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Islamic Responses to the COVID-19 pandemic in India and Pakistan

Keywords

COVID-19, Muslims in Denmark, mosques, postsecular society,

Abstract India's and Pakistan's governments, like most of the world's governments, responded to the spread of the COVID-19 virus with lockdowns, which in principle also affected religious institutions and rituals. However, Sunni mosques in Pakistan were not closed, as the government has no authority over autonomous religious organizations. In contrast, the Islamic organizations and institutions in India complied with government orders, and tried to present themselves as a "responsible minority" during a period when relations with the Hindu nationalist government were strained, and because a convention of the Tablighī Jamā'at had contributed considerably to the spread of the disease in the country and abroad. In Pakistan, the role of the "responsible minority" was played by the Shiites, who closed their mosques. On the whole, Muslim religious leaders and organizations showed little interest in taking a stand on the pandemic. Those few who make extensive use of the internet tend to address the better-educated social strata, and tend view pandemic-related restrictions more favorably.

This paper was originally commissioned and planned as a survey article, and attempts to map Islamic organizations', public figures', and state agencies' responses to the COVID-19 crisis in India and Pakistan. This includes not only responses to the epidemic itself, but also measures taken or proposed by the two countries' central or regional governments, therefore this paper must address the relationship between Islamic organizations and the state, and in the case of India, attitudes among the non-Muslim majority, as well. Where pertinent, the activities of Mus-

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lms with South Asian backgrounds abroad are also mentioned. This documentary approach identified four specific research questions which will be addressed in this paper.

1. The differing attitudes of most religious authorities to canceling congregational prayers in India and Pakistan.
2. The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on minority–majority relations, as early in the pandemic, the spread of the disease was accelerated by religious “super-spreader events” in both countries.
3. Legal (*fiqh*) and other religious arguments used to legitimize or to delegitimize anti-COVID-19 measures.
4. The surprisingly little attention paid to the pandemic by many religious actors (as reflected in their media). As the research was unavoidably dependent on material that was easily found on the Internet, it is necessary to consider how distorted the findings may be, as a result of this selection.¹

The course of the COVID-19 pandemic in India and Pakistan

In both India and Pakistan, individual cases of COVID-19 began to emerge in February 2020. In the following month, the disease could no longer be contained, and spread throughout the population. In both cases, religious meetings and pilgrimages to other countries played decisive roles at this stage. In the following months, officially-published infection rates and the per capita death tolls remained below those of most Western and Latin American countries. Epidemiologists add caveats regarding these numbers, as, among other things, India’s and Pakistan’s low official infection rates reflect the fact that far fewer people are tested than in Western countries. When it comes to the relatively low death toll per capita, the low average age is a factor to be considered, and frequent previous infections may have prepared the populations’ immune systems well.² Nonetheless, when it comes to absolute numbers, India was the country with the third most deaths related to COVID-19, behind the USA and Brazil at the time of writing (early December 2020). Moreover, it seems that the governments of both countries were not convinced that the relatively favorable numbers reflected the actual spread of the disease, as they opt-

¹ A note on references: Links to organizations’ websites or news-only items appear in the footnotes, other items are also listed in the bibliography.

² <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-india-54730290>.

ed for harsh lockdown measures that resembled those of many Western and Middle Eastern countries, potentially leading to detrimental economic effects: The government of India estimates that its GDP will contract by 8.9 percent in 2020, whereas the World Bank forecasts a 1.9 percent economic contraction for Pakistan.³

As in other countries, citizens' compliance with the government mandates was presented in terms of responsibility, and religious leaders and organizations were also expected to contribute to the containment of the disease, although the measures implied considerable interference in religious practices.⁴ Before describing the responses of Islamic actors in India and Pakistan to the double challenge of COVID-19 and the counter-measures, it is necessary to describe the main groups in the heterogeneous landscape of South Asian Islam, which will be referred to frequently, the relationships between Islamic institutions and organizations and the state, and finally, the political situation on the eve of the COVID-19 crisis, which was particularly decisive in India in terms of religion becoming a central issue in the public response to the pandemic.

Islam in South Asia: The institutional framework and the main currents

A characteristic difference between Islam in South Asia and Islam in most Middle Eastern countries is the fact that religious life has not been organized by the state in the last centuries. As result there exists no state-controlled religious bureaucracy as in Turkey or most Arabic countries. This resulted in the development of a heterogeneous religious landscape in what are today India, Pakistan, and Bangla Desh. A number of religious currents representing specific religious and legal traditions organize religious education and mosques. Although in India they are still mostly privately financed, they profit from a state collected *zakat* in Pakistan. Further sources of income are donations from other states, in particular the Gulf monarchies and Iran, whose importance should not be overrated. The religious sphere is not completely independent of state influence in either country. Although the average quarter or village mosque is not state controlled in Pakistan, Auqaf Departments of the provincial governments administer the financial and practical matters

3 <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/economy/indicators/moodys-revises-india-forecast-for-the-calendar-year-2020-to-8-9/articleshow/79186213.cms>; <https://www.worldbank.org/en/country/pakistan/overview>.

4 Riexinger et al. 2021.

5 <http://centralwaqfcouncil.gov.in/>.

of many Sufi shrines and a number of representative, mostly historical mosques. In India, the Central Waqf Council has a similar role under the Ministry for Minority Affairs and its sub-branches in the states and union territories.⁵ Politicians in Pakistan have continuously attempted to control the religious discourse, but with limited success. The Council of Islamic Ideology, an institution intended to legitimize state policies in Islamic terms, or to formulate Islamic doctrines suitable for suiting realpolitik, does not wield much authority, a matter that once again became apparent during the COVID-19 crisis.⁶

Three currents represent various traditions of Sunni Islam: the term “school of thought” (*maktab-i fikr*) is commonly used.⁷

Barelwis: Named after Ahmad Riza Khan Barelwi (1856–1921), this school of thought represents the amalgamation of Sufism and the strict adherence to Ḥanafī law that characterized Islamic beliefs and practice in Northern India for centuries. Sufi rituals are performed at the traditional *darbārs* “courts” around the tomb of a saint under the supervision of a *pīr*, who usually is a descendent of the saint, and the government agencies mentioned above. Instead of playing a leading role in performing the traditional Sufi rituals, Barelwi scholars legitimize and defend the basis of their theology. Although Barelwis may be the largest school of thought in terms of the number of adherents in Pakistan (there are no statistics for any of the three South Asian countries), the Barelwis lag behind the Deobandis when it comes to its number of educational institutions and the media output.⁸ Generally, Barelwi scholars have denounced secular education. This has contributed to their archetypal image of “backward” rural *maulwī* in the eyes of secularists, and also Islamists. *Minhaj ul-Qur’an* (“method of the Qur’an”), an offshoot of the Barelwis that plays an important role in terms of responses to the COVID-19-crisis in Pakistan and in the diaspora, diverges markedly from this image. Since 1980 it been organized by Muhammad Tahir ul-Qadri (b. 1951) and addresses more educated social strata, by presenting a variety of Sufi and Ḥanafī Islam that takes secularly-educated sensibilities into account.⁹

Deobandis: Named after the town Deoband, north of Delhi, where the *Dār ul-‘Ulūm*, the “mother” *madrasa* based on their teachings was founded in 1867, the Deobandis follow the Ḥanafī school of law, but they reject most ritual aspects of Sufism. They are particularly active in the field of religious instruction. Daughter schools of the original seminary have been founded

6 <http://www.cii.gov.pk/>; Zaman 2018: 90–92, 119.

7 Zaman 2018: 14–23.

8 Sanyal 1996; Gugler 2011; Philippon 2011.

9 Philippon 2011: 230–255.

all over South Asia. Before British rule ended in 1947, leading Deoband scholars supported cooperation with the Indian National Congress, in contrast to the Muslim majority.¹⁰ As a result, the *Dār ul-‘Ulūm* is often considered the main Islamic authority in the country, and fatwas issued by its *Dār al-iftā’* are often presented as the official Islamic view. Other leading scholars opposed that line, and supported the formation of Pakistan as a separate state for the Muslims in British India, and subsequently moved to the new state and built up their own organizations there. Under British rule, the Deoband school had already found many followers among the Pathans on the border of Afghanistan, therefore these areas, the capital, Peshawar, and Karachi, where most of the refugees and voluntary immigrants from India settled, became their centers in Pakistan. In Pakistan, their scholars often also enjoyed the special recognition of state authorities.¹¹

A particular subgroup of the Deobandis was to play a decisive role during the COVID-19 crisis in South Asia. The *Tablighī Jamā‘at*, the largest Muslim revivalist movement worldwide, was founded to convince rural Muslims to perform their religious duties regularly through the missionary activities of groups of men who travel around preaching for some part of the year. Today it has one independent branch in India, in Pakistan and in Bangla Desh, and their annual conventions (*ijtimā‘*) in these countries are among the largest Muslim gatherings after the *ḥajj*. The movement has also spread beyond South Asia, but nowhere else has it grown to a similar extent. Apart from enjoining regular religious practice, this movement discourages involvement in “worldly matters,” that is politics and current affairs in general.

