our research, the following conclusions can be drawn about the inhabitants of Konya Province and the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on their pilgrimages:

1. Before the outbreak of the pandemic, there was great interest in Hajj and Umrah pilgrimage trips in the analysed community. Each year, more than 80,000 inhabitants of the province (about 4% of the total) intended to travel to Mecca. However, the number of pilgrimage participants depended on the visa limits set by Saudi Arabia.
2. In 2017–2019, about 3,200 Konya believers participated in the Hajj each year. These were generally elderly people over 50 years of age (both men and women).
3. While the number of Hajj participants remained stable between 2017 and 2019, a decline in the number of Konya pilgrims participating in the Umrah pilgrimage was recorded in 2018 and 2019. Among them, the number of men and individuals over the age of 50 increased.
4. The survey of local religious tourism organisers showed a growing trend in pilgrimage trips in Konya Province before the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic.
5. Customers of travel agencies most often chose Mecca as their pilgrimage destination; among the offers sold, the Umrah was more popular than the Hajj.
6. As declared by the travel agents, inhabitants of the province aged 40 and over were the most likely group to participate in religious trips. Representatives of this age group were also more likely to purchase longer and more expensive Hajj pilgrimages.
7. The outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic wreaked great havoc on the religious tourism agency market in Konya. In 2020 and 2021, many entities suspended operations, while others were forced to modify their offers on an ongoing basis in order to survive.

8. The lack of pilgrimage opportunities during the COVID-19 pandemic affected the well-being of the public in Konya Province. In the analysed group, the related discomfort was declared by 34% of the total respondents who are Muslims and cultivate religious practices.
9. Feelings of danger and anxiety appeared mainly among respondents over 40 years of age (54% of the total), who were already planning to go on the Hajj and were aware of the extended waiting time for such a trip. Taking gender into account, the inflicted stress was more often experienced by women (65% of the total) than by men (35%).
10. The other 66% of the total respondents calmly accepted the suspension of pilgrimage trips to Mecca. This group included mainly young people aged 26–40 (both men and women).
11. The survey also showed a change in attitudes among the inhabitants of Konya Province, who are gradually moving away from traditional religious practices and increasingly opting for secular lifestyles. This is evidenced by for instance the declarations of the desire to make a pilgrimage to Mecca. Participation on such a trip was declared by 37 respondents (only 34% of the total number).
12. The other 73 people (66% of the total) were not interested in participating in the pilgrimage. Of particular importance here is the attitude of young people aged up to 40, as many as 55 of the 110 people who participated in the survey (50% of the total). In addition, they accounted for as many as 75% of respondents who declared a lack of interest in a pilgrimage to Mecca.
13. In this group, special attention should also be paid to the attitude of young women. Among the 73 respondents who did not plan to participate on a pilgrimage, there were 34 women, which accounted for as many as 47% of the total number.
14. The declining number of women on pilgrimage trips was also indicated by data from the Konya Valiligi Mudurlugu il Muftulugu office, especially with regard to Umrah.

Obviously, this study has limitations due to the small number of respondents in the sample. However, the desire was to show that the situation at that particular time had an impact. Nevertheless, as a piece of exploratory work, this project might be recognised as a starting point for further research.

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