

## **Umrah Travel Organizer's Survival Strategy During The Covid-19 Pandemic In Indonesia**

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### **Abstract:**

The Covid-19 pandemic has had a significant impact on the long-term viability of the Umrah Travel Organizer. The restrictive policies issued by the governments of Saudi Arabia and Indonesia have made the Umrah Travel Organizer business vulnerable. The purpose of this research is to explain the impact of the pandemic on the Umrah Travel Organizer and how they respond to these conditions with strategies and innovations in order to survive. This study employs a qualitative method with descriptive analysis of Umrah Travel Organizer in 11 districts/cities across five provinces. Observation, interviews, documentation, and literature research were used to collect data. According to the findings of this study, the Covid-19 pandemic forced the government to restrict umrah pilgrimage, which resulted in a reduction in the number of employees, lower employee salaries, and a reduction in company operations. To overcome the situation, the Umrah Travel Organizer implemented several strategies to keep their companies running, including the establishment of other types of businesses, both in trade, entrepreneurship, and other services. This study suggests that a more comprehensive follow-up study is needed in mapping the company problems during the Covid-19 outbreak.

**Keywords:** Survival Strategy, Umrah Travel Organizer, Covid -19 Pandemic, Umrah Pilgrimage, Indonesia

### **Introduction**

The implementation of social restrictions to suppress the spread of Covid-19 has threatened the existence of travel businesses around the world. The policy has a huge impact on the umrah travel industry. In a single trip (Asykur et al., 2021; Finatri et al., 2020) thousands of Muslims will travel to Saudi Arabia to perform umrah. However, during the pandemic (since March 2020), the government of Saudi Arabia

prohibited and restricted citizens of other countries from entering its territory to perform umrah pilgrimage. As a consequence, the Indonesian government has delayed the departure of 59,757 umrah pilgrims since February 2020, according to Arfi Hatim (2020). They have registration numbers to travel to the Holy Land, but their departures have been postponed due to the coronavirus pandemic.

The delay has had a significant impact on the business continuity of Umrah Travel Organizer. Chairman of the Muslim Association of Hajj and Umrah Organizers of the Republic of Indonesia (Amphuri), stated that the country's Umrah Travel Organizer totaled 1,475 units as of August 10, 2021. This figure has risen since 2019 when the number of Umrah Travel Organizer in Indonesia was around 1,300 units (<https://ekonomi.bisnis.com>). Almost all of the existing Umrah Travel Organizer have experienced the effects of the ban and restrictions on umrah pilgrimage and are at risk of losing money due to the delay.

Existing studies on the relationship of Covid-19 with the continuity of the religious pilgrimages tend to look at three things. First, the impact of Covid-19 on the mobility of religious activities in various (Faris & Griffin, 2020; Korstanje, 2020; Mróz, 2021; Nhamo et al., 2020; Raj & Griffin, 2020). Second, the studies on Covid-19 that causing harm to tourism and religious pilgrimage services (Giri, 2021; Lakshmi Singh et al., 2021; Lo Giacco, 2020; Manhas & Nair, 2020a; Manhas & Nair, 2020b; Olsen & Timothy, 2020). Third, the policy of limiting the implementation of hajj and umrah during the pandemic as an effort to prevent the spread of Covid-19 (Al-Shaery et al., 2021; Goni et al., 2021; Hoang et al., 2020; Jokhdar et al., 2021; Khan et al., 2021; Zumla et al., 2020). Likewise, the impact of this policy on the management of hajj and umrah travel (Finatri et al., 2020; Firdiansyah et al., 2020). According to those existing researches, not many have seen the survival strategy of umrah travel services during the pandemic.