Ahl-i Ḥadīth: This school of thought’s self-designation as “people of the hadith” stems from their identification with the hadith collectors of the early Islamic period who (in their eyes) opposed any introduction of human considerations in theology and law. Like the Deobandis, the Ahl-i Ḥadīth denounce Sufi rituals, particularly those by graves, and the ascription of a special ontological status to Muḥammad, and even more so the *awliyā’* (Sufi saints), and even reject the schools of law. Their outlook resembles that of the Wahhabis, with whom they have cooperated extensively since the 1920s. As a result they are well-connected in international puritanical networks, whereas they have less followers than the Barelwis and Deobandis.¹²

10 Friedmann 1971, 1976.

11 Zaman 2014: 131–133.

12 Riexinger 2004.

A religio-political movement that is sometimes considered a fourth school of thought is the **Jama‘at-i islami**, the organization founded in 1941 by the Islamist ideologist, Abu l-A‘la Mawdudi (1903–1979). Regarding theological and ritual questions, they mostly agree with the Deoband schools, and this movement controls only very few mosques or *madāris*. But according to the Mawdūdī they set the implementation of the “complete code of life” that Islam represents above the traditional aspects of religious life. Conceived of as elite-cadre party that follows the Leninist model, today the Jama‘at-i islami in Pakistan is still a top-down organized political party with a relatively large number of members, but rather modest election results. But particularly owing to its activist student organization, which does not shy away from intimidation, the Jamā‘at-i islami has a disproportionately strong influence on public life in urban Pakistan.¹³ In India, the Jamā‘at-i islāmī turned into an organization of a very different sort, after 1947. As it was quite unlikely that an Islamic supremacist concept could be implemented in a society in which Muslims comprise less than 15 percent of the population, the Jamā‘at-i islāmī focused on spreading reform ideas among Muslims, and by becoming increasingly irenic and ecumenical, it developed into the foremost Muslim agent in inter-religious dialogue initiatives.¹⁴

In addition to Sunnis, **Twelver Shiites** live in many parts of Pakistan and India. In studies that address societal and organizational aspects, they are often treated as representing another school of thought, as they have their own mosques and educational institutions. Because of differences regarding rituals, beliefs, and in particular, positions concerning the early history of Islam, it is impossible for them to find common ground with the Deobandis and Ahl-i Ḥadīth. Since the late colonial period, tensions between Shiites and puritanical Sunnis, sometimes also Barelwis, occurred on the occasion of Muḥarram, though usually with a limited degree of violence.¹⁵ From 1979 onwards the conflicts between Sunnis and Shiites in Pakistan became charged due to the ideological cum geopolitical confrontation between Iran and Saudi Arabia. Violent Clashes and terrorist attacks became a became the major threat to the public order, since the 1990s thousands, most of all of Shiites have been killed in sectarian attacks.¹⁶ This sectarian violence was formally denounced, but never systematically targeted by various governments, because the same Sunni organizations responsible for sectarian vi-

13 Nasr 1994, 1996; Hartung 2014.

14 Sikand 2004: 79–92.

15 Rieck 2016; Fuchs 2020.

16 In the 2002–2018 period, 4847 (Ismailis included) https://www.satp.org/satporgtp/countries/pakistan/database/Shias_killed_Pakistan.htm.

olence also furthered Pakistan's interests in Afghanistan and Kashmir. No Shiite scholar in South Asia has reached the rank of a *marja' -i taqlid*, whose legal judgments laymen and lesser scholars are supposed to follow, therefore believers follow authorities at the scholarly centers in Iraq (the majority) or Khamne'ī in Iran (who can provide more resources). In Pakistan they are therefore denigrated as agents of hostile powers by Sunni sectarian agitators.

The Political Situation on the Eve of the COVID-19 Crisis

India

In India, the rise of Hindu nationalism has been the decisive development throughout the last three decades. The Bharatiya Janata Party superseded the Indian National Congress as the leading party. The latter has traditionally garnered a large share of votes from the Muslim minority, although there was never a "Muslim bloc vote."¹⁷ This ensured that politicians paid attention to Muslim concerns, or more precisely, what community leaders presented as such, as for example, the protection of the Muslim Family Law against its replacement by a unified civil code which the Constitution in principle demands. This clientelist treatment led to resentment among many Hindus, which contributed to the rise of Hindu nationalism. In the BJP attitudes to Muslims vary considerably. On the one hand, the party nominates Muslim candidates for parliamentary seats, on the other hand, it includes members of radical organizations that are involved in violent anti-Muslim activities. With a few regional exceptions, very few Muslims consider voting for the BJP, but systematic, strategic voting by Muslims to support the candidate with the best prospects against the Hindu nationalists either cannot be observed either. Specifically, Muslim parties field sometimes-successful candidates from the few Muslim majority constituencies.¹⁸ The 2014 Lok Sabha election did result in the lowest representation of Muslims in 50 years (4 %), and for the first time, the ruling party had no Muslim Member of the Lok Sabha. In the April/May 2019 elections, the share of Muslim MPs rose slightly, but again, none belongs to the BJP, which won a

¹⁷ Graff 1986.

¹⁸ In particular, in some constituencies in Kerala, and in Hyderabad and Aurangabad.

¹⁹ Kopf, Thaker & Wolfe 2019; Vernier 2019.

sweeping victory.¹⁹ However, the BJP's power is constrained by the framework of the federal system, as the party governs only 17 of 34 states and union territories.

The last major political controversies that preoccupied India before the COVID-19 were related to the status of Muslims under Hindu nationalist rule. In August 2019, Jammu and Kashmir, the only Muslim majority state, was divided and deprived of its special status, which led to local protests, and was also regarded as an affront by many Muslims in other parts of India.²⁰

On December 11 2019 the Lok Sabha passed the Citizenship Amendment Act, which grants Indian citizenship to Hindus, Jains, Sikhs, Buddhists, Parsis, and Christians who left Pakistan, Bangla Desh, or Afghanistan before 2014, whereas Muslims from these countries cannot make a similar claim. Many Muslims and secular opponents of the BJP denounced this as unconstitutional religious discrimination, claiming that the reason was not protection from religious persecution, but the understanding of India as the natural home of Hindus (although the amendment also applies to Parsis and Christians). Widespread dissatisfaction with the law among Muslims and in secularist circles led to demonstrations throughout India. The situation escalated in Delhi, where the campus of the Muslim university, Jamia-i Millia, was a rallying ground for the protestors. In the course of the protests, over 60 persons, mostly opponents of the bill, but also policemen and government supporters, lost their lives.²¹ Therefore, relations between Muslims and the Indian government and the large sections of the population that supported the amendment were tense when COVID-19 broke out.

Pakistan

The 2018 general election in Pakistan brought about a decisive change in the political landscape. By winning the most seats in the National Assembly (with only 31.8 % of the votes), the Pakistan Tehreek-i Insaaf (PTI) of former cricketer Imran Khan ended the three-decade period of shifts between the Pakistan Muslim League and the Pakistan People's Party (PPP). However, as he won on an anti-corruption and "Islamic welfare" agenda, Imran Khan had to form a coalition government with several regional parties and Muslim League factions. The PTI governs three of the four provinces; only Sindh is controlled by the PPP. The electoral coalition of religious parties, Muttahida Majlis-i

20 <https://www.dw.com/en/how-indias-muslims-view-the-kashmir-dispute/a-35981601>.

21 Human Rights Watch 2020.

22 <https://www.electionpakistan.com/ge2018/result.html>; in addition to the seats won by the constituencies, further seats are allocated to women and religious minorities on a proportional basis.

Amal, gained only 12 territorial seats, all in Pathan majority areas, whereas other religious parties gained none.²² Neither Imran Khan's victory nor the religious bloc's meagre election results outside a specific region changed the relations between religious groups and the state in Pakistan. Their ability to mobilize large crowds—despite their rather modest electoral backing—to gather against “heretics” and “blasphemers,” is a further factor that accounts for the authorities' timidity about confronting them.²³

Religious responses to government measures

Unlike the highly centralized Middle Eastern countries, both India and Pakistan are federally organized, and state/provincial governments are largely responsible for public health and security concerns. In both countries, these lower levels of authority took different approaches to reopening after the nationwide lockdowns.

