

Fighting pandemics: Inspiration from Islam

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Abstract

Infectious disease has killed more people than any other cause throughout history. The current pandemic of coronavirus disease (COVID-19) has again revealed how vulnerable we remain. Muslims constitute the world's second-largest religious group, making up about a quarter of the world population. They have distinctive faith and culture, pertaining to their religious beliefs and practices that need special attention, in situations such as current COVID-19 pandemic. Congregational prayers are an indispensable part of Islamic culture. Performance of obligatory prayers in congregation is compulsory and mandatory for every Muslim adult male who has no excuse for not doing so. But, doing so during a pandemic can help in the spread of the COVID-19. Muslims look up to the Holy Qur'an and teachings of Prophet (PBUH) (Hadiths) for guidance under all the circumstances. In this review we will cover how Islamic teaching can guide us to manage pandemics like COVID-19.

Keywords: Holy Qur'an, Hadiths, Pandemic, COVID-19, Congregation, Pandemic.

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Introduction

Today the humankind faces an unparalleled situation, with prevalent fear and anxiety in the face of the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic. There are reports across the world that religious gatherings have provided the fertile ground for transmission of the novel corona virus. Congregational prayers are an important aspect of Islamic teaching as it promotes equality, unity, and love among the Muslims.¹ Congregational prayers are held five times a day across the world, on Friday and the two Eid days. During Hajj around 2.5 million people gather in the holy city of Mecca. Muslims need to learn how to respond to this crisis from a genuine Islamic perspective. Islam inspires Muslims to live in self-control

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and to develop spiritual, physical and psychological well-being. Islam celebrates life and health. Messenger of Allah (PBUH), said, "There is nothing erroneous with being prosperous for one who is aware of Allah, yet good health for one who is aware is better than wealth. And happiness is among the blessings".² Messenger of Allah (PBUH), also said, "Whoever among you wakes up secure in his property, healthy in his body, and he has his meals for the day, it is as if he has the whole world." Muslims had made significant contribution to science and medicine. The Holy Qur'an and Hadith vigorously promote seeking knowledge along with the faith in Allah. During current circumstances it is the need of hour to promote the scientific temperament in the Muslims, so as to overcome the crisis.

1. Knowledge and Islam

The very first revelation of the Qur'an in Surah Al-'Alaq emphasised learning through reading and writing. Many Muslim scholars were inspired by Qur'an and its teaching about nature, and were motivated to study the whole universe as illustrated by the saying of Allah "We created not the heavens, the earth, and all between them, merely in (idle) sport. We created them not except for just ends: But most of them do not understand".³

Muslim scholars like Jaber in chemistry described many chemical substances like sulphides of mercury, oxides, and arsenic compounds. Al-Razi's book *Sirr al-Asrar* (Secret of Secrets) 'foretells a laboratory manual'; it describes substances, equipment and procedures. Muslim chemists developed techniques for industrial and military goods. The detection of inorganic acids through chemical studies has provided important industrial applications.⁴

Muslim mathematicians had adopted both the Babylonian sexagesimal method and the Indian decimal method, and this became the foundation for numerical mathematical techniques. Muslims built mathematical equations utilising the decimal method, representing all numbers employing ten symbols, and each symbol provided both the place value and the absolute value. The first book of algebra was penned by Al-Khwarizmi. Another famous contributor to mathematics is Khayyam, who studied cubic equations and algebra simultaneously. Ibn al Haytham made remarkable contribution to optics

and deciphered the comprehensive description of ocular anatomy.⁴

2. Contribution of Islam to Medical Science

The basics of Islamic medicine started on the emergence and propagation of Islam. The Qur'an and the Prophetic traditions (Hadith) discuss the importance of personal hygiene and public health. To promote physical and spiritual health, the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) recommended proper eating practices, such as commensality, meditation, and exercise. It was the Qur'an's emphasis on professional ethics, ritual washing and cleanliness which gave rise to the use of water in Islam, thus pointing towards preventive medicine.⁵

When Islam expanded through Syria, Egypt and Iran from the Arab Peninsula, it reached long-established cultures and learning centres. The Arabians translated their philosophical and scientific works into Arabic. The translation achieved its pinnacle with the creation of "House of Wisdom" (Bait-ul-Hikmah) by the Abbasid Caliph Al-Mamun in Baghdad in 830 AD. For many centuries, it made Arabic the world's most important scientific language, and preserved knowledge that could otherwise have been lost forever.⁵

The major Arab hospitals became medical education institutions and incorporated many of the principles and systems we see in modern hospitals, such as separate male and female wards, personal and institutional health, patient records and dispensaries.

