



İslam ve Bilim: Diyanet Tarafından Verilen COVID-19 Fetvalarının İncelenmesi

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Öz

Salgınlar tarihteki toplumlar üzerinde derin etkiler bırakmış, bireylerin ve toplulukların hem maddi hem de manevi yönlerini etkilemiştir. COVID-19 salgını, ekonomik, sosyal ve dini ibadetler üzerindeki etkisi de dahil olmak üzere, geçici toplumsal değişikliklere neden olmuştur. Bu değişikliklerden biri de toplu yapılan ibadetlerin toplum sağlığının öncelemesinden dolayı askıya alınmasıdır. İkinci büyük dini grup olan İslam'da da cemaatle yapılan ibadetlerde, sağlık uzmanlarının ve bilim insanlarının yönergeleri doğrultusunda ve önlemleri çerçevesinde geçici değişiklikler yapılmıştır. Yapılan bu geçici değişiklikler din ve bilim etkileşimini göstermesi açısından önemlidir. Bu makalede, din ile bilim arasındaki ilişki, COVID-19 dönemini örnek olay olarak, özellikle İslam ile bilimin bu dönemdeki etkileşimini analiz etmeyi amaçlamaktadır. Bu amaçla, Türkiye Cumhuriyeti Diyanet İşleri Başkanlığı tarafından COVID-19 döneminde verilen fetvaların, Dünya Sağlık Örgütü'nün bilimsel kararlarıyla uyumunu analiz etmektedir. Bu ilişkiyi anlamak önemlidir, çünkü dinî otoriteler nüfus üzerinde önemli bir etkiye sahiptir ve halkın düşüncesini şekillendirmektedirler. Dolayısıyla bu makalede, fetva kurumlarının COVID-19 sürecinde ortaya çıkan problemlere ilişkin fetvalarında bilimsel verilerden ne ölçüde faydalandıklarını ortaya koymak amaçlanmaktadır. Bu amaçla, Türkiye Cumhuriyeti Diyanet İşleri Başkanlığı'nın fetva kurumu olan Din İşleri Yüksek Kurulu tarafından verilen fetva örnekleriyle birlikte, COVID-19 salgını sırasındaki din ile bilim arasındaki ilişkiye ışık tutmaktadır. Sonuç olarak ise salgın hem dinî hem de tıbbi önlemleri dikkate alan dengeli bir yaklaşımın halk sağlığı önlemleri için gerekliliğini ortaya koymuştur. Salgınlar, toplumlar üzerinde derin etkiler bırakırken, din ve bilim arasındaki etkileşim, sağlık krizlerinde yönlendirici bir rol oynayabilir ve toplumun refahı için önemli bir dayanak

oluřturabilir.

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Islam and Science: An Analysis of the COVID-19 Fatwas Issued by the Diyanet

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Abstract

Pandemics have had a profound impact on societies throughout history, affecting both the material and spiritual aspects of individuals and communities. The COVID-19 pandemic has caused temporary but significant societal changes, including its impact on economic, social and religious worship. One of these changes is the suspension of congregational worship due to the prioritization of public health. In Islam, the second largest religious group, there have also been temporary changes to congregational worship in line with the guidelines and precautions of health experts and scientists. These changes are important in showing the interaction between religion and science. This article aims to analyse the relationship between religion and science, specifically the interaction between Islam and science in this period, taking the COVID-19 period as a case study. To this end, it analyses how the *fatwās* issued by the High Board of Religious Affairs during the COVID-19 period align with the scientific decisions of the World Health Organization. Understanding this relationship is important because religious authorities have a significant influence on the population and can shape public opinion. Thus, this article aims to reveal the extent to which *fatwā* institutions utilize scientific data in their *fatwās* on novel issues arising during the COVID-19 pandemic. To this end, it sheds light on the relationship between religion and science during the COVID-19 pandemic, with examples of *fatwās* issued by the High Board of Religious Affairs, the fatwa institution of the Presidency of Religious Affairs of the Republic of Turkey. In conclusion, the pandemic has demonstrated the necessity of a balanced approach to public health measures that takes into account both religious and medical measures. As pandemics have a profound impact on societies, the interaction between religion and science can play a guiding role in health crises and provide an important foundation for the well-being of society.

Keywords

Religion, Science, Islam, Covid-19, Fatwās, Turkish Directorate of Religious Affairs (Diyanet)

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Introduction

Throughout the history, pandemics have unfolded across diverse regions of the world, assuming different designations and exerting multifaceted influences upon societies. Their ramifications have brought about alterations encompassing both the tangible and intangible dimensions of individuals and communities. In an effort to protect themselves and reduce the impact of these diseases, societies have taken significant measures. Pandemic outbreaks have affected different aspects of societies, such as social, psychological, military, economic, and religious. Thus, the COVID-19 has attracted many studies across the scholarly community.¹ During these periods, religious and state authorities have made adjustments to worship practices and environments in order to prevent further spread of the disease and minimize the impact on society. They have issued official decisions or religious announcements urging society to be vigilant and take necessary measures to prevent the spread of epidemics.