India

In India, several state/union territory governments enforced prohibitions on gatherings, which also affected religious meetings, before the federal government (henceforth, Centre) ordered a 14-hour curfew on March 22 2020, followed by a lockdown that was ultimately extended to May 5. The rushed decision to lock down, including terminating train services, was severely criticized as counterproductive, because the departure of many rural migrants from the big cities caused considerable congestion at major train and bus stations.²⁴ From May onwards, the Center allowed specific sectors of the economy and society to reopen stepwise, whereas many states and territories opted to extend lockdown measures because of the local infection rates. Some Muslim organizations took precautionary measures before the nationwide lockdown was imposed, but the prevailing attitude seems to have been that those who come to the mosque for Friday prayer must not be turned away.²⁵ When the lockdown finally made it impossible to hold congregational prayers, no (major) protests seem to have occurred in India, instead, regional Islamic organizations and institutions expressed support

23 Afzal 2020.

24 Harriss 2020: 97.

25 <https://theprint.in/india/call-off-friday-prayers-cut-duration-how-mosques-plan-to-tackle-covid-19/384109/>

26 <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/hyderabad/will-cooperate-with-govt-measures-asad/article-show/74720761.cms>

for the measures taken.²⁶ Jamā‘at-i islāmī scholars argued that if the imam, the muezzin, and two servants were performing ritual prayer in the mosque, the community had done its duty to uphold communal prayer; a similar solution was later proposed by Deoband and in two provinces of Pakistan.²⁷ When mosques were, in principle, allowed to reopen in June, some institutions, such as the Sufi-oriented Firangi Mahall, Deoband, and regional Muslim councils urged caution, or even prolonged the closing period.²⁸ In another fatwa on the occasion of the end of Ramadan, Deoband explained how the ‘īd prayer is to be performed in absence of an official imam, and provided a sermon to be read aloud at home.²⁹

Besides prayer in mosques, burials, and their preparation, other rituals were affected by government measures against the pandemic. Indian political authorities never attempted to prohibit the burial of COVID-19 victims, unlike in Sri Lanka, where Muslims were required to cremate their coreligionists who had died of COVID-19, but mandated hygiene precautions conflicted with traditional practices.³⁰ The *Dār ul-iftā’* at Deoband responded to several questions regarding official regulations that affected Muslim rituals. For example, they allow the deceased of COVID-19 to be washed with a hose, and the body be packed in a plastic bag (as demanded by the Mumbai municipality).³¹ A similar rule was also passed by the head of the Firangi Mahall, Sufi-oriented *madrasa* in Lucknow with a certain influence in Northern India, who also emphasized that victims of COVID-19 were to be buried in Muslim cemeteries after his precautions were taken. With this statement, he responded to protests against the burial of a victim of COVID-19 in the Muslim graveyard of Lucknow.³²

27 “Corona Virus: Appeal of Shariah Council, Jamaat-e-Islami Hind”; https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_V7jj6n3S3c; see <>.

28 <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/lockdown-5-0-islamic-centre-of-india-issues-advisory-for-reopening-of-mosques/article-show/76237447.cms>; <https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/kerala/lockdown-mosques-in-kerala-to-remain-closed/article31774783.ece>

29 *Dār ul-iftā’*, *Dār ul-‘ulūm* Deoband 2020a.

30 On Sri Lanka: Silva 2020: 25–29.

31 *Dār ul-iftā’*, *Dār ul-‘ulūm* Deoband 2020b.

32 <https://www.dailypioneer.com/2020/state-editions/khalid-rasheed---s-fatwa-on-burial-of-corona-victims.html>; <https://darulifta-deoband.com/ur/fatwa/MTc5NDgy>.

33 <https://www.socialnews.>

<xyz/2020/08/22/hyderabad-asaduddin-owaisi-mumtaz-ahmed-khan-inaugurate-mobile-covid-19-testing-van-gallery/>; <https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=1039726773111418>, “Interview—COVID19, Indian Media & Muslims”; <https://www.sahilonline.net/en/jamaat-e-islami-hind-maharashtras-statewide-donate-plasma-defeat-corona-campaign-from-aug-4-to-6>.

Islamic organizations such as the Jamā‘at-i islāmī or the small Muslim political party, All-India Majlis-e-Ittehadul Muslimeen, engaged in various kinds of charitable activities that contributed to the fight against COVID-19, such as organizing test stations, donating plasma, and providing help to those rushing home in the early phase of the lockdown.³³ Muslims even cremated the bodies of Hindu COVID-19 victims that had been abandoned by their families owing to fear of infection.³⁴ Without denying the honest motivation of the participants, the fact that these activities were centrally planned and widely advertised in the media reflects how these Islamic organizations intended to present the Muslims as responsible, committed, and reliable citizens at a time when they were frequently reviled as internal enemies. This also applies to the fatwas that urged compliance with COVID-19 measures, and the very cautious approach to reopening the mosques. This reflects the circumstances of Muslims under Hindu nationalist rule after the Citizenship Amendment Act protests, on the one hand, and on the other hand, the fact that not all Muslim organizations had acted responsibly, so others saw a need to tidy up behind them, an aspect about which the leader of the Jamā‘at-i islāmī Syed Sadat-ullah Husseini does not mince words.³⁵

Pakistan

In Pakistan, a nationwide lockdown was imposed on April 1 2020, but since mid-March the provincial governments had increasingly restricted public events and finally imposed lockdowns of their own.

In contrast to India, Pakistan’s central government was not able to enforce the closure of most mosques. Scholars from the various Sunni currents opposed this move. Even the All Pakistan Ulama Council, from whom the government had expected support, did not concede to more than a shortening of the

34 <https://www.newindianexpress.com/nation/2020/apr/16/muslims-cremate-hindu-neighbour-during-covid-19-lockdown-in-madhya-pradesh-2130930.html>; [https://www.indiatoday.in/india/story/telangana-muslim-volunteers-cremate-hindu-](https://www.indiatoday.in/india/story/telangana-muslim-volunteers-cremate-hindu-man-after-family-refuses-to-per-)

form-last-rites-1714792-2020-08-25.

35 “Interview—COVID19, Indian Media & Muslims” 04:30–05:50.

36 <https://www.dawn.com/news/1541658>.

37 Hassan & Paul 2020; large protests against the closing of mosques erupted only in Niger,

elsewhere they were quelled: Fibiger & Riexinger 2021: 151.

38 Rehman 2020; this factor explains opposition to suspending religious rituals in many places: Riexinger et al 2021: 136; Thorsen 2021: 144–146.

sermon, an increased distance between the rows, and a recommendation that the elderly remain home.³⁶ In some cases, protests against the closings turned violent. Apparently out of fear of civic unrest, the government refrained from further initiatives to enforce the closure of mosques, and negotiated minor restrictions concerning hygiene and density.³⁷ Apparently, a major reason for this obstinacy of the religious leaders was the fear that the flow of donations would ebb.³⁸ Not all mosques remained open. A few highly visible historic mosques, such as the Badshahi Masjid in Lahore, are controlled by the provincial Auqaf Departments, and were closed.³⁹ The Council of Islamic Ideology urged people to pray at home.⁴⁰ Finally, the government tried to convince the scholars to comply with its measures by asking for a fatwa from al-Azhar, but to no avail, as the Egypt's highest religious institution wields no authority in South Asia.⁴¹ Finally, the provincial governments of Sindh and Balochistan were able to convince religious leaders to hold Friday prayers with the mosque staff only.⁴²

Furthermore, Pakistan's Shiite leaders took a different approach from the Sunni scholars, led by Shāhinshāh Naqwī, they declared that their mosques should be closed to congregational prayer.⁴³ Naqwī was trained in Iran, where in March 2021 the government was still in denial, but with this decision, Shiites appeared to be a "responsible minority," whereas the Ahl-i Ḥadīth ignored that mosques were closed and even the *ḥajj* suspended in Saudi Arabia, the country which they usually look as a model. This fits with a common pattern of religious groups' responses to COVID-19: local circumstances trump transnational ideological orientations.⁴⁴

Unlike in the situation related to the mosques, Pakistan's

39 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IbZvacN3AEo> .

40 <https://www.geo.tv/latest/280615-islamic-ideology-council-asks-masses-to-pray-at-home-to-prevent-coronavirus-outbreak>.

41 Ahmad 2020: 259, 270.

42 <https://www.dawn.com/news/1543935>; <https://www.geo.tv/latest/279437-sindh-balochistan-punjab-restrict-congregational-prayers-in-mosques>; www.reuters.com/article/us-health-coronavirus-ramadan-pakistan/pakistans-sindh-province-bans-prayer-at-mosques-during-ramadan-idUSKCN226166.

43 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YCU-m18rAHo>.

