Socially distanced robots serve Mecca holy water ahead of Hajj

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Robots began handing out bottles of sacred water in Mecca this week in preparation for a socially distanced Hajj pilgrimage in Islam's holiest city, due to the coronavirus pandemic.

Saudi Arabia announced on Saturday that 60,000 residents vaccinated against the coronavirus would be able to perform the July pilgrimage—a number up from last year but drastically lower than in normal times.

Some 2.5 million Muslims from around the world participated in 2019.

Officials hoping to prevent any coronavirus outbreaks rolled out the small black-and-white robots on Sunday, each loaded with three shelves of [water](#) bottles, as a few devotees helped themselves with a mixture of bafflement and amusement.

"The aim of these robots is to provide personal services without any human contact," said Bader Al-Loqmani.

He manages water from the sacred spring of Zamzam which emerges in Mecca's Grand Mosque, built around the Kaaba, the black cubic building towards which Muslims around the world pray.

"Roughly 20 robots are currently available for helping visitors and pilgrims at the hajj," Loqmani said, noting that more could be brought onstream if necessary.

For centuries, pilgrims have flocked to drink water from the Zamzam spring, seen as miraculous in Islamic tradition.

Hundreds of thousands of bottles of Zamzam water are usually distributed each year.

The Hajj is one of the five pillars or key duties of Islam, but for the second year in a row will only be permitted for vaccinated residents of Saudi Arabia.

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