

Precautionary Measures In Dealing With Covid-19 Pandemic: Learning From The Prophet's Tradition

A Muslim should be careful and precautious in his or her behaviors so as to avoid endangering self, family, and the community.

By **Mohammed Farid Ali al-Fijawi, Shukran Abd Rahman & Zulqernain Haider** - March 31, 2020



Image credit: Reuters



The world is struck by Novel Coronavirus or COVID-19, an infectious condition that can spread directly or indirectly from one person to another. The virus has seriously affected various countries and disrupted the normal functions of their people. The virus spreads when the droplets coughed or sneezed from an infected person enter into the eyes, nose and mouth of another person; or contaminate the surface in his or her surrounding, only to infect others to come to contact with the surface. Given Covid-19 is an acute and highly contagious viral disease, transmissible through human interactions, there is a need to put in place judicious interventions to eliminate or slow the outbreak.

Human behaviours play important roles in curbing the spread and evolution of the virus. Managing human behaviour during this pandemic is therefore extremely critical, warranting behavioral scientists to work with policy makers, professionals and scholars who are involved in managing human activities. It is incumbent among them to assess and review the behaviors in work and social context so as to minimize hazardous actions which may expose them to risk of being infected. This includes reviewing their religious behaviours or practices which involve physical contacts with others. Putting this into the context of COVID19 pandemic scenario, the following sections deliberate a number of pertinent issues which warrant wise responses from Muslim scholars and behavioral scientists. Both should be joining forces to apply religious principles and behavioral science principles in providing interventions to develop awareness on the importance of good health care; hygiene related behaviors; and behavioral changes to reduce the transmission of COVID19.

Aimed at managing and reducing a wide range of risk factors to the pandemics, interventions that involve the review of religious practices is imperative so as to minimise the likelihood of the virus being transmitted. Historically, it has been reported that religious authorities of several religions have shown altered practices in spiritual-religious practices during certain epidemics. Justified by the aim to curb the fast and easy spreading virus, the Catholic and Anglican Churches (when) have made the decision on not allowing Christians to drink wine from the common cup (abc.net.au). In Islam, several flexibilities in religious practices have been shown by the Prophet Muhammad (*salla Allahu 'alayhi wa sallam*) during his time. In fact, Islam which has been brought by Muhammad (*salla Allahu 'alayhi wa sallam*) has put in place essential fundamentals which are sine qua non in managing human behaviours during disease outbreak. Putting this into the context of COVID19 pandemic scenario, the following sections deliberate a number of pertinent issues which warrant wise responses from Muslim scholars and behavioral scientists. Each issue will be addressed by relating it with the selected relevant hadiths or traditions of Prophet Muhammad (*salla Allahu 'alayhi wa sallam*).

The Attitude of Muslims in the Covid-19 Outbreak

A Muslim should be careful and precautionary in his or her behaviors so as to avoid endangering self, family, and the community. The right behaviors would be manifested if he or she is equipped with the right knowledge, information, and facts of the issue in question. Learning from Islamic teaching would enhance someone's knowledge and belief about what ought to be done or avoided during the pandemic. In this regard, the precautionary attitude of the Prophet Muhammad (*salla Allahu 'alayhi wa sallam*) is clearly reflected in a hadith narrated by Shurayd bin Suwayd al-Thaqafi who is reported to have said: "In the delegation of Thaqif, there was a leper. The Prophet (*salla Allahu 'alayhi wa sallam*) sent him a message that "we have accepted your allegiance, you can return." (*Sahih Muslim*, hadith no. 2231)

كَانَ فِي وَفْدِ ثَقِيفٍ رَجُلٌ مَجْدُومٌ، فَأَرْسَلَ إِلَيْهِ النَّبِيُّ صَلَّى اللَّهُ عَلَيْهِ وَسَلَّمَ إِنَّا قَدْ بَايَعْنَاكَ فَارْجِعْ.

