



All-Party Parliamentary Group on Hajj & Umrah

MINUTES OF MEETING

Held on:

Tuesday 14th May 2023

4:00pm – 5:00pm

Committee Room 14, Palace of Westminster

In attendance: Yasmin Qureshi MP (Chair), Tahir Ali MP, Lord Qurban Hussain, Rehman Chisti MP, Afzal Khan MP, Baroness Uddin, Lord Wajid Khan, Naz shah MP, Rashid Mogradia (CBHUK), DI Kevin Ives (City of London Police).

Members of the Public:

Prof Sean McLoughlin, Altaf Arif, Mohammed Hussain Dilwar, Abdul Akbur, Abdul Malek, Kasum Fahim Khan, Misbah Patel, Nur Mohammed Khan, Md Areeb Ullah

1. The Meeting convened at 5:05pm and the Chair welcomed everyone to the meeting.
2. The Chair opened the meeting by acknowledging that a new Hajj booking system (Nusuk) was in place and it was the second year in which there were issues around booking Hajj packages for British Muslims. Members of the APPG had been dealing with cases on an individual basis and it was therefore relevant to hold an APPG meeting to hear more from those affected and better understand the situation.

The Chair clarified the role of an APPG as an informal cross-party group comprising of Members of the House of Commons and House of Lords coming together on an issue as “Volunteers” who have an interest in the issue to ensure Hajj & Umrah experiences for British Muslims are good and address issues people face by lobbying the Saudi authorities and our own Government, ambassadors and foreign ministers as well. The Chair made it clear that the APPG was not part of any institutions, nor a Government body, a charity or an NGO and holds no official status. CBHUK acts as secretariat to the APPG.

The Chair mentioned the issues from the Motawif system last year and at that time, the APGP wrote to the Saudi Ambassador to the UK and also the British Ambassador to Saudi Arabia along with the Ministry of Hajj, and Government departments and made representation to them. The APPG spoke to the Minister of Hajj who gave assurance that things would be different this year and that the system for booking Hajj would not be reverting back to local agents.

The Hajj quota would also come in line with the rest of the Muslim World of 1 pilgrim per 1000 Muslim of the country. So whilst the UK previously had over 25,000 pilgrim quota this would now be reduced to the rule applied to other countries. The UK would be affected along with 57 other countries including USA, France and Germany.

The Chair mentioned the APPG lobbied the Saudi Authorities to restore the quota.

3. APPG Members Feedback

Rehman Chisti MP thanked members of the APPG and stakeholders in all that they do to support British Muslims and gave feedback on the recent APPG visit to Saudi Arabia.

- He mentioned how concerns over the booking system and lost payments were made to the British Ambassador in Riyadh to convey this back to the Saudi Authorities.

- He further elaborated on the meeting with the deputy minister for Hajj where they asked what steps were being done to compensate those who had a bad experience or were due refunds due to non delivery of services. It is understood that 95% of cases of those affected had been dealt with and the Ministry of Hajj earlier this year processed refunds for everyone else too and calls were being made to locate the remaining 5% of people so that they too could be refunded.
- The APPG delegation asked for reassurances on the new system to process payments and to be able to offer offline bookings for those who could not do so online. These were being looked at and would be done via regional offices in the UK.
- Finally the APPG asked for an increased quota for Hajj for the UK. It was understood that the Saudi Authorities were implementing a system of 1 pilgrim per 1000 which is fair to all countries around the world.
- The APPG met with the British Consul-General in Jeddah to see what more could be done to support British nationals coming for Hajj & Umrah. From an engagement perspective, both the British Ambassador and British Consul-General Jeddah and the Saudi Shura Council and Ministry of Hajj were constructive in engagement with the APPG and to take on board feedback and concerns and experiences of British Hajj pilgrims from last year.

Lord Qurban Hussain provided further feedback from the meeting and the appetite from the Saudi Authorities to provide a positive experience for all Muslims coming for Hajj & Umrah from around the World. The new system was to get rid of agents and instead allow pilgrims to book directly online and utilise Hajj guides for guidance.

Tahir Ali MP echoed the words of Rehman Chishti MP and Lord Qurban Hussain.