44 Riexinger et al. 2021: 138.

45 <https://www.dawn.com/news/1541790> ; <https://nation.com.pk/13-Apr-2020/punjab-auqaf-minister-visits-data-darbar> ; <https://www.dawn.com/news/1540884>; <https://tribune.com.pk/story/2189531/sindh-govt-cancels-lal-shahbaz-qalandars-urs-due-coronavirus-outbreak> ; <https://nation.com.pk/30-Jul-2020/sindh-to-reopen-all-shrines-for-public-after-eid>; <https://www.thenews.com.pk/print/700008-shrine-of-lal-shahbaz-qalander-to-open-from-aug-17>.

tribune.com.pk/story/2189531/sindh-govt-cancels-lal-shahbaz-qalandars-urs-due-coronavirus-outbreak ; <https://nation.com.pk/30-Jul-2020/sindh-to-reopen-all-shrines-for-public-after-eid>; <https://www.thenews.com.pk/print/700008-shrine-of-lal-shahbaz-qalander-to-open-from-aug-17>.

provincial governments had leverage when it came to closing most Sufi shrines, which they control through the Auqaf Departments. The severity of measures differed markedly from province to province. In the Punjab they were closed from March 18 to May 21 2020, in Sindh from March 14 until after ‘īd al-aḏḥā in July/August.⁴⁵ The closure in March necessitated cancelling one of the most popular ‘urs celebration in Pakistan at the shrine of Lal Shahbaz Qalandar in Sehwan Sharif, Sindh, where in a normal year, about 1 million people gather. Only some officials and a few musicians circled and clad the graves. Despite the cancellation, parties of pilgrims travelled to the shrine, but they were dispersed.⁴⁶ In this respect, it must be taken into account that the effect of the closure hit local economies hard, as these shrines are surrounded by commercial areas with shops that sell items related to the rituals or religious books, and food stalls that serve the visitors.⁴⁷ The longer closure of shrines in Sindh, in contrast to the Punjab, may reflect that the ruling PPP is least impressionable by religious sensibilities.

By the end of August 2020 the lockdown was generally loosened. As a result, Shiite Muharram processions, in which many of the Sufi-oriented in Pakistan also participate, were allowed with strict distancing regulations, in addition to the regulations which are supposed to prevent sectarian violence.⁴⁸ Processions on *Yawm-i ‘Alī*, the anniversary of Ali’s martyrdom, on May 15, were banned, but at least in Rawalpindi, some Shiites defied the restrictions and celebrated with processions, flagellation, and chanting.⁴⁹ The relaxation of the lockdown that began in August also meant that Pakistan’s other major ‘urs at the Data Ganj Bakhsh shrine in Lahore could take place from October 6 to 8. No special COVID-19 measures are mentioned, but access to the shrine is strictly controlled anyway, since the terrorist attacks in 2010 and 2019.⁵⁰ The laxer rules also made a third kind of event possible once again: large-scale sectarian rallies. On

46 <https://tribune.com.pk/story/2189531/sindh-govt-cancels-lal-shahbaz-qalandars-urs-due-coronavirus-outbreak> ; <https://www.samaa.tv/news/pakistan/2020/04/sindh-cancels-lal-shahbaz-qalandars-annual-urs-over-coronavirus-spread/> ; <https://tribune.com.pk/story/2196599/1-lal-shahbaz-qalandars-urs-slip-without-usual-celebrations>.

47 <https://www.dawn.com/news/1541790>.

48 <https://www.worldaware.com/covid-19-alert-pakistan-police-enforce-restrictions-aug-30-observance-ashura>.

49 <https://www.ruptly.tv/en/videos/20200515-006> ; <https://www.samaa.tv/news/pakistan/2020/05/todays-outlook-pakistan-observances-youm-e-ali-without-processions-national-assembly-meets/>.

50 <https://reliefweb.int/report/pakistan/8-dead-explosion-targeting-elite-force-vehicle-near-lahores-data-darbar>.

51 <https://www.samaa.tv/news/2020/09/anti-shia-rallies-raise-alarm-bells-over-groups-sectarian-ambitions/> ; Mirza 2020b.

September 11 to 13 and 20, large crowds in Karachi demanded that the anti-blasphemy law be extended to vilify the Companions, which would practically prohibit Shiite rituals and the presentation of the Shiite version of early Islamic history.⁵¹

If religious organizations were involved in charitable activities related to the COVID-19 crisis, this was not highly publicized, with the particular exception of al-Khidmat, the charitable organization of the Jamā‘at-i islami. In the initial stage of the epidemic, its volunteers provided food, hand sanitizers, and medical care to marginalized groups, particularly religious minorities and transgender people; later, they organized ambulance services, plasma donations, and testing facilities.⁵²

Religion-related super-spreader events and religious scapegoating

Throughout history, epidemics have always been times when deviant religious groups have been singled out as scapegoats. During the COVID-19 pandemic this has been particularly evident, as religious gatherings and rituals that involve chanting and/or close contact with persons and objects in fact turned into “super-spreader events” that drove up infection rates disproportionately rapidly. By ignoring the danger of the epidemic, intentionally or owing to ignorance, certain religious leaders provided fit occasions for the agitation of sectarian or communalist entrepreneurs and made it difficult for politicians and authorities to balance establishing targeted strategies, holding responsible persons to account, and avoiding communal blaming.⁵³ In South Asia, two religious currents are particularly associated with this problem.

In both Pakistan and India, the Tablighī Jamā‘at held meetings in March 2020. Participants at the events were infected, and re-

52 <https://alkhidmat.org/tag/covid-19/> ; <https://www.ucanews.com/news/pakistan-islamist-group-wins-praise-for-covid-19-initiative/87596> , <https://www.thenews.com.pk/print/688169-al-khidmat-foundation-plays-leading-role-in-fight-against-covid-19>

53 [https://www.outlookindia.com/website/story/india-news-corona-outbreak-afflicted-by-communal-virus-blaming-tablighi-jamaat-](https://www.outlookindia.com/website/story/india-news-corona-outbreak-afflicted-by-communal-virus-blaming-tablighi-jamaat-could-be-misdirected/349784)

[could-be-misdirected/349784](https://www.outlookindia.com/website/story/india-news-corona-outbreak-afflicted-by-communal-virus-blaming-tablighi-jamaat-could-be-misdirected/349784) ; <https://www.thehindu.com/opinion/editorial/beyond-the-blame-game-the-hindu-editorial-on-the-tablighi-jamaat-episode/article31230333.ece> ; <https://www.globalgovernmentforum.com/former-indian-civil-servants-protest-targeting-of-muslims-over-covid-19/>.

54 <https://tribune.com.pk/story/2203599/9-27-pakistans-covid-19-cases-linked-raiwind-ijtima-report> ;

<https://www.npr.org/sections/coronavirus-live-updates/2020/03/23/820043866/mass-religious-gathering-in-pakistan-leads-to-fresh-concerns-over-covid-19-sprea> ; Ahmad 2020: 257.

55 <https://twitter.com/SALSIKandar/status/1243767028483117062> ; <https://twitter.com/AyazLatifPalijo/status/1243141693114703872> ; <https://twitter.com/Edwardian842/status/123806235091111168> ;

turned to their home regions, creating new centers of infection. The large meeting in Raiwind, Pakistan, was hastily ended on March 12, three days before a lockdown was imposed, nevertheless, many participants had to be quarantined. The town of Raiwind was completely locked down, and so were centers of the Tablighī Jamā‘at throughout the country.⁵⁴ The Pakistani meeting led to some scathing Tweets from secularists, but had no political repercussions.⁵⁵ In contrast, the March 3 to 24 2020 meeting at the Delhi Markaz in the Nizamuddin borough of Delhi had a much larger political impact. Unlike the large *ijtimā‘* in Raiwind it was only a minor meeting of regional leaders. Nevertheless, it apparently violated the union territory government’s ban on religious gatherings of more than 50 persons, and moreover, persons from abroad participated. The Delhi police, which are under the supervision of the federal government, did not intervene, despite alerts. When the first cases of COVID-19 at the meeting were reported, the Union Territory government imposed quarantines, but by that time hundreds of participants had already left.⁵⁶ On April 15 the Tablighī leader Muḥammad Sa‘d Khandalvi and six other office-bearers were finally charged with “culpable homicide not amounting to murder,” a charge that does not necessitate an arrest.⁵⁷

Owing to the previously-mentioned communal tensions in India, reports on the outbreak fell on fertile ground in Hindu nationalist circles, and it took very little time for the hashtags #CoronaJihad and #TablighiVirus to trend on Twitter. A close investigation of these Tweets would be worthwhile, as many seem to contain concocted stories about scholars exhorting Muslims to disregard social distancing, to cough and sneeze or smear objects to spread the virus. Doctored videos and audio

56 <https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/coronavirus-nizamuddin-tablighi-jamaat-markaz-the-story-of-indias-largest-covid-19-cluster/article31313698.ece> ; <https://www.thehindu.com/news/cities/Delhi/who-is-to-blame-for-virus-going-viral-from-nizamuddin/article31264902.ece>; the chronology of the meeting is unclear: According to Boaz (2020: 135) it started March 8, however, the main activity seems to have taken place between March 12 and 15.
57 <https://www.thehindu.com/>

[news/cities/Delhi/tablighi-jamaat-leader-booked-for-culpable-homicide-after-attendees-die-of-coronavirus/article31346315.ece](https://www.thehindu.com/news/cities/Delhi/tablighi-jamaat-leader-booked-for-culpable-homicide-after-attendees-die-of-coronavirus/article31346315.ece).