Before Ibn Al-Nafis, Galen postulated that the left ventricle was filled with blood directly from the right side. It was Al-Nafis, a 13th-century Arab physician, who described the pulmonary circulation more than 300 years before William Harvey. Surgeon Abu Al-Qasim Al-Zahrawi (Abulcasis) wrote the book *Al-Tasrif* in which he described over 200 instruments. He used catgut for internal stitching, which is still used today, and also invented forceps for extracting dead fetuses [8]. Moreover Al-Zahrawi described hydrocephalus and other congenital diseases. Al-Razi (Rhazes) wrote *Kitab Al-Mansuri*, and also published on smallpox and measles. Al-Razi was the first to describe asthma and wrote an article on allergies and immunology. The books written by Ibn Rushd (Averroes) were also commonly used in Europe. *Al-Qanun fi al Tibb* (The Canon of Medicine) written by Ibn Sina (Avicenna), remained the consulting book on medical matters in Europe for centuries. While Ibn Sina made improvements in pharmacology and clinical practice, he possibly made his greatest contribution to the

philosophy of medicine. He takes into account various factors like physical, psychological, drugs and diet in treating the patients.⁵

3. Pandemics and Islam

Islamic teachings to protect the public from death and sickness from a pandemic go back to the very beginning of Islam. As discussed earlier, Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) advised his companions to value their health and live, urging people not to go to a place where there were epidemics. Safeguarding both the religion and life are amongst the primary objectives of the Shariah (Islamic Law). Hardship (*mashaqqah*) is an integral part of many acts of worship in Islam, such as fasting during summers. But if the difficulty crosses a limit, some rules may be relaxed, such as pregnant women may skip fasting in Ramadan and make it up later.

During this difficult timing of COVID-19 pandemic, when there is a lot of stress, fear and confusion, Islamic teachings can be very helpful in mitigating these conditions. Management of a pandemic like current COVID-19 requires a holistic approach, consisting of prevention, treatment, social support and emotional management. The teaching from the Qur'an and the Hadith provides excellent guidance for the holistic management of pandemics. Islam tells Muslims to utilise the means to protect themselves along with keeping their trust in Allah.

4.1. Teachings Regarding the Containment and Treatment of Pandemic

The current guidelines from the World Health Organisation (WHO) suggest maintaining good personal hygiene, social distancing, avoid touching of eyes, nose, and mouth, covering of mouth and nose with bent elbow or tissue on coughing and sneezing, and seeking medical advice from experts if feeling sick.⁶

Maintenance of good personal and community hygiene is one of the essential parts of Islamic teaching. The Prophet (PBUH) told his companions, hygiene is half of belief. Prophet (PBUH) used to cover his face with hand or garments while sneezing or coughing.⁷ It is mandatory to perform ablution before each prayer; ablution consists of gargle, cleaning of nose, washing hands, face and feet. It is also sunnah of Prophet (PBUH) to wash hands before and after eating or drinking. Prophet (PBUH) has taught us to make supplication to Allah and also to seek treatment from the experts. Someone asked, O Messenger of Allah (PBUH), shall we not seek treatment? The Prophet (PBUH) said, yes, you should seek treatment and Allah has created cure for every disease, except old age.⁸ Once one of the

companions of Prophet (PBUH) complained to him regarding chest pain, the messenger of Allah (PBUH) said, you have had a heart attack and you should consult Harith Bin Kalda, who was an expert physician at that time.⁹

Quarantine, social distancing and lockdowns are also important measures to control the spread of a pandemic like COVID-19. Aggressive testing and quarantine of cases are recommended as the first-line measure by WHO to control the spread. The messenger of Allah (PBUH) also taught us social distancing. It is reported that once a leprous man wished to pledge his allegiance to him, which would require him to touch the Prophet's (PBUH) hand. Prophet (PBUH) told him from a distance that his pledge had already been accepted.¹⁰ He (PBUH) also told us that those with contagious disease should not be kept with those who are healthy. Prophet (PBUH) also said, evade a [transmissible] ailment the way a person flees from a lion.¹¹ Therefore, taking precautions to avoid the spread of infectious disease is something prescribed in Islam.