Today, from social, economic, religious perspectives, the COVID-19 (Corona Virus Diseases 2019) pandemic has caused serious disruptions worldwide. Among the numerous effects of the pandemic is its impact on religious practices, which has necessitated adaptations by many religious communities to safeguard public health. Islam, one of the largest religions globally, has also notably undergone such adjustments. The pursuit of knowledge and scientific inquiry are important to Islam. Muslim communities have emphasized the importance of following the guidance of health experts and scientists when it comes to the COVID-19. This includes following measures such as wearing masks, practicing good hygiene, and getting vaccinated in general. The use of traditional Islamic remedies and religious practices has also been promoted as complementary measures like staying at home, and quarantine. It is worth noting that religion and faith are inherent to human nature and, as a consequence, faith healing is one of the various belief systems present in societies.² According to religious psychologists, religious beliefs, attitudes, and behaviours play a significant role in the perception, explanation, acceptance, and coping behaviours related to disasters. Religious beliefs provide believers with a perspective and approach to life.³ Hence, when individuals explain events, they employ a religious-based terminology that reflects this perspective and approach. From the perspective of a believer,

¹ Hamdullah Baycar, 'Civil War and Pandemic: Syrian's Response to the Covid-19', *Syrian Studies Association Bulletin* 25/1 (2022), 33–43; Hamdullah Baycar - Emrah Atar, 'Uluslararası İlişkiler ve Kovid-19: Realizm ve Küresel Salgın (Kovid-19)', *Pandemi Döneminde Siyaset Bilimi: Politikalar, Uygulamalar ve Tartışmalar* (Konya: Cizgi Yayınevi, 2022), 181–199; Santiago Mas-Coma et al., 'COVID-19 and Globalization', *One Health* 9 (10 April 2020), 100132.

² Furqan K. Hashmi et al., 'Religious Cliché and Stigma: A Brief Response to Overlooked Barriers in COVID-19 Management', *Journal of Religion and Health* 59/6 (1 December 2020), 2697.

³ Talip Küçükcan - Ali Köse, *Doğal Afetler ve Din (Marmara Depremi Üzerine Psiko-Sosyolojik Bir İnceleme)* (Istanbul: Emre yayınlari, 2006), 19.

what lends meaning to the emergence, source, and underlying power behind the events are concepts rooted in religious content.⁴

The measures taken by states and organizations to control the disease during the COVID-19 period can broadly be divided into two categories. The first of these is to prevent the spread of the disease, such as lockdown, social distancing, and quarantine; the second is the treatment of people who have somehow contaminated the virus. The third category may be added to these, and it may be related to funerals and funeral rites of those who lost their lives because of the COVID-19.⁵ The discussion revolves around the cremation and un-bathed burial of those who died due to the coronavirus.

The article aims to explore the relationship between religion and science, more specifically Islam and science, using the COVID-19 period as a case study. To this end, the extent to which the *fatwās* surrounding the measures implemented during the Covid 19 period in the Islamic normative plan are in line with scientific decisions will be analysed. The recent discussions need to be viewed in the broader context of modern scientific and medical research, which has introduced a number of new variables and therefore raised new questions. It is important to understand the relationship between religion and science because religious authorities have a significant influence on the population and have the power to shape public opinion. In this article, *fatwās* issued by the Turkish Directorate of Religious Affairs (Diyanet) in response to religious issues relevant to the coronavirus will be examined.

The COVID-19 pandemic has demonstrated the need for a balanced approach to public health measures, with both religious and medical measures taken into account. In analysing the *fatwās* surrounding the measures taken during the pandemic, it will be possible to ascertain whether Islamic teachings are in line with scientific decisions. This will enable the religious and scientific communities to work together with the intent of providing solutions to the pandemic while bridging the gap between them. It may also be used in the future to ensure that both religious and scientific principles are considered when making public health decisions.

1. Focusing on Islam and its Response to the Pandemic

In the Islamic tradition, the concept of *wabā'* (plague) is employed to refer to widespread pandemics. This concept is expounded in the Qur'an and Sunna. In the Qur'an, the term plague related to pandemics can be found several times through the use of the term *rijz*

⁴ Adem Eryiğit - Mehmet Ali Başak, 'Covid-19 Sürecinde İnanç ve İbadet: Covid-19 Pandemisinin Müslümanların İnanç ve Günlük İslamî Yaşantılarına Etkisi', *Akademik Sosyal Araştırmalar Dergisi* 8/53 (2021), 129.

⁵ Ayman Shabana, 'From the Plague to the Coronavirus: Islamic Ethics and Responses to the COVID-19 Pandemic', *Journal of Islamic Ethics*, (2021), 4.

(punishment or torment),⁶ especially in relation to the consequences that previous nations faced when they ignored the messages of their prophets. According to a *hadith* the Prophet indicated that the source of the plague could be attributed to a type of punishment (*rijz*) from God that was inflicted upon prior societies.⁷ Additionally, the term *ṭaʿūn*, literally plague, denotes a situation in which a significant number of individuals perish due to the spread of disease. Ibn al-Qayyim (d. 1350) stated that the term *ṭaʿūn* possesses multiple meanings. According to his writing, it could denote the causative agent of the epidemic, the symptoms that accompany the disease, or the mortality that ensues as a result of the outbreak.⁸ Consequently, the terms *wabāʾ* and *ṭaʿūn* have occasionally been interchangeably employed due to the frequent occurrence of high mortality rates during outbreaks.⁹ However, Ibn Hajar al-ʿAsqalānī (d. 1449) censured earlier authors for their inability to accurately differentiate between various diseases. He attributed this shortcoming to their classification of natural disasters such as floods, famines, and droughts under the rubric of “plagues”.¹⁰

In the *hadith* related from the Prophet Muhammad, it is said, “If you hear of an outbreak of plague in a land, do not enter it; but if the plague breaks out in a place while you are in it, do not leave that place.”¹¹ The relevance of the mentioned *hadith* is noteworthy in the context of mitigating the spread of COVID-19 through measures including lockdowns, self-quarantine, self-isolation, maintaining social distance, and similar preventive actions.¹²

In Islamic sources, there are references to the occurrence of epidemics in various locations during different times.¹³ For example, Ibn Hajar al-ʿAsqalānī provided a concise historical overview of the pandemic-related literature in Islamic history within his

⁶ Sura al-baqara Verse 59; al-Araf verse 162; al-Ankabut verse 34 A. Yusuf Ali, *The Holy Qur-Ān: English Translation of the Meanings and Commentary* (Al-Madina Al-Munawarah: The Presidency of Islamic Reserches, IFTA, Call and Guidance, 1987).

