Faith 2.0: pilgrims turn to tech to boost hajj

August 13 2019, by Hamza Mekouar

Smartphones are rapidly replacing traditional printed holy books as a means to read Koranic verses

The hajj pilgrimage underway in Mecca has been accelerating the growth of digital worship and spawning a slew of religious apps, tablet Korans and faith-based gadgets.

At the peak of Mount Arafat, numerous Muslim pilgrims were absorbed in Koranic verses displayed on their smartphones—rapidly replacing traditional printed holy books.

"Of course I read the Koran on my phone... it's much more simple," said Egyptian teacher Ahmad Salim, 46, who had travelled to Saudi Arabia for the hajj, one of Islam's five pillars.

For the first time in the hajj's history, 5G super high-speed mobile technology has been deployed around the holy sites to allow the faithful to transfer data at breakneck speeds.

Tech giants Zain and Nokia will even "demonstrate advanced virtual reality... allowing users to experience the hajj remotely as if they were there", using 360 degree high-definition video over 5G.

'A success'

Many pilgrims snapped selfies over the five-day rite, held this year August 9 to 14, and sent video clips to friends and family back home.

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Software exists to help visitors get around Mecca and the surrounding area as well as access medical services and properly follow religious rites.

Saudi's hajj ministry even sends text messages to pilgrims with a variety of information and advice.

A major digital innovation for this year's hajj has been the introduction of electronic hajj visas "delivered online for the first time without necessitating a consulate visit. It's been a success," said hajj ministry official Hassan Qadi.

'It's very useful'

"It's very practical, especially for those travelling with family," said Jordanian Abderrahman Shdaifat, 44, making his first hajj.

The authorities have also increasingly turned to technology to improve the hajj experience and avoid incidents like the stampede that claimed some 2,300 lives in 2015.

In the wake of that tragedy, pilgrims are now issued with electronic bracelets containing their personal data.

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"All of their information is loaded, a bit like an ID card. If you can't read or write and you get lost, you can give it to anyone and they can help you find your address. Technology helps ease the hajj," said Sami Abdelaziz, a 37-year-old Saudi pilgrim.

Shdaifat, the Jordanian pilgrim, sheltering under an umbrella from the heavy rains that have lashed the Mina Valley outside Mecca, said of the bracelets: "If a pilgrim gets separated, their group can locate them.

"It's very useful."

Saudi authorities have also fitted GPS trackers to 18,000 shuttle buses to monitor the flow of pilgrims.

Shdaifat brandished a second bracelet that gives him access to the metro system connecting Mecca's various pilgrimage sites.

Classic watches and alarm clocks are also losing ground to phone-based tools that alert worshippers to their five daily prayers.

"Nearly all the pilgrims have it," said Egyptian Ahmad Salim.

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Citation: Faith 2.0: pilgrims turn to tech to boost hajj (2019, August 13) retrieved 3 May 2024 from https://techxplore.com/news/2019-08-faith-pilgrims-tech-boost-hajj.html