The objective of this paper is to fill gaps in the previous researches, specifically regarding the survival strategy of umrah organizer during the coronavirus outbreak. This article has three specific goals in mind: (1) to answer questions about the policy of umrah worship restrictions and its consequences for Umrah Travel Organizer, (2) Umrah Travel Organizer's response (strategy, tactics) to regulations and policy restrictions during the pandemic, and (3) survival of the company's strategy: how many percent were successful, how many failed, how many switched bussiness, and what did those companies do to innovate? This study is based on the argument that the Covid-19 outbreak has had a tremendous impact on the long-term viability of the umrah travel industry. Especially after the Saudi Government issued restrictions on foreign nationals entering umrah worship areas, which were then supported by policies issued by the Indonesian government. Hence, the main source of problems that have a negative impact on the businesses and the workforce or employees in the umrah travel business is Covid-19.

## **Literature Review**

### **The Survival Strategy**

Survival strategy becomes a plan that takes precedence over goal

achievement. As a result, the strategy grows into a large and important plan. Individuals and communities must have good survival strategies to survive during difficult times (Akpan et al., 2021). To survive whatever problems arise, a more responsive, agile, and resilient network structure must be built (Obrenovic et al., 2020). This can be accomplished by developing a proactive strategy and fighting the crisis to ensure survival (Rakshit & Paul, 2020). Thus, survival strategies play a significant role in the lives of individuals and communities.

The increased market demand has finally prompted the rapid development of umrah travel services. They are commonly referred to as umrah travel agents with services include lodging, transportation, tickets, tour packages, and so on (Othman et al., 2019). Other services include ensuring and protecting umrah pilgrims' health and taking care of all umrah administration and documentation (Maisuroh et al., 2020). Many Muslim-majority countries, including Indonesia, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Egypt, and India, are profoundly impacted by Umrah worship activities (Almutairi et al., 2018). As a result of the rising demand, Umrah agents and businesses are becoming increasingly popular in Muslim countries (Akbari et al., 2019).

Three types of implementation can be seen as the survival strategy. Initially, there is a survival strategy with evaluation (Nurunnabi, 2020; Sorensen, 2017). As businesspeople do during a pandemic, they must monitor and evaluate all developments related to the virus's spread. Additionally, responding to crises by developing and putting in place contingency plans to deal with the unforeseen situation of this pandemic (Nurunnabi, 2020), such as the process of developing a shared knowledge model about the current crisis conditions (Obrenovic et al., 2020).

Moreover, turning a crisis or problem into a learning experience (Akpan et al., 2021) (Lestari, 2021). During the pandemic, many people took advantage of the physical restriction policy by conducting their activities online. It means, in these strange times, using technology has become a survival strategy (Akpan et al., 2021). These three manifestations indicate that the crisis is a consequence that has had a widespread impact in urging the community to become accustomed to and develop strategies as a defensive mechanism to overcome the crisis (Liu et al., 2014).

### **Umrah Pilgrimage Industry**

Umrah is a type of worship activity in Islamic teachings that is similar to hajj (Dewi, 2017). The difference is that umrah is *sunnah* (based on *fiqh* or Islamic law), and the time is not fixed and can be performed at any time (Ibrahim Alsini et al., 2018). Therefore, many Muslim pilgrims around the world prefer umrah as an alternative to waiting for the hajj to be performed. As a result, it is not surprising that the number of umrah pilgrims, including from Indonesia, continues to rise year after year (Abd Rahman & Ahamat, 2019; Pabbajah, 2021). Issues concerning umrah travel agents arise at a variety of events. First, there have been several cases of fraud involving them (Rahmayanti et al., 2019; NurulAin & Faezi, 2019). Because of the widespread interest in umrah worship, many umrah travel agencies have been discovered that defraud pilgrims to gain private interest (Rahmayanti et al., 2019). Second, umrah is explicitly mentioned in government policies (Lücking, 2017; Kumaladewi et al., 2017). The Ministry of Religious Affairs in Indonesia has legalized hajj and umrah, which consists of predetermined stages regarding the duration, purpose, and activities of the trip (Lücking, 2017).

Umrah agents must have official permission from the Ministry of Religious

Affairs to operate their travel services in this manner (Kumaladewi et al., 2017). Third, umrah travel agencies is a business industry (Ridha & Harris, 2020; Hassan et al., 2015). They, like any other business, strive to acquire and retain customers. To achieve these objectives, they must have mature management in areas such as services, guidance and counseling, rituals, and so on. Companies competing in hajj and umrah offer coaching, service, and protection with a variety of facilities (Ridha & Harris, 2020). These three factors demonstrate how the umrah trend is positively correlated with the creation of new business fields.