⁷ Narrated 'Amir bin Sa'd bin Abi Waqqas: That he heard Usama bin Zaid speaking to Sa'd, saying, 'Allah's Messenger (ﷺ) mentioned the plague and said, 'It is a means of punishment with which some nations were punished and some of it has remained, and it appears now and then. So whoever hears that there is an outbreak of plague in some land, he should not go to that land, and if the plague breaks out in the land where one is already present, one should not run away from that land, escaping from the plague.' Sahih al-Bukhari, 'Sahih Al-Bukhari 6974 - Tricks - الكتاب' (Accessed 3 March 2023).

⁸ Ibn Qayyim Al-Jawziyya, *Al-Tibb al-Nabawi* (Beirut: Dār al-Salām, 2018), 4/36.

⁹ Lawrence I. Conrad, 'Ṭaʿūn and Wabāʾ Conceptions of Plague and Pestilence in Early Islam', *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient* 25/3 (1 January 1982), 271.

¹⁰ Ibn Hajar al-ʿAsqalānī, *Badhl Al-Māʿūn Fi Faḍl al-Tāʿūn, Thahqīq Aḥmad ʿAsām ʿAbdul Qādir* (Al-Riyādh: Dār al-ʿĀsima, 2001), 94.

¹¹ Sahih al-Bukhari, 'Sahih Al-Bukhari 5728 - Medicine - الطب كتاب -', *Sunnah.Com* (Accessed 7 February 2023).

¹² A Wilder-Smith - D O Freedman, 'Isolation, Quarantine, Social Distancing and Community Containment: Pivotal Role for Old-Style Public Health Measures in the Novel Coronavirus (2019-NCov) Outbreak', *Journal of Travel Medicine* 27/2 (13 March 2020), taaa020.

¹³ Shabana, 'From the Plague to the Coronavirus: Islamic Ethics and Responses to the COVID-19 Pandemic', 6.

discourse on plagues.¹⁴ Also, Imam al-Nawawī, (d. 1277), identified five major plagues that occurred the the earlier period of Islamic history. In the medieval period, the Islamic world encountered multiple outbreaks of plague. Al-Nawawī mentioned as a first instance, known as the plague of Shīrwīyyh (*Tā'ūn Shīrwīyyh*),¹⁵ happened in al-Madā'in, Iraq during the lifetime of the Prophet in the year 627-628.¹⁶ The second outbreak occurred during the reign of 'Umar ibn al-Khaṭṭāb (d. 644) in the year 639, named the famous plague of 'Amwās, which claimed approximately 25,000 lives. The third happened during the rule of 'Abd Allāh ibn al-Zubayr in Shawwāl (d. 692) in the year 69/688, called the "Violent Plague". It is also known as the sweeping plague (*al-tā'ūn al-jārif*), where around 70,000 people died each day for three days.¹⁷ In the fourth outbreak of the year 87/706, the plague of the maidens (*al-fatayāt*), most of the victims were young women in Basra, and it affected Iraq and Syria. The fifth pandemic struck in the year 131/749.¹⁸ While historical sources do reference other instances of plague pandemics,¹⁹ it is evident that these occurrences were not isolated incidents but rather recurred over time. However, it is important to note that the scale and consequences of these pandemics exhibited significant variations.

The historical plagues in the Islamic world occurred sporadically, leading to varying degrees of scale and impact. The current COVID-19 pandemic serves as a reminder of the significance of these past events, as they all represent public health crises. In particular, the sweeping plague (*al-tā'ūn al-jārif*) resembles the COVID-19 pandemic, suggesting that there are commonalities between these two major disease outbreaks.

During the outbreak of the plague in Syria during the time of 'Umar, the second caliph, there was a noteworthy discourse surrounding the connection between divine destiny and pandemics, particularly the plague. Historical accounts of this event suggest that when the leaders of the army informed 'Umar of the epidemic, opinions were divided among his companions regarding whether to proceed with their journey or to return to Medina and avoid the risk of spreading the disease to other Muslims. Eventually, 'Umar decided to return to Medina, prompting Abū 'Ubayda ibn al-Jarrāh to question whether this action was to flee from God's destiny. However, 'Umar responded by stating that he was merely fleeing from one aspect of God's destiny to another. This incident highlights the question of whether one's agency can be exercised in the face of an event perceived to be part of divine

¹⁴ al-Asqalāni, *Badhl Al-Mā'ūn Fī Faḍl al-Tā'ūn, Thaḥqīq Aḥmad 'Asām 'Abdul Qādir*.

¹⁵ 'Alī ibn al-Ḥusayn ibn 'Alī al-Mas'ūdī, *Murūj Al-Dhahab Wa-Ma'ādin al-Jawhar*, ed. Muḥammad 'Abd al-Qādir 'Aṭā (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-'Ilmiyya, 1997), 1/223.

¹⁶ al-Asqalāni, *Badhl Al-Mā'ūn Fī Faḍl al-Tā'ūn, Thaḥqīq Aḥmad 'Asām 'Abdul Qādir*, 361.

¹⁷ Muḥyī al-Dīn ibn Sharaf Nawawī, *Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim Bi-Sharḥ al-Nawawī* (Cairo: al-Maṭba'a al-Miṣriyya, 1929), 14/204.