In the hadith, Shurayd bin Suwayd related an incident about a person who was infected with leprosy in the delegation of Thaqif. The leper wanted to meet the Prophet (*salla Allahu 'alayhi wa sallam*) to offer his pledge towards Islam before the Prophet (*bay'ah*). Taking a precautionary measure, the Prophet sent a message to the leper that he had already accepted his pledge so that he did not have to meet the Prophet in person. The leper can then return to his place. It could be learnt from this that it is mandatory upon someone who has been diagnosed positive COVID19 to adhere to quarantine order. The tradition also pinpointed the need to avoid meeting with individuals who have the disease or carry the virus, essential to protect others in the community from being infected. This will be deliberated in the following section.

The Necessity to Isolate Infected People from the others

Islam places the importance of ascertaining the well being of the community. Muslims are taught not to endanger themselves and people in their surrounding when they are suffering from infectious diseases.

In one instance, Umar Ibn Khattab, the second Khalifah, was in the middle of his expedition to Syria when he was informed that a scourge had broken out in Syria. The people suggested that the Khalifah return home and not endanger himself and the companions of the Prophet. Umar Ibn Khattab called the Muhajirun, the Ansar, and other companions to consult one after the other. Some were saying to return while some suggested that they continued the journey, being justified by a notion that encountering danger in any journey is a decree by Almighty Allah. Umar had been informed by 'Abd al-Rahman Ibn 'Awf who said that he had once heard from the Prophet who said "If you hear of its presence (the presence of plague) in a land, don't enter it, but if it spreads in the land where you are, do not escape exiting from it." This is reported by Habib Ibn Thabit in *Sahih Muslim* (Hadith no. 2219) and by Usamah bin Zayd in *Sahih al-Bukhari* (hadith no. 5729).

إِذَا سَمِعْتُمْ بِهِ بِأَرْضٍ فَلَا تَقْدُمُوا عَلَيْهِ وَإِذَا وَقَعَ بِأَرْضٍ وَأَنْتُمْ بِهَا فَلَا تَخْرُجُوا فِرَارًا مِنْهُ

Upon hearing the Prophet's hadith, Umar decided to return to Medina. Indeed, the decision was made in order to protect healthy people from being infected; and to avoid the spread of the virus if anyone in a group would enter a community which is free from the disease. This is true to the 3Ps principles. He or she is to stop attending congregational prayers and Jumu'ah Prayers but to say prayers at home or the place where he/she is being quarantined.

In a Prophet's tradition, Ibn Abbas reported that the Prophet said, "Harm shall not be inflicted nor reciprocated." This hadith is narrated in *Sahih Sunan Ibn Majah* (hadith no. 1910). This underscores the need for infected people to be quarantined, so as to distance themselves from others.

لَا ضَرَرَ وَلَا ضِرَارَ

This hadith has become one of the major legal maxims of Islamic jurisprudence. This hadith-cum-maxim is the yardstick to measure the validity of actions and behavior of Muslims. The ultimate aim of the hadith-cum-maxim is to eliminate all types of harm from the conducts of Muslims be it inter-Muslims or inter-humans. Harm denotes individual, social, environmental, and so forth. The hadith underscores the need to exercise collective responsibility, helping each other in preserving social cohesion, and supporting the effort to protect the society's well being and future functions. In relation to Covid-19, the infected person or the one diagnosed with symptoms will be inflicting harm if they leave their quarantine area and mix among the non-infected people. Not isolating oneself from family and friends in case of infection is a selfish behavior, which is against the teaching of Islam.

This hadith, being a major maxim, has a branching maxim: "Greater harm must be prevented even at the expense of the lesser harm." In this regard, not praying in congregation during the pandemic time is of lesser harm while getting infected or spreading the virus is of greater harm. Hence, the latter should take precedence over the former when introducing interventions to protect the community from COVID19. To illustrate, praying Zuhr at home instead of Jumu'ah in the Masjid during the outbreak time is a lesser harm compared to getting corona virus and endangering the lives of beloved ones.

In short, the discussion in this section is expected to provide some insight on the proper code of conduct in times of pandemic outbreak. Introducing movement control order, like in the case of many countries befits the social distance intervention to confront the infectious outbreak. The intervention requires behavioral changes to reduce the transmission rate by limiting physical contact and movement which are essential to slow the outbreak. Social distancing would require individuals to avoid public spaces or reduce unnecessary travel.