58 Harriss 2020: 96; Asif 2020: 153–155; <https://www.india.com/viral/trending-news-today-may-09-2020-tablighi-jamaat-delhi-police-crime-branch-finds-maulana-saads-audio-clip-doctored-sends-it-to-forensic-science-lab-4023963/>.
59 Mathew 2020.

60 <https://www.nationalheraldindia.com/india/uttarakhand-bjp-mla->

[gives-communal-advice-to-fight-coronavirus](https://indianexpress.com/article/india/coronavirus-outbreak-j-p-nadda-communal-colour-tablighi-jamaat-nizamuddin-6346539/) ; <https://indianexpress.com/article/india/coronavirus-outbreak-j-p-nadda-communal-colour-tablighi-jamaat-nizamuddin-6346539/>; <https://scroll.in/latest/959274/covid-19-separate-wards-for-hindu-and-muslim-patients-made-in-ahmedabad-hospital>.
61 <https://thewire.in/communalism/bjp-mla-says-tablighi-jamaat-members-can-be-shot-dead-for-not-seeking-treatment>; further examples: Boaz 2020: 136.

tapes also flourished in social media. Even prominent TV hosts participated in the baiting.⁵⁸

The Government of India sent mixed messages, both warning against giving the incident a “communal twist” and continuously emphasizing its importance.⁵⁹ Lower-ranking members of the ruling party did their best to fan the flames. In the state of Uttharkand, a member of the Legislative Assembly advised against shopping in Muslim shops, or patronizing barbers and shoemakers (jobs commonly associated with Muslims);⁶⁰ a member in Karnataka even said that Tablighis who had been avoiding treatment should be killed.⁶¹ The strong negative response to the incident was a major factor that motivated other Indian Muslim organizations to be extremely compliant with official measures, as mentioned before.

In contrast to the *ijtimā*’, the preaching tour of the Sikh guru, Baldev Singh, who had in early March 2021 arrived from a trip to Europe including Italy, and thus contributed to the spread of the epidemic in the Punjab, or the outbreak at a temple in Tirumala (Andhra Pradesh) were not similarly politicized.⁶² The fact that many members of the Tablighi Jamaat who recovered from COVID-19 donated plasma also received little attention.⁶³ This bias is far from unique: Emphasizing the negative aspects of communal behavior and downplaying the positive effects of communal commitment has been a common pattern when reporting on religious communities’ actions during the COVID-19 pandemic, as has been demonstrated with reference to the first super-spreader religious event in South Korea.⁶⁴ The Jamiat ul-Ulema-i Hind, the organization of Deobandi scholars, went to the Supreme court to bring action against the press and the social media in particular, which they claimed fomented communal hatred. The Chief Justice rejected the case, as an action would have curbed the freedom of the press.⁶⁵

Many Shiites in South Asia make pilgrimages (*ziyāra*) to the

62 <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-india-52061915>; <https://www.ctvnews.ca/health/coronavirus/super-spreader-guru-puts-indian-villages-on-high-alert-1.4872423>; <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-health-coronavirus-india-idUSKCN25612T>.

63 <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-india-52452468>.

64 Introvigne & Šorytė 2020.

65 <https://www.nationalheraldindia.com/india/sc-refuses-to-hear-plea-seeking-action-against-media-for-communalising-nizamuddin-markaz-issue>, further examples:

Mathew 2020.

66 Hart 2020.

67 <https://www.opindia.com/2020/03/pakistan-coronavirus-shia-sunni-virus-pilgrims-return-from-iran-taftan-border/>.

tombs of imams and their eminent descendants in Iraq, Syria, and Iran. Therefore, Shiites from both India and Pakistan were affected by the COVID-19 outbreak at the shrine of Fāṭemah-e Ma‘šūme in Qomm, perhaps the largest super-spreader religious event.⁶⁶ It is unsurprising that the fact that some of the first COVID-19 infections in Pakistan were detected among Shiites who had visited Qomm led to their being scapegoated on social media.⁶⁷ However, the whole country taken into consideration it is rather surprising that anti-Shiite agitation related to COVID-19 remained limited, but this may be because Sunni sectarian organizations themselves were hostile to COVID-19-prevention measures. However, there is one remarkable regional exception where the spreading of COVID-19 by Shiite pilgrims secularized on a larger scale: In Balochistan, public employees belonging to the Hazara, a Farsi-speaking Shiite ethnic group whose members fled from Afghanistan in the 1980s, and are easily recognizable by their Central Asian facial features, were forced to take leave from their government jobs by the provincial government, which accused them of spreading COVID-19, implying their close association with Iran. And although Hazara pilgrims returning from Iran were forced into quarantine, other travelers were not subjected to such treatment.⁶⁸

Initially, the presence of Indian pilgrims in Qomm and their return from Iran did not attract much attention. However, several hundred Shiite pilgrims were stranded in Iran after flights from that country were cancelled. The fact that the Indian government took no initiative in bringing home these pilgrims until a case was filed with the Supreme Court may be interpreted as indicating that the government does not consider itself responsible for its Muslim citizens abroad.⁶⁹

Islamic actors in South Asia and the New Media during the COVID-19 crisis

The minor importance of COVID-19 and of Internet communication to South Asian Muslim groups

68 <https://thediplomat.com/2020/04/covid-19-fans-religious-discrimination-in-pakistan/>; Mirza 2020a.

69 <https://www.thehindu.com/>

news/national/sc-seeks-govt-reply-on-over-800-stranded-pilgrims-in-iran/article31181703.ece

70 Urdu being considered as the national language and lingua franca

of South Asian Muslims, although the supporter of the party are primarily found among Pathans.

71 @juipakofficial; @MoulanaOfficial.

In general, the Internet and social media play a minor role—if any—in the communication strategies of South Asian Muslim organizations. Many of them, even some political parties, do not even have websites, for example, the Jamia-e Ulema Pakistan, the party of the Barelwis in Pakistan. The Deobandi Jamiat-e Ulema-e Islam Pakistan has an which provides pictures from the party's rallies. The choice of language – exclusively Urdu – indicates that the party targets a less Westernized segment of society⁷⁰ Two Twitter accounts, one related to the party, one to its leader Moulana Fazlur Rehman, serve similar purposes.⁷¹ COVID-19 receives hardly any attention on these platforms, with the exception of a Tweet in which Falzur Rehman states that the Pakistani government fails when it comes to combating COVID-19 in the same way as it demonstrates its inability on other fields.⁷² In March, another Deobandi scholar with a little-used Twitter account posted a prayer supposed to protect against infection by the Corona virus.⁷³

The Deobandi madrasa Jamia Binoria in Karachi has a blog that was reactivated in April 2020, after a five-year hiatus. The new entries are *nashīds* and videos from functions where the participants were apparently neither practicing physical distancing nor wearing face masks. The fatwa section includes no COVID-19-related items. This is particularly remarkable, as the director of the institution, Mufti Muhammad Naeem, died of this illness on June 20 2020, a fact that the Indian internet preacher Zakir Naik (s.b.) does not mention in the obituary.⁷⁴ Several videos on Binoria Media, its YouTube channel, which has a relatively large number of subscribers, show the funeral, but do not mention the circumstances of his death.⁷⁵

The websites of most Islamic movements and organizations in Pakistan neglect Corona and its effects on society as well. The Markazi Jamiat-Ahli Hadith Pakistan website resembles that of the JUIP, and the organization also communicates through a Facebook page and a YouTube channel (with 428 subscribers as of September 28, 2020). On the website there is a gap between a statement—unrelated to COVID-19—by the leader, Sajid Mir, on March 7 2020, and pictures from the annual convention in mid-September 2020.⁷⁶ The lacking interest in COVID-19 can even be observed on the Jamā‘at-i islāmī website, where one might expect more focus on public concerns. An exception to the rule is its volunteer organization, al-Khidmat, which publi-

72 <https://twitter.com/MoulanaOfficial/status/1271055813805772807>.

73 <https://twitter.com/UbaidUl63872193/status/1239783920939536385>.

74 <https://binoria.org/>; <https://binoria.org/dr-zakir-naik-on-mufti-muhammad-naeem-ra-condolence/>; <https://www.samaa.tv/news/2020/06/senior-religious-scholar-mufti-naeem-passes-away/>.

75 https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCNrE-QWJq_fsNoCLx-c8607w.

76 <https://ahlehadith.pk/>; <https://www.facebook.com/mjapak>; <https://www.youtube.com/c/ahlehadeespakistan>.