### **The Covid-19 Pandemic**

Covid-19 is a severe acute respiratory syndrome (SARS) that resembles the previous two outbreaks, SARS-CoV and MERS-CoV (Acharya et al., 2021). Because of the wide spread of the virus infection, the virus has become the most severe global health emergency in history (Alaimo et al., 2020); (Richardson et al., 2020). As a consequence, many state activities had been stalled. Today, many businesses, employees, schools, and markets have addressed issues, like public health to broader social and economic issues that affecting people's lives (Wister & Speechley, 2020). It suggests that Covid-19 not only causes health problems and death but also has an impact on other aspects of life (Nah & Siau, 2020). As a result of the vulnerability to Covid-19, various policies have been issued, both referring to world health organizations and autonomous countries (Li et al., 2021). These policies include physical separation, prohibitions on traveling, holding large physical gatherings, the necessity of wearing personal protective equipment such as masks, the closure of various agencies, and the closing and locking of countries (Brzezinski et al., 2020; Iwuoha & Aniche, 2020; Kumar et al., 2021).

The Covid-19 pandemic emerged in at least three important processes. First, consider the pandemic as a manifestation of a life-changing (Fenwick et al., 2020; Usher et al., 2020). Changes occur in various aspects of life as a result of the pandemic, which occurred unexpectedly and spread throughout the world as a severe vulnerability (Fenwick et al., 2020). These fundamental changes are still taking place in tandem with the spread of the virus (Usher et al., 2020). Second, the pandemic as part of the process of sustaining life (Alsetoohy et al., 2021; Eftekhari Ardebili et al., 2021). The adaptation process can be seen in many things, such as companies and industries that must reorganize company expenses, employee management, and adaptive marketing strategies for Covid-19 (Alsetoohy et al., 2021). Third, the pandemic inspired new ideas (Al-Tahitah et al., 2021; Sa'diah et al., 2020). During lockdowns, there is a shift from offline to online traditions, social media is regarded as an innovative medium for community activities. And it affects individuals and communities involved in education and business (Al-Tahitah et al., 2021). In other words, the Covid-19 pandemic has evolved into a series of lives that will continue to evolve in response to new life innovations.

### **Research Method**

This research was conducted on the Umrah Travel Organizer in several areas to describe and understand how their businesses were carried out in order to survive the Covid-19 pandemic. The location was chosen based on the existence and reputation of the Umrah Travel Organizer, which is located in 11 locations across five provinces: Banten (South Tangerang and Serang), West Java (Bandung and



Depok), Central Java (Semarang and Banyumas), Yogyakarta Special Region (Yogyakarta and Sleman), Java East (Surabaya and Bangkalan), and North Sumatra (Medan)

This study used a qualitative approach method and data collection was conducted through the use of interviewing, observing, and documenting methods. Interviews with the Umrah Travel Organizers were conducted at the central, branches, and agents. The research used primary and secondary data. Primary data is information obtained directly from the subject of the study, such as information obtained from direct interviews with the Umrah Travel Organizer. And secondary data was derived from interviews with members of the congregation and officials from the Office of the Ministry of Religious Affairs in the respective regencies/cities. Observations and documentation are used to collect data on Umrah Travel Organizer activities related to the pilgrimage and other supporting activities as a survival strategy.

Data were collected from each research location by purposive sampling. During the process, the research informants are chosen based on the previously prepared problems. The criteria for determining Umrah Travel Organizer informants are those who stop the umrah business and those who continue it. Based on this, two companies were chosen as informants in each research location. The problem variable in this study is the survival strategy they used during the pandemic. Data were analyzed qualitatively as proposed by Huberman (2000), and it consists of reducing, organizing and presenting data, and then drawing conclusions. After all, data has been collected, data reduction is performed by determining which data are related and required to answer research questions. The data classification based on the research questions is then presented and organized as a data-theory discussion, and following that, the conclusion is drawn.

