**Islamic Bioethical Approach to Control Covid-19 Pandemic**

**Abstract**

The *Qur’ān* and the *Sunnah*are sources of across-the-board moral and ethical guides for life, which can help people in achieving success and prosperity in this life and the hereafter. Their guidelines can used to provide a coherent global bioethical paradigm. Therefore, one should approach them for considering bioethical issues in the right direction. Islamic teachings put emphasis on trust in God as well as on using means of protection in pandemic situations. In this time of coronavirus pandemic, people are in need of guidance to cope with this situation. Islamic bioethical guidelines are helpful in this regard. The Qur’ānic and Prophetic teachings about communicable diseases, such as leprosy, plague, and other infections demonstrate how one should respond in situations of such outbreak.

**Key words:** *Qur’ān,* *Sunnah*, Islamic Bioethics, Covid-19, Pandemic

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**Introduction**

Coronaviruses are a large family of viruses that cause illness ranging from the common cold to more severe diseases, such as the Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS) and the Middle East respiratory syndrome (MERS), both of which have high mortality rates and were detected for the first time in 2003 and 2012, respectively. A new coronavirus, known as ‎“SARS-CoV-2”, was reported from Wuhan City, China, in December 2019. It gradually spread to other countries causing the “Covid-19 pandemic.”[[1]](#footnote-1)

The *Qur’ān* and *Sunnah*emphasize the protection of human life (*ḥifẓ al-nafs*), which is one of the essential objectives of Islamic law mentioned by al-Shāṭibī (d. 790/1388).[[2]](#footnote-2) Therefore, it has been asserted in Islamic sources that every step shall be taken to preserve and protect human life. For instance, the Holy *Qur’ān* revealed in the second chapter: *“Do not throw yourselves, with your own hands, into ruin”.[[3]](#footnote-3)* The Prophet Muḥammad(peace and blessing be upon him) also instructed that there shall be no infliction of harm from one person to another: *“There should be neither harming nor reciprocating harm” (lā ḍarar wa lā ḍirār*). [[4]](#footnote-4)

From an Islamic point of view‎, one should learn the obligations of responding to this calamity. In spite of being a natural part of our lives, all illnesses including the Covid-19 are tests from God. The Almighty demands His servants to face these trials with patience and remain steadfast. The Holy Qur’ān reveals: *“We shall certainly test you with fear and hunger, and loss of property, lives, and crops. But (Prophet), give good news to those who are steadfast.”[[5]](#footnote-5)* Therefore, one should exhaust all his resources to protect himself and other fellow human beings from this calamity and achieve the level of patience and steadfastness.

In the pre-modern world, epidemics and pandemics were a recurring phenomenon. In his book, *Epidemics and Pandemics*, published in 2005, J.N. Hays discusses fifty epidemics chronologically including three plague pandemics that began in the sixth, fourteenth, and nineteenth centuries and the influenza pandemic of 1918–1919. Some of them resulted in high death tolls and serious social disruption over wide areas, whereas others affected particular communities in especially challenging ways. Hays’ study shows that human responses to pandemics had underwent significant changes during the course of history.[[6]](#footnote-6) Covid-19 pandemic is no exception. It has also molded human lives on to a new pattern. Provided the advancements and innovations in epidemiology and virology, it is an established opinion that today human race is in a better position to deal with the coronavirus infection.

On March 11, 2020, the World Health Organization has expressed that coronavirus is a pandemic, affecting an unusually large percentage of the population over a large geographical range.[[7]](#footnote-7) This virus, technically termed as Covid-19, has greater transmission rate than MERS, SARS, and influenza. According to the CDC (Centre for Disease Control, USA) Covid-19 transmits through respiratory droplets produced when an infected person sneezes or coughs. Moreover, it may also transmit when an individual touches the contaminated things or surfaces and then touches his eyes, nose, or mouth. Keeping in mind this basic knowledge about Covid-19 infection, certain bioethical guidelines may be drawn in the light of Islamic teachings.

**Islamic Bioethical Guidelines for Coronavirus Pandemics**

The directives which Islamic teachings deliver us in the situation of pandemic may be theological or medical. The medical guidelines may relate to general measures of protection against infections or specific measures against certain kinds of infections. As far as Covid-19 infection is concerned, specific measures shall be taken as given below:

1. **Quarantine and Isolation:**

Quarantine and isolation are two different terms that are used often mistakenly to describe one phenomenon. Quarantine is defined as the restraint or segregation of human beings or other living creatures, who may have come, either potentially or actually, into contact with transmissible pathologies, until the moment when it is considered certain that they no longer constitute a health risk.[[8]](#footnote-8) In contrast to quarantine, isolation is defined as separation of infective, for the period of communicability, from others in such a way as to prevent or limit the direct or indirect transmission of the infectious agent.[[9]](#footnote-9) Hence, quarantine denotes restrictions upon the activities of *susceptible* persons or animals, whereas isolation denotes restrictions upon the *infected* persons or animals.