The Chair summarised key issues being faced by British pilgrims booking on the new Nusuk Hajj Portal.

- Lack of communication, no email newsletters for those who subscribed
- No clear time lines for each stage of the Hajj booking process
- Packages went live on Thursday 4th May 2023 and were sold in matters of a few hours.
- 2 Bank Holiday weekends and only 5 days given to make first 50% payment
- Payment options and issues with payments being stuck in Gulf and Riyadh Banks
- Cash Payments promised, but then were hit by 20% VAT and had to be done as a bank draft. Those who selected this options could not switch to another payment options so either had to pay the VAT or cancel their booking and rebook.
- Payments not reaching Nusuk in time
- Due to lack of quota, people faced days refreshing computer screens to see if any packages were cancelled to re-appear on Nusuk and book.
- Hajj Guides assigned to packages cannot be contacted and if they are, have no idea what to do.

Fraud

- Dodgy posts on social media claiming to be from “Nusuk” to assist those who could not book to help process payments and bookings
- Some UK tour operators offering Hajj packages outside the Official Nusuk Hajj Portal
- Failure by Hajj trade associations to hold their members to account for misleading pilgrims and marketing of Hajj packages

The Chair mentioned that on behalf of the APPG, she was meeting with the Saudi Ambassador next week and the purpose of today’s meeting was to gather feedback of what’s going on and once she had spoken to the stakeholders she could present this back. She gave assurances that the APPG had last year met the Minister for Hajj and more recently the Deputy Minister for Hajj and members of the Saudi Shura Council and have been lobbying them on behalf of the British Muslim community who faced problems. They have been sympathetic and had accepted there had been problems to resolve it.

Naz Shah MP reported that she had been contacted by her constituents on the issues of booking a Hajj package on the Nusuk Hajj Portal and that she had met with the Saudi Ambassador to the UK to relay their concerns and that he would look into them. She had also written to the Foreign Secretary and awaiting a reply.

Lord Wajid Khan mentioned the he had his own family members affected by the new system. He was angry and frustrated at the rollout and was concerned for young Muslims being able to fulfil their religious obligations in the future given the current quota and systems. He assured the meeting that he along with the APPG were having meaningful conversations with UK and Saudi officials and will be persistent in raising the issues on behalf of the Muslim community. In his view the Motawif and Nusuk system had been a mess.

City of London Police Hajj Fraud Awareness

Detective Inspector Kevin Ives reported back their annual Hajj fraud awareness campaign. The campaign was launched for 2023 before Ramadan and the pickup from press and media was not great. The City of London Police has to be careful in differentiating a) problems with booking system and b) actual fraud. If anyone had been affected by fraud then they should report to Action Fraud.

4. Public Feedback

Misbah Patel spoke to represent her family and raised her concerns on the possibility of data breaches and how does the public protect themselves from anyone claiming to be from Nusuk and demanding payment to be made for packages. She was relying on the official Nusuk newsletter to be advised on when packages were to be released and was disappointed that it went live without notice. For a working mother and with a hectic schedule she could

only check online after work, which was not convenient and now she found herself in a situation of not being able to secure a Hajj package causing her and her family anxiety. She commented that the system should have gone live earlier in the year to allow people to plan and make payments in instalments. She asked why only 3 of the 14 Saudi Hajj providers actually ended up serving British pilgrims. Packages did not reflect value for money and was expensive.

Altaf Arif mentioned that the Licensed Hajj Organisers (LHO) a Trade Association was being wound down as there were no more Hajj agents. He confirmed he was working with Albait Guests (One of the Saudi Approved Hajj providers). He mentioned:

- Former LHO members and non-members were using the “LHO logo” to market Hajj packages and that these companies were confronted to remove the logo.
- The system for Hajj bookings had changes it’s called ‘progression’ and in its infancy. He addressed concerns from Misbah about data protection breaches being down to sharing of information on Chat groups (WhatsApp and Telegram) and this was not the fault of Hajj service providers or Nusuk.
- There are also 2 different Hajj service providers for the UK.
 - 1) Nusuk – the official online Hajj booking platform for British Muslims
 - 2) Hajj services for dual nationals (for example; people could utilise their Pakistani passport to go Hajj via the Pakistan Hajj quota and via Pakistani Hajj service providers who were working with agents in the UK).
- He confirmed that UK guides were working hard with Saudi Hajj providers who in turn were talking to Nusuk to resolve issues.
- Issue with the banking system and compliance with AML (Anti-Money Laundering) laws which meant money getting stuck especially with bank transfers and furthermore credit cards would offer financial protection under section 75.
- Payments to Nusuk being blocked by UK banks and Saudi banks

- There were more packages on the system than capacity
- He acknowledged people were facing challenges and gave assurances that Nusuk was working hard to resolve the issues.

