

12,000 American Muslims to make pilgrimage to Mecca

by [Omar Sacirbey](#)

November 10, 2010

(RNS) Some 12,000 American Muslims are expected to join an estimated 2.5 million pilgrims in the Saudi Arabian city of Mecca for the hajj, the annual Islamic pilgrimage that this year runs between Nov. 14 and 18.

The number of pilgrims expected is about the same as in recent years, said Nail Al-Jubeir, a spokesman for the Saudi Arabian embassy in Washington, D.C., which limits pilgrims to making the pilgrimage no more than once every five years.

Islam requires followers who are physically and financially capable to complete the hajj once in their lifetime.

Overcrowding and catastrophic stampedes have led Saudi authorities to issue special hajj visas; since 1990, more than 2,500 pilgrims have been killed in stampedes, while hundreds more die each year as a result of sickness, heart attacks, traffic accidents and other incidents.

Most problems have occurred at an elevated platform known as the Jamarat, from which pilgrims throw stones at walls representing the devil. To ease overcrowding, Saudi authorities have gradually expanded the Jamarat to five levels and added exits.

Despite efforts to limit the number of pilgrims, hundreds of thousands of mainly Saudi residents still try to perform hajj without permits. "Quite a few people get turned back because of overcrowding," said Al-Jubeir.

Many unauthorized pilgrims evade detection and camp out in the hills surrounding Mecca, where Muslims believe Islam's prophet Muhammad received his first revelation from God in 610 A.D. "It becomes a sanitation nightmare," he said.

For American Muslims, the most difficult part of the journey may be the return home. In recent years, many Muslims returning from travel abroad have complained about religious profiling and lengthy searches and questioning at airports and border crossings.

In response, Muslim civil rights groups have issued travel advisories for pilgrims, telling them to expect questioning and advising them what types of questions are legal, such as name and residency, and which are not, including questions about religious or political beliefs.