## **Results and Discussion**

### **The Umrah Restriction and Cancellation Policy**

The Saudi Arabian government has issued a policy prohibiting umrah travel due to the Covid-19 pandemic. According to Al Arabiya News, the policy of suspending the arrival of foreign nationals to perform umrah was implemented in early February 2020, and it applies to nine countries: Indonesia, India, Pakistan, Egypt, Turkey, Argentina, Brazil, South Africa, and Lebanon. Furthermore, the Indonesian government has issued a similar policy, decree of the Minister of Religious Affairs of the Republic of Indonesia number 719 of 2020 concerning Guidelines for Organizing Umrah Travel During the Covid-19 Pandemic, which covers pilgrim requirements, health protocols, and departure quotas. Regarding the decree, M. Arfi Hatim, as Director of Special Hajj and Umrah Development, stated that this regulation focuses on pilgrims' health and safety, the implementation of health protocols, age limits, and provisions regarding congenital/comorbid diseases, transportation scheme rules, and other service aspects that must be provided by the Umrah Travel Organizer.

In line with this policy, Syam Resfiadi, General Chairperson of the Association of Indonesian Hajj Umrah Organizers (SAPUHI), predicts that if Saudi Arabia continues to close the umrah pilgrimage, the umrah travel service business will suffer

losses. As a result, the losses borne by Hajj and Umrah travel agencies will logically increase. As was the case with Umrah Travel Organizer, which suffered losses because they had paid in full for airlines, hotels, and other necessities. The umrah cancellation and restriction policy was implemented in order to prevent the virus's spread, particularly in Saudi Arabia. Following this, the Indonesian government, as part of its prevention efforts for prospective umrah pilgrims, has also issued similar regulations.

### **The Umrah Travel Organizer 's Response to the Restriction Policy**

Because of the restrictions many Umrah Travel Organizers went bankrupt because people were no longer interested in registering as prospective umrah pilgrims, and many of those who had registered withdrew their deposits for fear of Covid-19 transmission, as well as economic factors for more pressing needs. As a result, these companies are unable to cover the cost of salary expenses for each of their employees and are forced to terminate their employment (Krisnandika et al., 2021). This condition also contributes to an increase in the unemployment rate. Based on data on the number of workers laid off from both the formal and informal sectors, unemployment in Indonesia increased abnormally as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic (Krisnandika et al., 2021).

There were efforts to rise and survive running their umrah travel business in this situation. Even so, they are unable to generate an income that is commensurate with their expenses. Some have diversified or shifted their focus to other businesses so that Umrah Travel Organizers can continue to exist as an umrah service provider. Business diversification is an effort to continue operating business processes as usual while adding new products, lines of business, and locations to increase revenue. Because of the declining selling price of their products, some companies have taken a stance to increase the production of goods. (nanang & Viana, 2020).

According to the findings of field interviews, the existence of the policy regarding umrah restriction has elicited mixed reactions from Umrah Travel Organizer circles in various regions. According to the head of DUT entrepreneur in Medan City, the enthusiasm of pilgrims to continue going for umrah was still there even though they had to pay a very high price. He said :

*"The enthusiasm of Umrah pilgrims to continue leaving at a very expensive prices is unpredictable. The umrah travel organizer is still not allowed to open yet, so we are waiting for directions from the Ministry of Religion on how to continue this Umrah service".*

Although the cost is higher, the desire to continue for going umrah will also be carried out as conveyed by the EK and TP Umrah pilgrims from Yogyakarta. However, this is not experienced by the pilgrims of AMB, that if the price rises to 40 million, it is likely that many pilgrims will withdraw their money because of the economic situation.

Meanwhile, according to the manager of CWD Umrah Travel Organizer, the policy has been anticipated, including related to Umrah Travel Organizer's financial management and plans not to lay off employees. CWD and HWAT have been forced to lay off some of their employees. The chairman of AMTAS (Sumatera Muslim Travel Association) also stated that several Umrah Travel Organizers laid off most of the employees, by freeing them to look for other jobs. The Umrah Travel

Organizer's obligation is only to pay their Social Security Agency of Health permonth.