Altaf Arif mentioned that Hajj is part of faith and that people in the UK, due to their affluence, British Muslims would meet the Sharia criteria to perform Hajj far sooner than others in the world and for this reason the UK quota should be left as it was.

Abdul Akbur praised efforts by the APPG and urged the members to work together collectively to raise the concerns and issues and present them to the relevant authorities rather than working solo, this would have a stronger voice.

Ameer Hamza mentioned he had been affected by the new system. He spoke about system not fit for a 'developed nation' and asked what kind of conversation were being had with Saudi officials.

The Chair responded:

- 1) When the Ministry of Hajj & Umrah introduce changes to please give people enough notice what the new system would be
- 2) Who would be the people to contact if things didn't work properly
- 3) Some Hajj packages actually prize a lot of people out of the market and for this reason to offer packages which cater for all and not just a few

Prof Sean McLoughlin (University of Leeds) asked whether, in addition to formal channels (via Ambassadors and Government), was there any back channels to communications with the relevant authorities being utilised. The Chair mentioned that the conversation were being held at top level in line with the country's vision and policy and that our own government would need to interact to get any changes at that level too.

Mohammed Hussain Dilwar challenged Altaf Arif in 'praising Nusuk'. He said that people clicking away for hours on ends on the platform to book a Hajj packages was not acceptable. He claimed this was a social experiment. He

asked why did Nusuk not just shut down the website or put up an alert to say 'the UK quota was full do not continue to try and book'. He questioned why CBHUK or the APPG or others had not been active enough to advise the public on what to do.

Abdul Akbur mentioned that these channels had been active and that the statement be retracted.

Rashid Mogradia (CBHUK) challenged the notion that CBHUK was not active enough. He said for the record there was something about sharing factual, meaningful and accurate information and not just sharing information for the sake of sharing. What was evident that information being shared on social media had been taken out of context from chat groups and tweeted on social media causing further anxiety to peoples' already heightened emotions and existing anxiety levels. As a charity we shoulder a lot of responsibility and have to be pragmatic in the advice we deliver and timing of it. He further clarified the difference between Nusuk App for Umrah and Nusuk Hajj Portal which were two separate entities being run by two different ministries. This confusion was also being shared on social media by people who did not fully understand the dynamics of Hajj or Umrah systems adding to further confusion. He also addressed the issue of those wanting to book a package but were unable to even though the package was available as there seemed to be more packages uploaded on to the booking portal than actual supply.

Mohammed Hussain Dilwar asked why people were being allowed to pay via unsecured channels and why were the authorities not clamping down on such practices and not to engage with the new system.

The Chair made it clear that no one could make that bold statement (or stop people from going for Hajj) but rather the APPG would listen to issues and relay back to the relevant authorities.

Areeb Ullah from Middle East Eye asked the Chair to confirm the UK Hajj quota for 2023 as 3,649. The Chair confirmed that the "1 per 1000 of the

Muslim population rule” applied to Muslim majority countries was now being implemented right across all countries of the world including the west and that included the UK and USA also.

He also asked whether the issue of ATOL protection was raised at meetings, to which the Chair confirmed that it was. Rashid Mogradia (CBHUK) further mentioned that this was raised as early as January 2023 with the Civil Aviation Authority (CAA). There was a meeting held recently with the FCDO, CAA and other stakeholders with the Saudi authorities and this issue was being looked at. He further elaborated that CBHUK had been a strong advocates for ATOL protection and since 2008 and had worked with CAA to increase compliance amongst Hajj and Umrah agents and had also raised this with Saudi officials over Motawif and Nusuk portals.

5. The meeting concluded at 5:10pm