THE ABOVE HADITH INDICATED THAT IF A PERSON IS INFECTED OR HAS SYMPTOMS OF COVID-19 OR IS UNWELL, HE OR SHE SHOULD NOT PARTICIPATE IN THE FRIDAY PRAYERS AND CONGREGATION IN THE MASJID.

Congregational Prayers in Mosques during the Covid-19 outbreak

There are special circumstances or situations which grant exemption on regular spiritual-religious practices, including the suspension of Jumu'ah prayer during COVID19 situations. In such a situation, safety and health of an individual's self, loved ones, and community take precedence over other

matters. Moving forward with the regular practices during the situation will only lead to more harm and danger. This is the **verdict passed** by the Council of Senior Scholars in Saudi, Riyadh (Resolution 246, Council of Senior Scholars) which highlights the prohibition for those who are affected with the viral infection from attending Friday Sermon and congregational prayers. This is based on the Prophet's (*salla Allahu 'alayhi wa sallam*) saying which read "A sick will not be taken to a healthy" (*muttafaq 'alayh*). And as he said, "when you come across the news of a pandemic in a region you should not enter it and if you are already there you should not leave therefrom." (Resolution 246, Council of Senior Scholars).

The above hadith indicated that if a person is infected or has symptoms of Covid-19 or is unwell, he or she should not participate in the Friday prayers and congregation in the masjid. He will endanger the congregants present in the masjid. This is supported by two hadiths reported by both Imam Bukhari and Imam Muslim. First hadith, Abu Salama Ibn 'Abd al-Rahman Ibn 'Awf reported that the Prophet (*salla Allahu 'alayhi wa sallam*) said: "A sick will not be taken to a healthy person" (*Sahih al-Bukhari*, hadith no. 5771; *Sahih Muslim*, hadith no. 2221).

لا يُوردُ مُمرِضٌ على مُصِحِّ

Whoever is afraid of being infected or afraid of infecting others, it is allowed for him not to attend Friday prayer and Congregational prayers as the Prophet (*salla Allahu 'alayhi wa sallam*) said: "Harm shall not be inflicted nor reciprocated" (Ibn Majah). Therefore in all these situations, when one does not attend Friday prayer they will pray four raka'at of Zuhar. (Resolution 246, Council of Senior Scholars).

The responses and resolutions made by religious authorities around the globe are not without sound bases. They have been judiciously deliberated by taking in account relevant principles availed in the teaching of Islam, and instituted by Muslim scholars. For example, many Muslims are unaware of the Prophet's directive on the conduct of prayers during dire situations, for they perceived that prayers must only be observed in congregation. To them, such a requirement is unchangeable, so much so that they go to the extent of compromising their personal, family, and community's health and safety. In actual fact, in Islam, religiosity and religious practices are to be performed based on Shari'ah rulings.

Discussion

The above deliberation points out that there were several fundamental principles in the interventions, encompassing a three-step precautionary measures—Protect yourselves, Protect your loved ones, and Protect your Community, abbreviated as 3Ps (1MG 2020, p. 25-28) . The 3Ps principle which has been considered to be effective method to defeat this easily spread virus, has necessitated specific steps to be adhered, namely:

1. Protecting oneself: Keep hands clean, maintain distance from coughing and sneezing person, and practice no-touch greeting;
2. Protecting loved ones: Avoid sneezing into hands, sneeze into tissue or inner side of the elbow, avoid travelling or visiting crowded places if one is sick, and wearing mask if one is sick or when taking care of someone with symptoms;
3. Protect the Community: Seeking medical attention if one feels unwell, staying indoors if one has fever, cough, or difficulty breathing; calling for healthcare professionals to help assess people with symptoms; and sharing authentic information on the outbreak.