Another revelation made by the owner and manager of GAW in Banyumas, that due to the Covid-19 pandemic, his company has postponed as many as 80 prospective umrah pilgrims who have registered. Since the regulations came out, GAW has also stopped registration for umrah pilgrimages. Meanwhile, the manager of the umrah travel business, MBW in Banyumas, states, "During the outbreak, we still accepted registrations even though the number of prospective pilgrims was very limited, but we did not accept booking fees, only their biodata, and so far there have been around 50 prospective Umrah pilgrims." Private groups of the hospital employees are among those who have registered. In line with the manager of BMW said, personal of MIW also stated:

*"We are still open now and serve the prospective umrah pilgrims, by answering complaints, like someone who wants to withdraw funds, or just to find information on when to leave. Meanwhile, we are not opening registration for new pilgrims. If they just provide documents, and want to wait, it's okay, this is not from travel but from the government and it's all closed."*

According to the manager of HAWT, there was still time in 2020 to send 797 congregations until February. However, after the Saudi Arabian government closed the arrival of pilgrims for umrah in March 2020, HAWT did not make any umrah trips to the Holy Land from then until now, resulting in massive losses for the company.

Meanwhile, KIT as an umrah travel entrepreneur had a similar experience. Although the pandemic has lasted nearly two years, many Muslims have come to the company for consultation related to registration for umrah worship if the coronavirus outbreak is over and it is safe to perform umrah. According to the manager of CWD, "We have around 400 pilgrims who have not yet departed and only 1-2 percent have withdrawn their money. The rest are still optimistic that umrah will persist and hopeful that there will be no price increase." According to one Umrah Travel Organizer in Bangkalan, the pandemic has clearly had an impact. There are almost no daily operational activities. Previously, hundreds of congregations could be sent each month, now, there are none. Few congregations are interested, and no one even inquiries about umrah anymore. On average, they are just waiting for confirmation of departure and fewer restrictions on umrah.

### **Strategies for Survival**

When the business of Umrah travel services was restricted, causing several Umrah Travel Organizers to suffer setbacks and almost go bankrupt, some of them opened up other business opportunities to keep their companies afloat. They trade various goods, provide other services to the community, communicate with congregation alumni and prospective pilgrims who have registered for Umrah trips, and engage in social and religious activities to strengthen their business venture. According to Musa, Pabali, Suryadi, Adi Paramitha, and Rizqi Ratna in their book "Subsistensi Budaya: Strategi Survival Masyarakat Terdampak Kebijakan Social Distancing di Perbatasan Indonesia-Malaysia," each individual's survival strategy

will be different, and they will try to meet their basic needs by utilizing other sources (Musa et al., 2021).

The findings of interviews with several umrah business actors the continuation of their companies revealed that several Umrah Travel Organizers continue to employ their employees by selling goods, while some are laying off their employees. As did the owner and manager of CWD, which operates a mini-market in various areas of Yogyakarta Province. Furthermore, the manager of VSW travel revealed that in order for the company to survive and pay employees, the company's management changed its business strategy by becoming a sales agent for dates imported directly from Middle Eastern countries such as Saudi Arabia and Egypt, and opening an online shop. MBW in Banyumas and one of Umrah Travel Organizers in Medan also participated in such activities.