¹⁸ Nawawī, *Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim Bi-Sharḥ al-Nawawī*, 14/204.

¹⁹ al-Asqalāni, *Badhl Al-Mā'ūn Fī Faḍl al-Tā'ūn, Thaḥqīq Aḥmad 'Asām 'Abdul Qādir*; Conrad, 'Tā'ūn and Wabā' Conceptions of Plague and Pestilence in Early Islam'; Musferah Mehfooz, 'Understanding the Impact of Plague Epidemics on the Muslim Mind during the Early Medieval Period', *Religions* 12/10 (October 2021), 843.

destiny and is significant in relation to the current COVID-19 pandemic.²⁰

In the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, the serious psychological traumas experienced by millions of individuals who have been affected by the disease, lost loved ones, or faced unemployment pose a significant threat to the mental well-being of society. Alongside these traumas, the uncertainty, anxiety, and panic experienced by many individuals further contribute to the threat to their psychological health. In its statement, the Diyanet emphasizes the necessity of implementing measures to alleviate these psychological effects. The existence of a positive influence of faith in navigating through this challenging period with minimal damage is highlighted. Particularly, beliefs in Allah, the afterlife, the understanding of destiny and trust in divine providence, the practices of worship, supplication, and repentance as a means of seeking refuge in Allah, as well as the virtues of patience and perseverance, offer notable advantages in helping individuals cope with illness and adversity.²¹ In fact, in the Quran, in the verses 60-82 of *Sura Al-Kahf* (Chapter of the Cave), the story of Prophet Moses and his encounter with the person referred to as “Allah’s servant” who is mentioned as al-Khadir or Hidir in the *hadiths*,²² portrays an event where divine mercy and knowledge are bestowed upon him.” Moses said to him, “May I follow you, provided that you teach me some of the right guidance you have been taught?” He said, “You certainly cannot be patient ‘enough’ with me. And how can you be patient with what is beyond your ‘realm of knowledge?’”²³ In conclusion, it is essential to remember that everything happening in this world carries a sublime meaning and purpose known only to God, even if people may not fully comprehend its wisdom. Human beings, equipped with their intellect and capacity for understanding, can only grasp a fraction of this meaning and purpose, unable to comprehend its entirety and innermost depths. Therefore, the belief in destiny plays a significant role in preventing believers from experiencing psychological harm during periods such as the COVID-19 pandemic, where humanity is subjected to a divine test.

Moreover, the report includes the prophetic guidance advising individuals not to enter an affected area or to leave it if they are already present, a recommendation that was not known to ‘Umar before he made the decision to return to Medina. Upon being informed by his companion, ‘Abd al-Rahmān ibn ‘Awf (d. 652 or 653), ‘Umar expressed satisfaction that his decision was consistent with the prophetic advice.²⁴ As a result, this incident has sparked conversations about the degree to which individuals can utilize their agency in reaction to an occurrence or event that is believed to be part of divine fate.

²⁰ Din İşleri Yüksek Kurulu, *İslam’ın Hastalık Salgınlarına Bakışı*, 2020, 9–10.

²¹ Din İşleri Yüksek Kurulu, *İslam’ın Hastalık Salgınlarına Bakışı*, 49–50.

²² Sahih al-Bukhari, ‘Sahih Al-Bukhari 122 - Knowledge - العلم كتاب’ (Accessed 25 May 2023).

²³ ‘Sūra Al-Kahf, Chapter 18’, trans. Yusuf Ali, *The Holy Quran* (Accessed 25 May 2023), Verses 60-82.

²⁴ Nawawī, *Şaḥīḥ Muslim Bi-Sharḥ al-Nawawī*, 14/208–210.

2. Role of the Muslim Religious Leaders during the COVID-19 Pandemic

The COVID-19 pandemic has brought out unprecedented challenges globally, including significant implications for religious practices. The scholarly community has shown considerable interest in investigating the influence of religion and religious beliefs in the context of disasters and societal disruptions. This heightened interest can be attributed to the expanding significance of religion in relation to disasters and social challenges throughout the previous decade. Researchers have sought to examine and understand the role played by religion in these circumstances, recognizing its potential impact on individuals and communities affected by such events.²⁵ The reason for this is that religious beliefs can affect people's perception of disasters, their response to them, and even their ability to cope with them.²⁶

In response to the various questions raised since the outbreak began in early 2020, a number of *fatwās* have been issued throughout the Muslim world.²⁷ As the epidemic rapidly turned into a global public health crisis, with ramifications touching all aspects of people's lives, this already substantial literature of normative pronouncements demonstrates the wide range of religious and moral questions that occupied Muslim scholars and ethicists. In addition to individual *fatwās* and institutional statements, these pronouncements also include professional guidelines and recommendations. There are *fatwās* that focus on a single issue such as prayer,²⁸ while others address a variety of topics.²⁹ For instance, the British Board of Scholars and Imams prepared the briefing as a guide for the UK Muslim community.³⁰

To address pressing questions regarding the various health concerns sparked by the pandemic, major *fatwā* institutions have also organised special meetings between jurists and medical experts. For instance, the International Islamic Fiqh Academy has convened to discuss the Islamic perspective on issues such as the use of vaccines, the status of COVID-

²⁵ J. Christophe Gaillard - Pauline Texier, 'Religions, Natural Hazards, and Disasters: An Introduction', *Religion* 40/2 (2010), 81-84; Kathleen M. McGeehan PhD - Charlene K. Baker PhD, 'Religious Narratives and Their Implications for Disaster Risk Reduction', *Disasters* 41/2 (2017), 258-281; Millawage Supun Dilara Wijesinghe et al., 'Role of Religious Leaders in COVID-19 Prevention: A Community-Level Prevention Model in Sri Lanka', *Journal of Religion and Health* 61/1 (2022), 687-702.

