

# News story: Armed Forces Muslim Personnel Complete Hajj

Led by Islamic Religious Advisor to the Chief of Defence Staff Imam Asim Hafiz, the Hajj was a chance for British Muslim Armed Forces personnel to reflect on the role of their religion as part of their service. Hosted by the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia Armed Forces (KSA AF), the Hajj took place over the first weekend of September, around Eid celebrations.

Hajj, meaning 'to intend to journey', is the fifth pillar of Islam and requires all Muslims who are able to make a pilgrimage to Mecca and locations of historical significance related to the Prophet Abraham. The group, which consisted of personnel from the Army and Royal Air Force, visited the Holy Mosque in Mecca, Arafat, Muzdalifah, and Mina. In addition they visited the Prophet's Mosque in Medina.

Captain Tim Rudkin, from the Royal Electrical and Mechanical Engineers (REME) said:

We have learnt a lot about ourselves and confirmed that Islam is not only compatible with military life, but supports the Armed Forces' values we strive to embody.

This journey has no rival to anything I have done before, with representatives of almost every country it is the largest gathering of people in the world, sharing common goals and values, coexisting peacefully.

During the group's visit to Medina, the pilgrims visited the Prophet's Mosque and toured the site of the Battle of Uhud. Afterwards they travelled to Mina where they stayed in a tent city and performed the daily stoning of the jamarat against three pillars where the devil appeared to the Prophet Abraham. The UK personnel also met with the KSA AF's Head of Religious Affairs Major Muhammed Al Sadan, who spoke of the importance of Hajj and Islam's compatibility of serving in the Armed Forces.

Sergeant Ahmed Dhalai, from MOD, said:

The military gives me the strength to become a better Muslim. My chain of command not only understand the significance of this journey, they actively encourage it as an opportunity to reflect and aim to be a better person, both in and out of the military.

The group also met with the Malaysian Chief of Defence Force General Tan Sri Raja Mohamed Affandi Bin Raja Mohamed Noor, Sudanese Major General (Pilot) Hussein Muhammed Othman, and Senior Bangladeshi officers who offered words of

encouragement on religious tolerance and explained the importance of Hajj, not only as a religious obligation for Muslims but as an experience to reflect on as ambassadors to develop greater understanding of faith in our militaries.

Corporal Ceesay Ali, from 1 Medical Regiment, said:

Without doubt this journey I have made is going to make me a better Muslim, a better person, and a better soldier. It has provided me with personal and professional development, as well as allowing me to meet my religious obligation

The Armed Forces personnel entered a raffle across the three services to join the 25,000 pilgrims from the UK travelling to Mecca this year.

A diverse and inclusive force is a stronger force, and the MOD encourages and celebrates diversity, promoting an inclusive working environment. To achieve this a wide range of initiatives under a Defence-wide Diversity and Inclusion Programme have been established. While recruitment is an important element, the wider Defence Diversity and Inclusion Programme (DDIP) takes a much broader view of diversity and inclusion and is driving real change by embedding D&I within the leadership and culture and taking steps to increase the retention and progression of people from underrepresented groups.