According to one of the shareholders of KIT, to keep his company able to survive and pay its employees, the company management also changed its business strategy by selling honey and Islamic books online and offline, such as interpretation books (*tafsir*), hadith, fiqh, the history of the prophets, living an Islamic life, the morals of Muslim women, and other popular Islamic books. The owner of QT in Bandung stated the same thing. His party chose to ask their employees to sell and work together to keep the company running, such as by selling dates, and sacrificial animals, as well as collaborating with minimarkets to sell fruits and vegetables as AT does it to maintain his company. Several attempts have been made by DU travel so that the company does not stop and collapse, during the Covid-19 pandemic, they sell all food and goods that are usually obtained when pilgrims go to Umrah, such as zamzam water, dates, chocolate, headscarves, mukena, etc. The strategy carried out by HWAT travel organizer in Depok, is to lay off 4 employees with suspended status or Work From Home (WFH), i.e. they do not enter the office but continue to work according to their respective job descriptions, by working online in serving the umrah pilgrims. Another thing to do is to reduce employees as stated:

*"To get around the finances so that there is no shortage, they were reducing employees in the less strategic sections by 3 people, by laying them off without salary, but they are still promised to work again if the company's financial condition is stable"*

ANU Umrah Travel in Bandung stated that they were still able to recover because of the prepared funds, for the rented employees that had been prepared. But for the continuation how to just surrender to Allah. There is no activity doing. Just waiting until this November to see either it will be continuing activities or not. The manager of MBW explained that his organization was trying opportunities by opening a YouTube channel (*eroslanytorinachannel*) that featured content about hajj and umrah trips that included several community leaders, as well as several themes relevant to people's lives today. Meanwhile, SGS switched its business to become a café since the beginning of the pandemic to empower some workers. Initially the café business was mostly through application orders such as Go Food, as an alternative to the absence of income from the side of Umrah travel services.

"We are trying to shift our focus by offering ONH Plus (Hajj Pilgrimage Fare/Special Hajj Program) to our hajj and umrah alumni, including those outside the city," said an owner of LS. The LS building is in one place with the Islamic



boarding school (pesantren), so the operational costs are relatively low. Its human resources are staff from the Islamic boarding school (pesantren) itself. The office also joins the boarding school so that the pilgrims travel is still running normally. Meanwhile, HAWT finances its business operations with available company savings (reserve funds) and reduces staff in less strategic areas. Nonetheless, the company promises to take them back if the company's financial situation improves.

### **Conclusion**

This study demonstrates that the Covid-19 pandemic has had a significant impact on the Umrah Travel Organizer. Because a decrease in the number of registrants or some prospective congregations resigning would withdraw the registration fees, many Umrah Travel Organizers suffered losses and even threatened to go bankrupt. The crisis also causes employees to only work at certain times, resulting in underpayment of wages, even to the point of termination of employment. The policy of umrah cancellation and restriction has raised public concern, especially since Umrah Travel Organizer is aggressively promoting the umrah program as a substitute for pilgrimage due to the long waiting period. Many people hope that the Indonesian government will pay attention to the umrah business sector to support them in various ways in dealing with the problems caused by the mentioned policy. This chaotic situation makes it difficult for thousands of umrah travel companies like Umrah Travel Organizer, hundreds of employees, and millions of people around them.

On the other hand, some Umrah Travel Organizers are able to continue to operate by implementing strategies and tactics in their business in the form of other activities or businesses, as well as innovating. Thus, the Covid-19 pandemic, apart from posing challenges to the sustainability of Umrah Travel Organizer, has in fact provided opportunities for Umrah Travel Organizer to open up new other services as a form of survival strategy in responding to activity restrictions during the outbreak. This research portrays a theoretical picture of how, amid restrictions and lockdowns, a company must take more adaptive plans to changing conditions strategic steps. Conceptually, a survival strategy is an essential offer for Umrah Travel Organizer in responding to the limitation regulations on the application of Umrah pilgrimage during the pandemic. Besides, this study contributes to possible solutions to various problems encountered by the companies to avoid bankruptcy.

The weakness of this study lies in the data collected which is based on only 12 districts/cities. Likewise, the sample used was only 24 informants, so it is necessary to conduct further comparative studies with Umrah Travel Organizers in other regions in Indonesia. Prospective pilgrims' perspectives on survival strategies open up a portion of the field for further research, allowing for a more comprehensive comparison and analysis. Furthermore, this research is constrained by time and field conditions. Based on this explanation, it is feasible to conduct additional research with aspects that have not been resolved in this research contextually during the ongoing Covid-19 pandemic.

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