²⁶ Javad Yoosefi Lebni et al., 'How the COVID-19 Pandemic Effected Economic, Social, Political, and Cultural Factors: A Lesson from Iran', *The International Journal of Social Psychiatry* 67/3 (May 2021), 2387; Yoosefi Lebni et al., 'How the COVID-19 Pandemic Effected Economic, Social, Political, and Cultural Factors'.

²⁷ Adnan Zulfiqar, 'Mapping Covid Fatwas Project', *Fatwās and Scholar Statements on Covid-19 (Novel Coronavirus)* (Accessed 18 January 2023).

²⁸ Dar al-Ifta' dar al-Ulum al-Zakariyya, 'Regarding Jumma Prayer During the Coronavirus Pandemic' (14 March 2020).

²⁹ Fiqh Council of North America, 'Prayer and Funeral Issues Pertaining to COVID-19', *Fiqh Council of North America* (3 May 2020).

³⁰ The British Board of Scholars and Imams, 'UK Community Briefing Paper for Imams, Mosques, and Madrasas for the Coronavirus Pandemic' (30 May 2020).

19 patients, and the implications of herd immunity.³¹ One of these *fatwā* institutions is the Turkish Religious Affairs (Diyanet İşleri Başkanlığı; henceforth: Diyanet) organization which is a government agency in Turkey responsible for regulating religious affairs and practices.³² Since it is difficult to cover the entire scope of the normative literature that has been generated, this paper will focus primarily on *fatwās* issued by the Diyanet. It is evident in the statements of the Diyanet that they cover the range of issues that arise during a pandemic as well as the various aspects of the COVID-19 pandemic in terms of legal, medical, and public policy aspects. As a result of their comprehensive scope, Diyanet's *fatwās* are selected because they address most of the issues that have been discussed in individual or specific *fatwās*.

In the Islamic world, religious leaders have played a critical role in guiding their communities through the pandemic.³³ They have used their platforms to disseminate information about the virus and public health guidelines, as well as to encourage adherence to preventive measures. Furthermore, religious leaders have urged their followers to be patient and resilient in the face of the pandemic and have provided emotional and spiritual support. This has been particularly vital, given that many Islamic practices, such as communal prayers and the *Hajj* pilgrimage, were significantly impacted by COVID-19 restrictions. To Put an example, some restrictions were enforced by the Saudi Arabian government in 2020 on individuals planning to perform *Hajj* and *Umra*.³⁴ In many instances, Islamic religious leaders have also worked together with government officials to develop policies and strategies to manage the pandemic in their respective countries. As an example, the government of the Islamic Republic of Iran endorses the observance of health protocols during the pandemic, given its profound repercussions on the economic, social, cultural, and political spheres.³⁵ Overall, the role of Islamic religious leaders during the COVID-19 pandemic has been essential in ensuring the well-being and safety of their communities. In the same vein, the Turkish government has also issued some policies concerning health protocols during the pandemic.³⁶ Likewise, in other Muslim-majority

³¹ Koutoub Moustapha Sano, 'IIFA Statement on the Ruling to Take the Available Covid-19 Vaccines during the Fast of Ramadan, and on the Precautionary Measures Taken by the Government of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia towards Visitors of the Two Holy Mosques during Ramadan', *International Islamic Fiqh Academy* (13 April 2021).

³² Emine Enise Yakar, *Islamic Law and Society: The Practice of Iftā' and Religious Institutions* (London ; New York, NY: Routledge, 2022), 74.

³³ Wijesinghe et al., 'Role of Religious Leaders in COVID-19 Prevention'; 'Religious Leaders Play Key Role in Battle against COVID-19' (Accessed 1 March 2023).

³⁴ Shahul H. Ebrahim- Ziad A. Memish, 'Saudi Arabia's Drastic Measures to Curb the COVID-19 Outbreak: Temporary Suspension of the Umrah Pilgrimage', *Journal of Travel Medicine* 27/3 (18 May 2020), 2-3.

³⁵ Yoosefi Lebni et al., 'How the COVID-19 Pandemic Effected Economic, Social, Political, and Cultural Factors', 299.

³⁶ Berkan Güngör, 'Türkiye'de Covid-19 Pandemisi Süresince Alınan Önlemlerin Kriz Yönetimi Perspektifinden Değerlendirilmesi', *Uluslararası Sosyal Bilimler Akademisi Dergisi*, (22 November 2020), 830-

countries such as Saudi Arabia, Iran, and Malaysia,³⁷ Türkiye have implemented social distancing measures to limit religious activities that involve large gatherings.