Once Caliph Umar ibn al-Khattab, may Allah be pleased with him, was on a journey towards Syria when he arrived at Sargh. He was informed by his companions that the epidemic of plague had befallen the land of Syria. Umar consulted his companion and decided to return. One of his companions told him, "Are you absconding from decree of Allah?" He famously replied, "Yes, I am fleeing from the decree of Allah to the decree of Allah. If you had camels and they are entering into a valley with two sides, one fertile and one barren, would you graze the camel in the fertile land by the decree of Allah or you would graze in the barren land by the decree of Allah?"¹² The statement of Caliph Umar establishes an exceptional example of how to balance between relying on Allah and taking sufficient precautions. Later on, he also received similar advice from Abdurrahman ibn Awf who told him that the Messenger of Allah (PBUH) said, "If you hear that the plague epidemic has started in a land, do not go there; if you are present in that land, do not come out from there."¹² These teachings perfectly illustrate one of the fundamental objectives of the Shariah, which is to preserve life.

The teachings of Prophet (PBUH) also exempt Muslims from holding congregational prayers when there are chances of some harm such as rain. It was narrated that Ibn Abbas said to the caller of prayer on a very rainy day: 'Do not say 'come to prayer' but rather say 'pray in your houses'. Some people were amazed, so he replied to them: 'Are you amazed by what I told? An individual better than me said the same [referring to the Messenger (PBUH)].'¹³

4.2. Emotional Management

A pandemic like COVID-19 is associated with a lot of stress, secondary to fear of catching the infection, economic loss, and domestic violence. Teachings of the Prophet (PBUH) can be very useful in overcoming these fears and providing hope in such a hopeless situation. The Messenger of Allah (PBUH) said, 'How lucky is a believer! Everything is a blessing for a believer. If he is prospering and he expresses thankfulness to Allah, then it will be for his good; and if he is in adversity and he keeps patience, it will also be for his good.' Prophet (PBUH) said indeed the most perfect believer is the one who has best manners and is kindest to family. The Messenger of Allah (PBUH) also said that the most perfect amongst the believers in faith was the one who has best manners, and best of you are those who are best to their wives.¹⁴

4.3. Social Support

During pandemic, the restraints imposed on routine activities as part of social distancing can lead to unemployment. Many people who are stuck in the lockdown need social support. In South Asian countries where poverty is rampant, and government services are not up to the mark, social support becomes an important part to mitigate the effects of lockdown measures. The Prophet (PBUH) said: "By Allah, he is not a believer!" Three times' It was asked, "Who, O Prophet of Allah?" He said, "One whose neighbour does not feel safe from his evil."¹⁵ Prophet (PBUH) also said he is not a believer who eats his fill whilst his neighbour beside him goes hungry. Allah's Messenger (PBUH) also told that no-one hoards except the sinner and the best person is the one most useful to others.¹⁶

Conclusion

Currently the world is staring at an unprecedented situation; to overcome this we need a collective effort from everyone. The measures taken to overcome this pandemic are also taking a toll on humankind especially the poor. In such circumstances the teachings of Islam can be very helpful. As discussed above the current guidelines from different regulatory bodies are very much according to the teaching of our beloved Prophet Muhammad (PBUH). If we follow the teachings of Prophet (PBUH) we can surely overcome this pandemic in a better way. The teachings of Prophet (PBUH) also provide an overview to provide a holistic approach to manage the pandemic. The pandemic has led to lockdown, has shown tremendous benefit on the environment; our rivers are now clean, and air pollution has decreased. This gives us a message to use our resources in a better way.

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