It is found that the decision made by the Catholic and Anglican Churches befitted the 3Ps principle. Such is also the case in the current responses of many muslim religious authorities. They have decided to introduce a number of alterations in the ways rituals (*Ibadat*) are conducted. For instance, under normal circumstances, Muslims are required to perform prayers at mosques, meeting the congregants (*jama'ah*) to perform Friday prayer (*Jumu'ah*), and the five-time prayers (*Salat*). Nevertheless, during the COVID19 situation, the Islamic Affairs Authorities across different places have come up with various alternative practices. The Islamic Religious Council of Singapore (MUIS), for instance, has suspended the Friday prayers and closed the Masjids for 5 days for cleansing purposes. The East London Mosque and London Muslim Centre announced that from 20 March 2020, Friday prayers will be shortened until the situation improves. The congregants were asked to take ablution at home or office before they come to masjid. The ill and old with symptoms were asked to pray at home. Similarly, masjids in Kuwait have altered the calls for prayers on loud speakers by putting "*al-Salat fi buyutikum*(Pray in your houses)" instead of "*Hayya 'ala al-salah* (Come to prayer)." In Malaysia the Islamic Affairs Authority has made a statement that if the Covid19 pandemic were to become worse, Friday prayers would be replaced with Zuhr prayers. The Minister in charge of Religious Affairs has directed that congregants should make ablution at home, masjids should provide masks and sanitizer, and ill should pray at home. And as of the time this article is written, Muslim scholars, committees, and councils are still working on issuing resolutions in relation to the outspread of this virus vis a vis the spiritual-religious practices.

SUGGESTIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The Prophet's Sunnah in relation to pandemic outbreak is relevant to the situation the world is caught in today. It is the responsibility of the learned scholars to expose the contemporary Muslims to the forgotten practices of Prophet Muhammad (*salla Allahu 'alayhi wa sallam*). The three hadiths presented and explained in the discussion supports the "3Ps" precautionary steps i.e. protect self, protect the loved ones, and protect the community. Like the resolution issued by the Council of Senior Scholars in Riyadh, Muslims in countries with Covid19 outbreak should emulate the Sunnah of the Prophet (*salla Allahu 'alayhi wa sallam*). The Prophet (*salla Allahu 'alayhi wa sallam*) did not allow

the sick to contact the non-sick; he did not allow visits to pandemic struck areas and did not permit people inside pandemic struck areas to exit. Juxtaposing with the crux of these 3 hadiths, we suggest the following actions:

1. The infected immediately should report to the medical authority.
2. The infected should isolate themselves and strictly avoid any intermingling with family and community members.
3. The quarantined should not leave the quarantine area.
4. In case of contact with infected directly or indirectly (same gathering) report immediately to medical authority.
5. In case of contact with the infected avoid contact with family and community.
6. Wash hands with soap and water, and sanitizer regularly.
7. Greet without body contact.
8. Avoid public places and gatherings for business or religious purposes.
9. Suspend Friday prayers if necessary for time being or when instructed by the authority.
10. Pray at home and avoid congregational prayers if necessary or when instructed by the authority.
11. Avoid disseminating fake or unverified news.
12. Avoid disseminating unverified remedy and medicine.
13. Tie the camel then make *tawakkal*.
14. Pray regularly to Almighty Allah for protection of self, family, and community.

Reference

1mg. *Coronavirus: No-Panic Help guide*.

Muhammad Ibn Isma'il al-Bukhari. *Sahih al-Bukhari*. Muhibb al-Din al-Khatib (ed.). Al-Qahirah: Maktabah Salfiyah, 1st edn., 1400H. Dorar.net.

Muslim Ibn al-Hajjaj al-Qushayri. *Sahih Muslim*. Muhammad Fu'ad Abd al-Baqi (ed.). N.p.: Dar Ihya' al-Kutub al-'Arabiyah, 1st edn., 1374H. Dorar.net.

Muhammad Nasir al-Din Albani. *Sahih Sunan Ibn Majah*. Al-Khalij: Makatabah al-Tarbiyah al-'Arabi li Duwal al-Khalij, 1st edn., 1407. Dorar.net.



Mohammed Farid Ali al-Fijawi, Shukran Abd Rahman & Zulqernain Haider