2.1. The Diyanet's Official Explanation: The Islamic Perspective on Epidemic Diseases

During the pandemic, the Diyanet issued a guideline entitled *İslam'ın Salgın Hastalıklara Bakışı* (The Perspective of Islam on Epidemic Diseases) in April 2020.³⁸ The High Board of Turkish Religious Affairs recognizes the importance of describing how Islam views and responds to disease in general and to the global COVID-19 pandemic in particular. Additionally, people may be negatively affected by misinformation, indoctrination, and incorrect religious messages circulated in the public. For this reason, the High Board of Religious Affairs have undertaken to make a study that explains the Islamic view and attitude toward diseases in a simple and easy-to-understand manner.³⁹

The Diyanet's guideline covers 13 chapters, each addressing a specific question, and includes an appendix detailing the doctrinal genealogy of practical measures, such as interruptions of communal prayers and funerary services, and possible modifications to the imminent Ramadan fast. The five chapters of the guideline were dedicated to exploring the nature and characteristics of disease outbreaks. Chapter 3 specifically delved into the case of the COVID-19 outbreak, analysing its impact on individuals and society. This chapter shed light on how the COVID-19 outbreak presented a unique circumstance for people to either unite or challenge their personal boundaries and capacities. Chapter 4 discusses whether such diseases and catastrophes were caused by people themselves and what lessons can be learned from them. The topic of whether outbreaks were a warning from the Divine is discussed in chapter 5. Additionally, it is discussed in chapter 6 whether they were punishments or torments sent by Allah; and whether they could be read as omens signalling the Day of Judgment in chapter 7. The responsibilities of a Muslim during a pandemic disease like Coronavirus were discussed in chapter 8. A discussion regarding the possible implications of the Coronavirus pandemic on people's religious beliefs was also presented in chapter 9.⁴⁰ Furthermore, it was also debated whether those who died because of epidemic diseases could be considered martyrs by Islam. At the end of this guidelines, there is a set of *fatwās* that were issued by the Diyanet during the coronavirus pandemic.⁴¹

These *fatwās* address religious matters arising from the coronavirus pandemic. They cover various topics such as the suspension of congregational Friday and regular prayers,

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³⁷ M. Asrorun Ni'am Sholeh, 'Towards a Progressive Fatwa: MUI's Response to the COVID-19 Pandemic', *AHKAM* 20/2 (2020), 283.

³⁸ Din İşleri Yüksek Kurulu, *İslam'ın Hastalık Salgınlarına Bakışı*.

³⁹ Din İşleri Yüksek Kurulu, *İslam'ın Hastalık Salgınlarına Bakışı*.

⁴⁰ Din İşleri Yüksek Kurulu, *İslam'ın Hastalık Salgınlarına Bakışı*, 4-5.

⁴¹ Din İşleri Yüksek Kurulu, *İslam'ın Hastalık Salgınlarına Bakışı*, 7.

the religious rulings related to funeral prayers and burial procedures during an infectious disease outbreak. Additionally, the *fatwās* provide guidance on alternative ways to observe religious practices. They highlight the questions about performing Friday prayers at home or joining the congregation virtually through television or the internet. Moreover, the *fatwās* offer guidelines for individuals at risk of contracting the disease and address the observance of Ramadan fasting in light of the pandemic. These guidelines aim to ensure the safety and well-being of the community while upholding religious obligations.⁴²

In addition to promoting obedience and godliness, it is stated in the explanation of the High Board of Religious affairs that many religious traditions offer boons or bounties as a means of rewarding good deeds and encouraging virtuous behaviour. These blessings can take various forms, including good health and material wealth, and are seen as a means of fostering kindness, generosity, and piety. The current coronavirus pandemic can be viewed as a form of adversity that tests humanity's response to its past actions, including environmental abuse, depletion of natural resources, and violation of moral values that protect and preserve these resources. This testing serves as an opportunity for individuals, communities, and countries to reflect on their impact on the environment and their fellow humans, as well as their overall moral values. It encourages people to responsibly act, show kindness, and be more generous in their interactions with others and the environment. These activities have caused an imbalance in the cosmic order, and the testing with adversity should serve as a reminder for people to consider the consequences of their actions and find ways to correct them. Ultimately, the pandemic serves as a call to action for individuals and societies to prioritize environmental protection, ethical behaviour, and virtuous living.⁴³

With its transformation into a global pandemic on the basis of confirmed medical reports, the statements indicate, the disease continues to cause significant risk to people's lives. Since one of the main objectives of *Shari'a* is to protect life, the *fatwā* emphasizes that all necessary precautions to achieve this objective should be taken.⁴⁴ Under these circumstances, Friday as well as congregational prayers can be suspended in order to reduce the spread of the disease.⁴⁵ In support of this view, the statement cites two *hadīths* which refer to the importance of the protection of human life and spread the of diseases. In that *hadīth* report, the Prophet Muhammad said "If you hear of an outbreak of plague in a land, do not enter it; but if the plague breaks out in a place while you are in it, do not leave that place."⁴⁶ The present *hadīth* serves as a fundamental point of reference in highlighting the paramount importance of implementing quarantine measures as a means of curtailing the spread of infectious diseases amidst the ongoing pandemic.

⁴² Din İşleri Yüksek Kurulu, *İslam'ın Hastalık Salgınlarına Bakışı*, 41–56.

⁴³ Din İşleri Yüksek Kurulu, *İslam'ın Hastalık Salgınlarına Bakışı*, 17.

⁴⁴ Din İşleri Yüksek Kurulu, *İslam'ın Hastalık Salgınlarına Bakışı*, 12.

⁴⁵ Din İşleri Yüksek Kurulu, *İslam'ın Hastalık Salgınlarına Bakışı*, 41.

⁴⁶ Sahih al-Bukhari, 'Sahih Al-Bukhari 5728 - Medicine - الطب كتاب -'.

