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## Gulf states accuse Iran of trying to politicise Haj

Taimur Khan

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The secretary general of the GCC on Wednesday condemned the statement by Iran's supreme leader accusing Saudi Arabia of deliberately killing Iranian pilgrims at last year's Haj, calling it an attempt to politicise the annual pilgrimage.

The accusations were "inappropriate and offensive" and "a clear incitement and a desperate attempt to politicise" the Haj and the worst-ever loss of life at Mecca last year, said Abdullatif Rashid Al Zayani,

The flare-up in public vitriol began on Monday when Iran's supreme leader Ayatollah Ali Khamanei issued a public letter accusing Saudi leaders of deliberately killing Iranian pilgrims in the Haj stampede last year that killed at least 2,411 people, according to Associated Press. The dead included more than 460 Iranians, the largest number of any nationality.

Talks between Riyadh and Tehran over increased security and logistical measures for this year's Haj broke down in May, and no Iranians will make the pilgrimage for the first time since 1990, the last year of a three-year ban by Iranian officials on the Haj.

"The hesitation and failure to rescue the half-dead and injured people ... is also obvious and incontrovertible," Ayatollah Khamanei wrote, adding that "They murdered them." The cleric

called the Saudi leadership "blasphemous" and "faithless", and called on Muslims to "reconsider the management" of Islam's two holiest sites in Mecca and Medina.

In response, the kingdom's Grand Mufti Abdulaziz Al Sheikh reportedly told a newspaper in Mecca that Iran's leaders "are not Muslims, they are children of Magi", a pejorative reference to the Zoroastrian religion predominant in Persia before the spread of Islam. "Their enmity toward Muslims is old and their main enemies are the followers of Sunnah [Sunnis]," the Arab News website reported.

The Iranian foreign minister, Mohammed Jawad Zarif, fired back on Tuesday in a Twitter post, accusing the Saudi political and religious leadership of "bigoted extremism". Iran's president, Hassan Rouhani, told a cabinet meeting on Tuesday that the Muslim world should punish Riyadh.

The war of words between regional rivals Saudi Arabia and Iran over the stampede has escalated days before the start of the Haj and taken an increasingly sectarian tone.

Riyadh and Tehran have intensified their strategic rivalry for power and influence in the Middle East and beyond, and this cold war has been overlain with and infused by sectarian and ethnic rhetoric.

Riyadh has not publicly released the results of its official investigation into the suffocation and trampling deaths — the worst loss of life in the history of the Haj. Saudi officials have said that two waves of pilgrims converged on a narrow in Mina, and the deaths occurred there. But there has not been an explanation of what sparked the crowd panic or a description of its aftermath.

Riyadh has invested billions of dollars in crowd flow infrastructure, crowd control and safety, but the growing numbers of pilgrims make the sometimes unpredictable dynamics of so many people difficult to control. More than three million Hajis now annually make the pilgrimage.

This is not the first time that relations between Saudi Arabia and Iran have frayed badly over the Haj. After the revolution in 1979 brought a Shiite religious regime committed to spreading its revolution in the region to power in Tehran, some Iranian pilgrims began to organise political demonstrations against the US and its allies in the region during the Haj. There were clashes with Saudi security forces, and some of the protests were tolerated.

But in 1987, also a time of heightened regional tensions, an Iranian demonstration descended into a riot with other pilgrims and police, leaving more than 400 people dead, including 275 Iranians and 85 Saudis, mostly police, according to Saudi officials at the time. The Iranian representative in Mecca had called for "two glorious demonstrations" in the city to spread Iran's revolutionary doctrine among pilgrims.

In echoes of the chain of events this year after the execution of a Shiite leader in the kingdom, Nimr Al Nimr, the Saudi, Kuwaiti and French embassies in Tehran were stormed and then

supreme leader Khomenei's deputy called on Muslims to take control of the two holy sites from Saudi Arabia.

Diplomatic ties were broken, and Iran banned its citizens from attending the Haj until 1991.