Tahir ul-Qadri

As mentioned above, Tahir ul-Qadri's movement, Minhāj ul-Qur'ān, is rooted in the Barelwi tradition, but he eliminated those aspects that earned the Barelwis the image of being particularly out of sync with the demands of the modern age. He discusses general religious questions, and he also addresses questions such as "Islam and science". In addition to his religious activities, Tahir ul-Qadri also led a political party, the Pakistani Awami Tehreek, which was not based on a specifically Islamic platform. Because of the "first past the post" election system, it had no electoral success, therefore the party focused on marches for electoral reform, which escalated into a violent clash that led to 14 deaths in 2014. After this, he focused on religious matters. Although activities of many other Barelwis focus on domestic matters, Tahir ul-Qadri seeks cooperation with Sufi-oriented Islamic movements in other parts of the world, and takes an irenic stance to Shiism.⁸¹ In Western media he has attracted some attention with his statement condemning terrorism and suicide bombings.⁸² Women play a larger role in his movement than the usually do in other South Asian Islamic organizations, given their seclusion at home. The Danish branch of the Minhāj ul-Qur'ān even emerged out of a women's study circle.⁸³ These aspects of Tahir ul-Qadri's approach may also explain why the Minhāj's the presence in communities of Pakistani descent abroad is particularly strong in countries where their educational level is high. Today, he communicates mainly through his YouTube channel (371 k subscribers March 25 2021), which he started in 2010. Currently, new clips are published at least once a day. Mostly, he addresses general religious issues, but on certain occasions, he presents series of lectures on a specific topic for example, in Muḥarram, when he exhorts Sunnis to demonstrate their love for the Prophet's family. However, public concerns are rarely addressed. The videos published during the initial phase of the COVID-19 crisis are exceptions. Formally, apart from some clips from debates, Tahir ul-Qadri's videos may be classified as frontal teaching, with the presenter sitting before his book shelves filled with the hadith collections and commentaries on the Qur'ān, sometimes fortifying himself with those volumes from which he is going to quote during the lecture.

Tahir ul-Qadri starts his contributions on COVID-19 by describing its symptoms and offering practical hygiene advice, such as hand-washing and disinfecting items,⁸⁴ then he empha-

81 Philippon 2011: 230–256;
Riexinger 2020 : 52.

82 <https://www.minhaj.org/english/oid/33357/BBC-News-Cleric-launches-counter-terrorism-curriculum.html>

83 Kühle & Larsen 2019, s. 235–236.

84 "Corona Virus & Prophetic Teachings | Shaykh-ul-Islam Dr. Muhammad Tahir-ul-Qadri" 04:00–5:40, 08:10–08:20.

85 "Corona Virus & Prophetic Teachings | Shaykh-ul-Islam Dr. Muhammad Tahir-ul-Qadri" 05:45–07:00.

86 "Corona Virus & Prophetic Teachings | Shaykh-ul-Islam Dr. Muhammad Tahir-ul-Qadri" 07:00–08:00.

87 "Corona Virus & Prophetic Teachings | Shaykh-ul-Islam Dr. Muhammad Tahir-ul-Qadri" 09:30–10:30.

sizes the necessity of avoiding gatherings,⁸⁵ and it is only after this that the first religious reference appears, namely, that the Prophet advised against travelling during an epidemic.⁸⁶ This is the starting point for an elaboration based on a variety of hadiths and reports from the Companions, which exhort Muslims to avoid any behavior that could spread an epidemic, which means complying with social distancing rules. He asserts that people always used to do so in the case of *tā'ūn* (plague), which according to him was also caused by a virus, not a bacterium.⁸⁷ The outbreaks he references were of a kind that the WHO would declare a “pandemic” today.⁸⁸ He then extensively discusses the hadith prohibiting travel to places where an epidemic is raging, and travel from one’s own area if it is struck by an epidemic.⁸⁹ Insights informed the behavior of the *ṣahāba* when the plague broke out in Kufa.⁹⁰ Furthermore, he refers to another group of hadiths, according to which the “sick” should not be mixed with the “healthy” (*lā yūridū l-mumriḍa ‘alā al-muṣiḥḥ*), conceding that it refers primarily to livestock (*mawāshī*), but passing over the fact that some of these traditions deny the idea of infectious diseases (‘*adwā*).⁹¹ He then refers to other traditions that urge the isolation of people infected with leprosy.⁹² Although Ṭahir ul-Qadri quotes extensively from Arabic sources, he uses a lot of anglicisms when explaining the objectives of the rulings, such as, “contagious disease,” “categorical,” “test positive,” “isolation/isolate” “quarantine,” “break up.” His use of this terminology bolsters his claim that modern responses to epidemics were already recommended by the Prophet.⁹³ Thus, he implicitly confirms his opinion that Islam and science are in harmony. Nevertheless, on another occasion he stresses the priority of medical concerns over religious ones. In contrast to the previously-

88 “Corona Virus & Prophetic Teachings | Shaykh-ul-Islam Dr. Muhammad Tahir-ul-Qadri” 11:40–.

89 “Corona Virus & Prophetic Teachings | Shaykh-ul-Islam Dr. Muhammad Tahir-ul-Qadri” 10:30–14:20; “Commandments for Friday and Congregation Prayers in mosques during Pandemic | Part-1” 09:25–10:35.; al-Bukhārī 5728 (book 76 no. 43).

90 “Corona Virus & Prophetic Teachings | Shaykh-ul-Islam Dr. Muhammad Tahir-ul-Qadri” 13:20–13:30

91 “Corona Virus & Prophetic Teachings | Shaykh-ul-Islam Dr. Muhammad Tahir-ul-Qadri” 19:00–22:40; al-Bukhārī 5771, 5773–5775 (book 76 no. 85, 87); Muslim 2221b; Ibn Māja 3541; Abū Dāwūd 3991; Dols 1977: 109–121.

92 “Corona Virus & Prophetic

Teachings | Shaykh-ul-Islam Dr. Muhammad Tahir-ul-Qadri” 23:00–26:30.

93 “Corona Virus & Prophetic Teachings | Shaykh-ul-Islam Dr. Muhammad Tahir-ul-Qadri” 15:15–16:45 (in particular, but throughout this and other clips).

94 Friday and Congregation Prayers in mosques during the Pandemic | Part 1” 04:45–06:00.

mentioned resistance of Pakistani ‘ulamā’ to the closing of mosques for congregational prayer, Tahir ul-Qadri endorses the closing of mosques and abstaining from congregational prayer, arguing that Corona is a crisis that resembles a war. Such exceptional circumstances necessitate reconsidering rules concerning fasting and prayer.⁹⁴ He underlines the urgency of the situation when he mentions that people who asymptomatic may also be infected.⁹⁵ In the first video on this topic, he extends the argument in favor of the general lockdown, with reference to a hadith that one should wait out an outbreak of the plague where one is at that time, with patience and trust in God’s reward. Thus, Islam recommends a “lockdown although the “scientific knowledge” was not “available” but in light of contemporary knowledge, the reason for this recommendation may be understood.⁹⁶ In such cases, it is recommended that one maintain a distance of *rumḥ aw rumḥayn* (“a lance or two”), which he identifies as three to six feet.⁹⁷ As there is no verse in the Qur’ān or a *ḥādīth* with provisions for prayer under the circumstances of an epidemic, Tahir ul-Qadri draws an analogy (*qiyās*) by referring to the dispensation from the Friday prayer in the case of heavy rains and flooding. As religion is not supposed to be a burden to the believer, under such circumstances it is appropriate to pray at home.⁹⁸

Although Tahir ul-Qadri prioritizes medical approaches for combating the pandemic, he emphasizes that religion must also play a role, when it comes to the individual level. It provides a “spiritual vaccine” that empowers believers to cope with the adverse effects of the social distancing measures. God’s “prescription” is to be followed as diligently as that of a doctor.⁹⁹ He elaborates for some time on the *an ‘amta ‘alayhim* and the *ghayri l-maghdūbi ‘alayhim* in the Fātiḥa (1:7) as evidence of divine guidance that protects those who abstain from misdeeds, before

95 “Commandments for Friday and Congregation Prayers in mosques during the Pandemic | Part 1” 03:40–04:00.

196 “Commandments for Friday and Congregation Prayers in mosques during the Pandemic | Part 1” 14:00–20:15; al-Bukhārī 6619 (book 82 no. 25)

97 “Commandments for Friday and Congregation Prayers in mosques

during Pandemic | Part 1” 23:50–27:40.

98 “Commandments for Friday and Congregation Prayers in mosques during Pandemic | Part 1” 33:20–37:56; “Special Prayer & Commandments for Friday and Congregation Prayers in mosques during the Pandemic |Part 2” 00:00–03:20.

99 “Spiritual Vaccine” 10:30–11:00.

100 “Spiritual Vaccine” 12:00–23:30.

101 “Spiritual Vaccine” 26:00–28:39; Langholm Larsen et al.: 18.