The core of the Diyanet's guideline is consistent with the health protocols established by the World Health Organization (WHO), which posits that the COVID-19 is transmitted from person to person through direct or indirect contact, as well as close interaction with individuals who have been infected, via the discharge of secretions from the mouth and nose. Thus, the COVID-19 can propagate from one individual to another through direct or indirect means or through close proximity to an infected individual.⁴⁷

2.2. The Diyanet's *Fatwā* on the Friday and Congregational Prayers

The Islamic tradition emphasizes the safeguarding and sanctity of human life, and further underscores the removal of potential sources of harm to human life. In accordance with this ethical principle, the imperative to prioritize both preventive measures and curative interventions in preserving human health is grounded in the sanctity of life that Islam esteems. Proponents of this position strengthen their argument by invoking the *hadīth* that posits the existence of a cure for every ailment, as well as the *hadīth* that exhorts the servants of God to seek healing.⁴⁸

In addition to all these, one of the justifications for suspending congregational prayer was concluded that it would be appropriate to interrupt congregational prayer for a period in relation to the pandemic that poses a risk of death.⁴⁹ The Diyanet's *fatwā* based on the principle of the *Majalla*⁵⁰ a codification of the Hanafi law of civil transactions into the form of a modern code, code 26, '*small harm is tolerated in order to prevent greater harm*'.⁵¹ Moreover, it has been mentioned that there are practices where congregational prayers are suspended under certain conditions, including adverse weather conditions (e.g. heavy rain).⁵²

The Diyanet statement begins by acknowledging the contagious nature of the disease and then highlights that it can be transmitted even by asymptomatic individuals. By citing authoritative medical reports, the statement also states that the COVID-19 outbreak has reached to the pandemic, posing a critical threat to human life. As protection of life is a primary objective of Islamic law, the *fatwā* emphasizes the importance of taking all necessary measures to safeguard public health. As a means of reducing the spread of the disease, the suspension of Friday prayers and congregational prayers is deemed acceptable.

⁴⁷ WHO, 'Q&A: Coronavirus Disease (COVID-19): How Is It Transmitted?' (2020).

⁴⁸ Sahih al-Bukhari, 'Sahih Al-Bukhari 5678 - Medicine - الطب كتاب' (Accessed 22 February 2023); Ibn Majah, 'Sunan Ibn Majah 3436 - Chapters on Medicine - الطب كتاب -' (Accessed 24 July 2022).

⁴⁹ Din İşleri Yüksek Kurulu, *İslam'ın Hastalık Salgınlarına Bakışı*, 50.

⁵⁰ The *Majalla*, also known as the Ottoman *Majalla* or *Mejelle*, is a legal code that was first introduced in the late 19th century in the Ottoman Empire. It was created by a group of legal scholars and jurists under the supervision of the Ottoman government and was implemented in 1877. The *Majalla* consists of 1,851 articles and is based on Islamic law, specifically the Hanafi school of jurisprudence. Samy A. Ayoub, 'The Ottoman Rationale for Codification: The *Mecelle*', *Law, Empire, and the Sultan: Ottoman Imperial Authority and Late Hanafi Jurisprudence*, ed. Samy A. Ayoub (Oxford University Press, 2019), 0.

⁵¹ 'Al-Majalla(The Ottoman Courts Manual (Hanafi))', (no date), 224.

⁵² Din İşleri Yüksek Kurulu, *İslam'ın Hastalık Salgınlarına Bakışı*, 44.

Three *hadīths* are related in supporting this position, demonstrating that Friday and congregational prayers may be suspended under a variety of circumstances. One of the *hadīths* referred to in the *fatwā* suggests that there are some circumstances in which attending congregational prayer can be difficult or inconvenient, such as during heavy rain, illness, or concerns about personal safety, property, or family.⁵³ The *fatwā* suggests that while heavy rain can be a justifiable reason to avoid congregational prayer, a highly contagious and potentially fatal disease like the COVID-19 poses a more significant risk to people's health and safety.⁵⁴ Additionally the *hadīth* cited in the *fatwā* recommend that individuals should not move into or out of areas affected by an outbreak, such as the case of a plague-stricken area. The *fatwā* also states that attending congregational prayer should be avoided if it causes harm to individuals present.

The World Health Organization (WHO) suggests measures to prevent the transmission and spread of the COVID-19, including maintaining a distance of at least one meter from others, frequent hand cleaning, covering the mouth with a tissue or using the elbow when coughing or sneezing, and wearing a fabric mask when physical distancing is not possible.⁵⁵ Even though it was not explicitly stated, the Diyanet was under influence of scientific and international institutions such as WHO and mainstream scholarly thoughts.

Furthermore, the *fatwā* points out that regular noon prayers should be offered instead of Friday prayers and that the call to the prayer should still be made and that mosques should be kept open for those who wish to pray individually, taking the necessary precautions. Finally, the *fatwā* states that if the danger of infectious diseases reaches a global scale that threatens the whole society and humanity, the public authority has the authority to temporarily postpone congregational worship as well as to prohibit being in public places and collective activities. They have stated that the decisions of the competent authorities should be obeyed,⁵⁶ citing the verses “Do not put yourselves in danger with your own hands”⁵⁷ and “Do not kill yourselves.”⁵⁸

Almost all human life has been transferred to virtual space.⁵⁹ The question of whether virtual congregational prayers or Friday prayers are permissible has been a topic of discussion among Muslim believers. In response to this issue, the High Board of Religious Affairs has released a supplementary *fatwā* clarifying the impermissibility of performing Friday prayers at home or observing them via television or the internet. The committee has

⁵³ Sahih al-Bukhari, 'Sahih Al-Bukhari 901 - Friday Prayer - الجمعة كتاب -', *Sunnah.Com* (2023).

⁵⁴ Din İşleri Yüksek Kurulu, *İslam'ın Hastalık Salgınlarına Bakışı*, 41-44.

⁵⁵ WHO, 'COVID-19 Transmission - Learning How to Protect Yourself and Others', *World Health Organization* (2023).

⁵⁶ Din İşleri Yüksek Kurulu, *İslam'ın Hastalık Salgınlarına Bakışı*, 45.

