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# Iran bars its citizens from traveling to Mecca for the Muslim pilgrimage

TEHRAN

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In a sign of further tension between regional rivals, Iran will not allow its citizens to travel to Saudi Arabia for the annual Muslim pilgrimage to Mecca in September, Iran's state television has reported.

The decision, which means that tens of thousands of Iranians cannot make their spiritual journey to the main pilgrimage site of Islam, came after several failed rounds of talks between officials of both countries and on the heels of accusations that Saudi Arabia has started a cyberwar against Iran.

Iran's culture minister, Ali Jannati, told state television on Sunday that "no pilgrims would be sent to the Muslim Holy sites of Mecca and Medina, because of obstacles created by Saudi officials."

In a statement, Iran's Hajj and Pilgrimage organization condemned Saudi Arabia for what it said was a lack of cooperation. "Too much time has been lost, and it is now too late to organize the pilgrimage," the organization said, ac-

ording to the semi-official Mehr news agency.

The Saudi Ministry of Hajj and Umrah accused a visiting Iranian delegation of refusing to sign an agreement resolving issues. "They will be responsible in front of Allah Almighty and its people

**Iran's decision means that tens of thousands of Iranians cannot make their spiritual journey this year.**

for the inability of the Iranian citizens to perform hajj for this year," the ministry said in a statement published by the official Saudi Press Agency.

The annual hajj pilgrimage is one of the pillars of Islam. According to religious tenets, every Muslim is duty-bound to visit Mecca. The absence of Iranian Shiites during the pilgrimage will further widen the rift with Sunnis; some extremist Sunni adherents accuse Shiites of not being true Muslims.

Relations between Iran and Saudi Arabia have remained strained since the start of the conflict in Syria more

than five years ago. Iran supports President Bashar al-Assad's government in Damascus, while Saudi Arabia supports rebel militias.

Throughout the last year, there have been tensions over Iranian visits to Mecca. During the 2015 hajj, many pilgrims died in a stampede, with Saudi Arabia claiming around 700 deaths and Iran saying more than 4,500 people had been killed. An independent investigation by The Associated Press put the death toll at 2,411.

In January, Iranian protesters ransacked the Saudi Embassy in Tehran after a Shiite Muslim cleric was executed in Saudi Arabia, events that led to the severing of diplomatic ties between the two countries.

Besides supporting several opposing groups in multiple conflicts in the Middle East, both countries are engaged in a low-level cyberwar. Since Saturday, several websites belonging to official institutions, including that of Iran's cyberpolice, have been taken down by hackers. In an interview with state television, the deputy commander of the digital police force, Hussein Ramezani, said the IP addresses of the

attackers originated in Saudi Arabia.

Among the targeted websites were crucial pieces of government infrastructure, including the Deeds and Property Organization and the postal service. Iran's Statistical Center was also hacked.

The Al Jazeera news channel reported that a Saudi hacker known as Nimr, Tiger of Saudi Arabia, had announced that his group, Electronic Decisive Storm, attacked Iranian satellite channels' websites. The semi-official Iranian news agency Tabnak said other sites had been hit by a hacker called Da3s.

"This is not the Islamic State," Tabnak's website said. "It appears this comes from Saudi Arabia."

The attacks occurred a week after Gen. Gholanreza Jalali, the head of the Iranian Passive Defense Organization, warned against coming cyberattacks by Saudi Arabia.

In 2012, Saudi Arabia accused Iran of hacking the state-owned oil company Saudi Aramco, an attack widely seen as Iranian retaliation for the hacking of its main oil terminal on Kharg Island in the Persian Gulf.

In March, the United States Justice



Muslim pilgrims performing the last rite of hajj near Mecca, Saudi Arabia, last September. MOSAB AB ELSEIFI/AP/ASSOCIATED PRESS

Department unsealed an indictment against seven Iranian computer experts accused of carrying out cyberattacks against several targets, including financial institutions and a dam in the United States, as part of an assignment for

Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps. On Sunday, General Jalali said the experts were still in Iran.

*Ben Hubbard contributed reporting from Jidda, Saudi Arabia.*