102 Fibiger & Riexinger 2021: 149–150, 155; Galal in this issue: <https://english.alaraby.co.uk/english/news/2020/3/14/kuwait-mosques-tell-believers-to-pray-at-home>; <https://www.theguardian.com/world/video/2020/mar/14/coronavirus-the-impact-on-islam-video>

presenting concrete approaches to handling anxiety, stress, and depression.¹⁰⁰ In the final section of the video, he says that the challenges must be overcome by withdrawing (*khalwa*) and the spirit of *i'tikāf* (self-isolation with a focus on rituals). He hints at a sequel in which he will elaborate on this topic; however, this never appeared.¹⁰¹

The repertoire of Prophetic traditions to which Tahir ul-Qadri refers is fairly common, as the same hadiths were already mentioned in the first fatwa issued in Singapore on February 18 2020, which advocated closing the mosques, and were often cited in the Arab World.¹⁰²

Zakir Naik

Zakir Naik (b. 1965) is an “Islamic influencer” from Mumbai. He did not formally study to become a religious scholar, but a physician, but nevertheless he has been engaged in *da'wa* activities since his teens, and turned this into his profession. The organizational backbone of his preaching activities is the Islamic Research Foundation, which he launched, and his most important propaganda tool the YouTube-channel, *Peace TV*. Sometimes labelled a Salafi, his religious standpoint is instead Deobandi. The main focus of his preaching reflects classical apologetic subjects, such as favorably comparing Islam to other religions, and demonstrating that Islam is compatible with science (implying that the theory of evolution is not science). He occasionally preaches in Urdu, but primarily in English, which accounts for the audience he has attracted outside of South Asia.¹⁰³ In India and in Western countries he has been declared a supporter of terrorism, but no such claim have been substantiated, and his preaching includes no incitement to violence. Nevertheless, India revoked his passport in 2017, and he is now settled in Malaysia.

Unlike Tahir ul-Qadri, Zakir Naik did not immediately address COVID-19, which he explained by noting that “every Tom, Dick, and Harry” felt entitled to say something about it, which led to a wave of “fake news.”¹⁰⁴ Even worse, some persons not qualified as *mujtahids* arrogated to themselves to come forth with Islamic guidance.¹⁰⁵ Even in the medical profession, a only small numbers of virologists is qualified to say something about the Corona virus. He then explains the history of its discovery, the harmless and dangerous variations of Corona viruses, and the specific challenges of Corona.¹⁰⁶ Only then does he address-

103 Riexinger 2020: 55; his influence is particularly strong among young Muslims in Norway: Bangsta & Linge 2015.

104 “Dr. Zakir Naik on Corona Virus” 01:00–04:30.

105 “Dr. Zakir Naik on Corona Virus” 04:30–05:00.

106 “Dr. Zakir Naik on Corona Virus” 05:00–13:40; also the basis for the argument in, “Should Muslims follow Social Distancing for Fear of Coronavirus? – Dr. Zakir Naik.”

107 “Dr. Zakir Naik on Corona Virus” 13:40–16:30.

108 “Dr. Zakir Naik on Corona Virus” 16:30–17:39.

109 “If a Muslim doctor dies of treating a patient with COVID-19, will he get the Sawaab of a Martyr?”

es COVID-19 from a Islamic point of view. Like Tahir ul-Qadri, he quotes the hadith that prohibits travel to and from places where the plague has broken, out and those with injunctions against physical contact with lepers.¹⁰⁷ Finally, he cites a hadith that declares the plague a punishment for those who deserve it, whereas it is a blessing for the believer, as those who die of the epidemic are martyrs.¹⁰⁸ Weeks later he reversed this position and stated that a doctor who dies because he was infected while helping patients who are infected with Corona will not receive the reward (*thawāb*) of a martyr in the hereafter, but only the reward for saving lives, as not every epidemic is the plague.¹⁰⁹

When it comes to closing mosques, he declares that this is acceptable in those cases that the government has consulted both medical experts and the *fuqahā*, but he does not consider it appropriate in countries where no cases of COVID-19 have been reported. However, infected persons should in any case stay home, and mosques should take measures to ensure the necessary distance between those who pray, and provide disinfectants. Moreover, the doing the washing and supererogatory prayers at home diminishes the danger of infection. Abstaining from prayer out of fear is not recommended.¹¹⁰ Stating that various scholars hold different opinions, he himself abstains from determining whether a congregational prayer will be counted as congregational prayer or just as individual prayer if a six foot distance is kept.¹¹¹

Jamā‘at-i islāmī-i Hind

The Jamā‘at-i islāmī in India makes many of its public functions available on its Facebook page, and throughout the first half of 2020 the organization dedicated much attention to COVID-19. In a speech given at a seminar on COVID-19, the leader, Syed Sadatullah Husseini, complains that Muslims do not show enough interest in modern science, which is essential for coping with the pandemic, just as it has made life easier in many respects. He emphasizes this by asserting that the Prophet encouraged finding out about technical advances in the military field.¹¹² After complaining about ethnic persecution and refugees, and about the increasing gap between rich and poor, he admits that the relation of these topics to COVID-19 is not “scientific”, but “ethical”, as the Qur’ān relates how people who indulged in self-aggrandizing behavior were punished by floods or similar dis-

110 “Should Mosques be Closed During the Coronavirus COVID-19 Pandemic All Over the World? – Dr. Zakir Naik”

111 “Is Prayer valid when we Pray as a congregation in a Mosque keeping 6 ft distance between 2 worshippers?”

112 “Lessons of COVID-19 for Humanity” 06:00–14:45.

113 “Lessons of COVID-19 for Humanity” 21:20–23:30.

114 “Lessons of COVID-19 for Humanity” 28:30–32:30.

115 “Lessons of COVID-19 for Humanity” 32:30–33:10.

asters.¹¹³ Furthermore, he argues that the Corona virus is a result of the “ecological imbalance” caused by abusing the plenty God has bestowed on mankind for the production of luxuries, and thereby threatening the last refuges of biodiversity. It is here that pathogens transgress the species boundary and infect humans. He also quotes “Ghandiji,” to emphasize that the Earth has resources enough for everybody, if used responsibly.¹¹⁴ Therefore, one has to hope that the simpler life under the lockdown will teach humanity a lesson, and convince people to lead more austere lives.¹¹⁵ Such ecological references are rarely found in Islamic discourses on COVID-19 in South Asia and elsewhere, but are frequent in Hindu debates, hence such remarks reflect the influence of the Jamā‘at’s interaction with Hindu leaders.¹¹⁶ Like Tahir ul-Qadri’s, Urdu Husseini’s is highly anglicized, to suggest that the speaker is up to date on the medical and administrative aspects of the crisis.

Raziul Islam Nadvi, the secretary of the Jamā‘at-I islāmi Hind, addresses the topic of Islamic rules for containing the pandemic. He starts with the ḥadīths that urge the separation of the sick and the healthy, but unlike Tahir ul-Qadri, he acknowledges that there is a problem, as these traditions deny the concept of infection. Nadvi circumvents this by asserting that infections happen only because of God’s will.¹¹⁷ According to him, the correctness of the hadith advising against travel to or from a place stricken by the plague is proven by the of COVID-19 spread from China by travelers.¹¹⁸ However, his arguments are not derived only from the early history of Islam. He also relates Ibn Ḥajar al-‘Asqallānī’s (1372–1449) observation that initially about 40 people per day were dying of the plague in Cairo, but after believers gathered in mosques to pray for help against the epidemic, the daily death toll rose to 1000.¹¹⁹

Other speakers for Jamā‘at-i islāmi address questions such as the economic and environmental impact of the COVID-19 crisis.¹²⁰ Moreover, in line with its commitment to the interfaith dialogue it has developed in India, the Jamā‘at-i islāmi organized an online conference of religious leaders, to discuss how religions may help to combat the Corona pandemic. No other Islamic organization participated, and remarkably, the National Trustee of the Bahai in India—generally considered heretics among Muslims—was invited to contribute (the other contributions came from Hindu, Sikh, Buddhist, and Spiritualist

116 Fibiger 2021: 170.

117 “Protection from Corona and Islamic Teachings” 05:00–08:20.

118 “Protection from Corona and Islamic Teachings” 11:40–13:20.

119 “Protection from Corona and Islamic Teachings” 21:10–22:30.

120 <https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=195079198591245>; <https://www.facebook.com/JIHMarkaz/videos/627552101179333/>.