⁵⁷ 'Sūra Al-Baqara, Chapter 2', trans. A. Yusuf Ali, *The Holy Quran* (Accessed 21 February 2023), verse 195.

⁵⁸ 'Sūra An-Nisa, Chapter 4', trans. A. Yusuf Ali, *The Holy Quran* (Accessed 21 February 2023), verse 29.

⁵⁹ Lokanath Mishra et al., 'Online Teaching-Learning in Higher Education during Lockdown Period of COVID-19 Pandemic', *International Journal of Educational Research Open* 1 (1 January 2020), 100012.

affirmed that Friday prayers, being a fundamental act of worship, must be performed in congregation in a mosque or in the open air, and thus cannot be performed at home. However, the Committee has clarified that viewers at home may listen to the sermon delivered during Friday prayers. Nevertheless, they should not follow the *imām* (person who leads the prayer) in prayer since there is insufficient physical proximity between the *imām* and his followers.

The *fatwā* brings into focus the importance of physical presence and community in Islamic practices, particularly with respect to the congregational aspect of Friday prayers (*salāt al-jumu'a*). It acknowledges the limitations of virtual environments in fulfilling this aspect of the worship, while also emphasizing the significance of being present in the mosque or open air for the Friday prayer. The *fatwā* highlights the nuanced considerations and interpretations that must be taken into account while evaluating the religious permissibility of virtual congregational prayers. In classical *fiqh* books, a river or a wide road passing between the *imām* and the congregation has been considered by Islamic scholars as an obstacle to the congregation following the *imām*.⁶⁰

The High Board of Religious Affairs has extensively relied on textual evidence to substantiate its position that Friday prayers cannot be performed at home. The committee has drawn upon a variety of sources, including *hadīths*, the practices of the Companions, and classical books of *fiqh*, to establish the religious and legal basis for this ruling. Through a comprehensive analysis and synthesis of these sources, the committee has provided a detailed and authoritative exposition of the prohibition of performing Friday prayers in the home setting. The overarching finding indicates that the requirement of physical proximity between the imam and the congregation renders the act of intending to follow an imam situated in a different location through mediums such as the internet, television, or radio inadequate in fulfilling this prerequisite. Consequently, the notion of the congregation remains unrealized in such scenarios. Therefore, following the Friday prayer or congregational prayer through the internet, radio, or television is not valid.⁶¹

Conclusion

Religions offer comprehensive guidance concerning various dimensions of health, encompassing preventive, curative, and restorative measures. Notably, historical encounters with plagues have established boundaries for intellectual discourse and exerted an influence on contemporary approaches to contagious diseases. These include imposing travel restrictions in plague-stricken areas, emphasizing the simultaneous pursuit of essential medical treatments and prayers, implementing quarantine measures that prioritize the well-being of the affected individual and the broader public, and promoting cleanliness as a means to cultivate good hygiene practices and enhance immune system resilience. Therefore, the measures taken in the 21st century to prevent the spread of

⁶⁰ Mufti Nizamuddin, *Fatawa Hindīyya* (Lebenon: Dar Al-Kotob Al-ilmīyah, 2000), 1/87.

⁶¹ Din İşleri Yüksek Kurulu, *İslam'ın Hastalık Salgınlarına Bakışı*, 52–53.

disease closely conform to the hygiene and infection control practices applied during the medieval period in the Islamic cultural sphere. The article examined the Islamic principles that reshaped Muslim societies towards the development of an approach for contagious diseases, which are still, in their original form, applicable in response to present pandemic outbreaks.

The response of the Islamic community to the COVID-19 pandemic should be viewed as an ongoing and evolving ethical tradition, which is derived from both normative and empirical sources. The Islamic normative discourses have undergone important changes and transformations in the modern period, which are reflected in the recent responses to the pandemic. The statement and *fatwās* issued by the Diyanet indicate that the authority structure in the modern period has been reconfigured to allow for more collective interdisciplinary *fatwās*. These recent statements also reveal the degree to which modern scientific medical knowledge is integrated into increasingly normative pronouncements, highlighting the extent of collaboration between religious scholars and public health authorities at local and global scales.

The Diyanet responses to the COVID-19 pandemic reflect the continuous evolution of Islamic ethical traditions, as well as the ways in which these traditions adapt to changing circumstances. The changes in Islamic normative discourses in the modern period reflect a shift towards more collective and interdisciplinary approaches, which take into account modern scientific knowledge and collaborate with public health authorities. The Diyanet's approach is also evident in its *fatwās* addressing various medical issues.⁶² The Diyanet maintain its scientific approach in the issuing process of *fatwās* during the COVID-19 pandemic.

The integration of modern scientific medical knowledge into Islamic ethical principles reflects the growing recognition among religious scholars of the importance of empirical evidence and scientific research in shaping Islamic responses to contemporary challenges. The collaboration between religious scholars and public health authorities at both local and global levels also reflects the recognition that effective responses to the pandemic require interdisciplinary and collaborative efforts. Therefore, the Islamic response to the COVID-19 pandemic is grounded in an ongoing and evolving ethical tradition that draws from normative and empirical sources. The recent statements by the Diyanet illustrate these trends and provide a comprehensive approach to dealing with the pandemic.

62 'Fıkhi Açıdan Ceninin Durumu Nedir?: Din İşleri Yüksek Kurulu : Dini Bilgilendirme Platformu' (Accessed 24 May 2023); 'Ertesi Gün Hapı ve Doğum Kontrol Hapı Kullanmak Caiz Midir?: Din İşleri Yüksek Kurulu : Dini Bilgilendirme Platformu' (Accessed 24 May 2023).

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