121 <http://jamaateislamihind.org/eng/corona-crisis-message-from-religious-scholars/>; “Re-Telecast || Messages from Religious Scholars”; in Kerala, Muslim scholars participated in an interreligious anti-Corona prayer organized by Christians: <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/kochi/religious-leaders-come-together-in-kerala-for-joint-online-prayer-to-overcome-covid-19/articleshow/75519983.cms>

122 Gugler 2011: 99–103.

scholars). The highly Sanskritized Hindi of many of the contributions transcend the linguistic abilities of the author, therefore no analysis of these is provided here.¹²¹

Ilyās Qādrī

The leader of Da‘wat-i islāmī, a Barelwi missionary organization modelled after the Tablighī to counter its influence,¹²² addresses his followers’ questions in YouTube videos. Here, he also addressed questions regarding the COVID-19 several times in March and April 2020. His answers differ considerably from the statements of those discussed above as they reflect his very traditional religious outlook. Whereas the Tahir ul-Qadri, Naik, and the Jamā‘at-i islāmī Hind emphasize the importance of science for combating COVID-19 and their grasp of the scientific approaches involved, Ilyās Qādrī declares that with the COVID-19, which has brought the world to a standstill, God has taught the great powers, and also science, a lesson, demonstrating that everything is under his power.¹²³ He does not address questions such as the closing of mosques, but takes the lockdown for granted when he condemns hoarding, and urges that food be provided for the poor.¹²⁴ His attitude to established medical science remains unclear. On the one hand he promotes remedies based on hearsay: To protect themselves, people should inhale steam, something he has heard from various sources, but hot tea also works as a preventive;¹²⁵ on the other hand, he urges his followers to donate blood, to prevent a shortage of blood needed by thalassemia patients.¹²⁶ In another video he stresses that there is an illness that is worse than COVID-19—sin—hence, one should be more concerned with this. Missing prayer once is enough to lead to Hellfire.¹²⁷ Like other Barelwis, he has also published a *du‘ā* against COVID-19 on YouTube.¹²⁸

123 “Coronavirus Ka Challenge | Coronavirus Ne Science Ko Bhi Hara Diya | Duniya Me Coronavirus Ka Khauf”; “Coronavirus Pori Duniya Ke Liya Khatarnak | Aik Corona Ka Sab Ko Harana | Allah Ki Qaudrat Or Corona.”

124 “Coronavrius Or Gareebon Ka Haq | Gareebon Ki Khidmat Karny

Walon ko Maulana Ka Mashwara.”

125 “#Covid19 Se Bachne Ka Behtreen Tarika | Asan Nuskha Corona Sy Bachna Ka | Mualana Ilyas Qadri.”

126 “Thalassemia Ke Mareez ko Khoon Den | Lock Down Or Thalassemia Kay Mareez | Blood Donations Needed!”

127 “Aik Beemari Jo Corona Sey Bhi Bari Hai | Coronavirus Ki Waja Sey ALLAH Sey Daren | Coronavirus Or Hum” 03:55–end.

28 https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=q_DGito4eAQ.

129 Ahmed 2020: 258; Boaz 2020: 135.

Final remarks

One common characteristic of South Asian Islamic responses to the COVID-19 pandemic is that the reality of the pandemic and its status as a transmissible disease are generally acknowledged. At an early stage of the pandemic, some scholars doubted that it was a transmissible disease,¹²⁹ but the systematic denials uttered by conservative Christian groups in the West, Latin America, and Africa, or by esoteric/new religious circles were not found. In no source that has come to my attention has reference been made to humoral medicine (*yūnānī ṭibb*) promising relief, although in both India and Pakistan numerous ‘ulamā’ practice this, in addition to their religious activities. This contrasts with Ayurvedic remedies for COVID-19 being promised among Hindus.¹³⁰ No actor whose statements have been analyzed clings to the traditional Sunni position that transmission does not exist (a sub-aspect of the denial of natural causes).¹³¹ Apparently, modern science has much authority among South Asian Islamic actors, when its usefulness is apparent, as in cases of biomedicine. Nevertheless, this does not apply to less practical, but theologically more charged questions: Both Tahir ul-Qadri and Naik are advocates of Islamic creationism.¹³² The hadith material chosen is interpreted in a way that makes it appear to anticipate modern medical knowledge.

Non-compliance with government imposed COVID-19 related measures occurred due to either a demonstrative lack of interest in current or “worldly” affairs, as in the case of the Tablighī Jamā‘at, or they were justified by the argument that even a pandemic is not a sufficient reason to prohibit congregational prayer, as was the case of Pakistani Sunni leaders’ resistance to closing the mosques. Furthermore, the latter only opposed the cancellation of Friday prayer, not the closure of public life in general, including other religious meetings. No religious group or leader tried to assume the role of a spokesperson for those economically harmed by the lockdowns, as Pentecostal churches did, with some success, in Latin America.¹³³ Those who justified the closing of mosques did so based on analogies related to the hadiths; no references to the concept of *maṣlaḥa* and the five objectives of law – a minority position in pre-modern legal theory, which has become very influential since the late 19th century – were to be found. In the framework of this legal approach danger to life trumps the necessity of rituals. This ar-

130 Fibiger 2021: 173; Riexinger et al. 2021: 134; Fibiger & Riexinger 2021: 156.

131 Fibiger & Riexinger 2021: 156.

132 Riexinger 2020: 52–53, 55–58

133 Thorsen 2021: 146.

134 Begović 2020: 247–248; Fibiger & Riexinger 2021: 155–156; Opwis 2019.

135 Riexinger et al. 2021: 137–138; Kühle in this issue.

gument played an important role legitimizing the closing of mosques in the Arab World, South East Asia, and Bosnia.¹³⁴

The opposing attitudes of Sunni scholars in India and Pakistan to the suspension of communal prayer highlights the completely different positions of Muslim leaders in these societies. As in other countries where Muslims are a minority that many regard with suspicion, in India, most Islamic organizations, institutions, and public figures tended to emphasize their willingness to follow instructions and often to do more than necessary, to present Muslims as committed and responsible members of society.¹³⁵

In Pakistan, a Muslim- and more precisely, Sunni-majority country, where religious scholars and most institutions are largely autonomous, the COVID-19 crisis was a welcome opportunity for the Sunni religious establishment to demonstrate their power vis-à-vis the government. And as on many previous occasions, they succeeded. Hence, the situation also differs considerably from that in most Arab countries, where the religious sphere is controlled by the state. Ahmed ignores this dependence on the state in other countries, when he argues that the position of the Pakistani scholars reflects a distrust of the state nurtured by British rule.¹³⁶ Actually the—admittedly not completely consequential—British policy of non-interference in the religious sphere was a precondition for the significant autonomy of religious organizations in Pakistan.¹³⁷

Notably, of the prominent Pakistani Sunni scholars, the one who took a different approach was Tahir ul-Qadri, who considers the sensibilities of more secular, better-educated groups, particularly abroad. Shiite religious leaders in Pakistan took on the “responsible minority” role, and thus followed a similar pattern to that of Muslim religious leaders in India, reflecting the fact that for Sunni sectarians in Pakistan, Shiites represent “the other,” undermining the nation, similar to the role Hindu communalists in India ascribe to Muslims. In both cases, the stance also reflects that the communities had become suspect because of super-spreader events.

Finally, South Asian Islamic debates influenced developments abroad. Tahir ul-Qadri’s *Minhaj ul Qur’an*, which is strongly represented among Pakistani Muslims in Denmark, and has a special “health branch” with a medical doctor as its main contributor, very actively urged Muslims to comply with government rules.¹³⁸ In contrast the opposition to the closing of mosques in Pakistan has apparently influenced the reluctant at-

136 Brown et al. 2020; Fahmi 2020; Galal 2021; Ahmed 2020.

137 Riexinger 2004: 335, 607, 611; Zaman 2018: 14–23; although the autonomy alone cannot completely explain the obstinacy as governments succeeded in convincing fairly autonomous Islamic organizations: Sukamto & Parulian 2020; https://www.lepoint.fr/afrique/senegal-le-coronavirus-au-confluent-du-politique-et-du-religieux-14-03-2020-2367166_3826.php.

138 “Live om corona i lyset af koran og hadith”; <https://www.facebook.com/MinhajSundhed/>

139 Birt 2020, with links to three relevant Deobandi fatwas.

140 South Africa: North Gauteng High Court, Pretoria 2020.

titude of South Asian linked organizations to in Great Britain, in particular those with a Deobandi background, to the closing of mosques,¹³⁹ and in South Africa they even tried to sue for a repeal of the ban on communal prayers.¹⁴⁰

Danish Abstract:

Ligesom i verdens fleste lande reagerede Indiens og pakistans regeringer med nedlukninger på spredning af COVID-19 virus som i princippet skulle også inkludere religiøse institutioner og ritualer. I Pakistan blev de sunnitiske moskeer dog åbne fordi regeringen havde ingen hjemmel for at gennemtvunge nedlukningen imod de autonome religiøse organisationer. I Indien fulgte de muslimske organisationer dog, og forsøgte at vise sig som det “ansvarlige mindretal” grundet spændinger med den hindunationalistiske regering og også fordi en forsamling af Tablighī Jamā'at havde bidraget betydeligt til spredning af smittet i landet og udenfor. I Pakistan var det derimod shiiterne som spillede rolle som det “ansvarlige mindretal” ved at lukke moskeerne. I det hele set viste muslimske organisationer og ledere ingen stor interesse i tage til sygdommen, dem som ytrer sig på internettet henvender sig i forvejen til et højere uddannet publikum og er mere positivt indstillet over for nedlukninger.

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