Quarantine is a crucial measure that WHO recommends to lessen the impact of Covid-19 pandemic. In fact, this principle is not novel; Prophet Muḥammad (peace be upon him) set up strategies more than fourteen hundred years back which the public health authorities apply today. He forbade travelling to areas known to be plagued and directed people who were in infected societies to stay at their place and avoid spreading the infection far afield. He said, *“If you hear that there is a plague in a land, do not enter it; and if it (plague) visits a land while you are therein, do not go out of it”.*[[10]](#footnote-10) Moreover, one who stays at the infected place and dies out of an infection is rewarded the death of a martyr. The Prophet Muḥammad said: *“The one who flees from the plague is like one who flees from battle, so whoever endures patiently will have the reward of a martyr.”[[11]](#footnote-11)*

The Prophet Muḥammad (peace be upon him) has also told the medical strategy of ‘isolation’. He advised to stay away from lepers: *“One should run away from the leper as one runs away from a lion.”*[[12]](#footnote-12) Once the Prophet (peace be upon him) sent a leper back and did not allow him to come and take oath of allegiance.[[13]](#footnote-13) One of his saying categorically highlights the practice of isolation. He said: *“A sick (camel or person) should not be taken to the healthy one.”*[[14]](#footnote-14) These *aḥādīth* are strong arguments in favour of isolation. The leper was sent back by him to avoid the spread of disease to others. He said to him, “Go back, we have taken your oath.” This shows that the leper was not asked to come at some other moment when no one is around.[[15]](#footnote-15)

Such instructions about contagious diseases, like Covid-19, appeared at a time when germ theory unknown to the world. Robert Koch (1843-1910) proposed the germ theory in the final decades of the 19th century as a result of his experimentation on anthrax.[[16]](#footnote-16) Subsequently, it was discovered that people, living in or visiting the afflicted areas are germ carriers, they might transfer the plague to other places if they travel to it even if they are looking healthy with no symptoms. They would interact with healthy individuals, and as a result, they might cause them to catch the infection.

By virtue of the findings about plagues and contagious ailments, a worldwide renowned and modern system of quarantine was established. The practice began during the 14th century to protect coastal cities of Italy, Ragusa and Venice, from plague. The ships arriving at these cities from infected ports were required to sit at anchor for 40 days. The modern idea of quarantine is founded in the International Sanitary Conference in 1851 in response to the cholera epidemics.[[17]](#footnote-17) As a preventive measure, quarantine for 14 days is required in the Covid-19 infection because it takes 1-14 days for the incubation before common symptoms of fever, dry cough, or fatigue reveal in infected patients. During this period, the carriers are capable for spreading the infection. Therefore, although the disease will not seriously affect many infected people, they can be harmful by transmitting it to people who are at higher risk.

1. **Sanitization & Hygiene**

To reduce the risk of transmitting Covid-19, ‎public health authorities encourage [personal disinfection and cleaning](https://www1.health.gov.au/internet/publications/publishing.nsf/Content/ohp-enhealth-manual-atsi-cnt-l~ohp-enhealth-manual-atsi-cnt-l-ch3~ohp-enhealth-manual-atsi-cnt-l-ch3.7)  especially frequent hand washing for at least 20 seconds with sanitizer. In the context of adopting good hygiene, the Qur’ān attributes great importance to observing cleanliness in all circumstances. Allāh the Almighty says: *“God loves those who are clean”.[[18]](#footnote-18)* Prophet Muḥammad(peace be upon him) stressed that *“cleanliness is half of faith”*.[[19]](#footnote-19) Many regular practices guided by him to every Muslims are very hygienic and reduce the risk of infections. Such practices include washing hands upon awakening, washing hands before and after eating, performing ablution and washing five times a day for prayers, washing hands before and after eating and covering mouth when sneezing.

1. **Use of Face Masks:**

The wearing of a mask as a protection against disease was advised by Henrot as early as 1868, many years before the emergence of germ theory. After the discovery of germs as causative agents in infectious diseases, it was found that many healthy people harbor viable pathologic bacteria in their throats and expel them with their breath. Hence, the idea of using face masks to prevent the spread of infections emerged.[[20]](#footnote-20)

It is *Sunnah* of the Prophet Muḥammad (peace be upon him) to cover mouth while sneezing and yawning. The Messenger of Allāh said: “The sneeze is from Allāh and the yawn is from devil. So when one of you yawns let him cover his mouth with his hand.”[[21]](#footnote-21) Similarly, it is narrated that “when the Prophet would sneeze, he would cover his face with his hand or with his garment, and muffle the sound with it.”[[22]](#footnote-22) The practice of covering the mouth or nose while yawning and sneezing refers to a protective way in case of droplet infections. The Covid-19 is also a droplet infection; therefore, a face mask is important to reduce the transmission of infection.

1. **Social Distancing:**

The practices to limit interactions between plague-ridden and uninfected inhabitants include patient isolation, use of personal protective equipment, and closing of school, travel restrictions, social distancing, and avoiding sharing commonly used items. The WHO advises to maintain at least 1 meter distance between people when they speak, sneez, or cough to reduce the risk of corona virus infection.[[23]](#footnote-23) This practice was taught by the Prophet when he said: “*Don’t stare the leper constantly and when you talk to them there should be a distance of a spear (usually more than 1 meter) between you and them*.”[[24]](#footnote-24) Since leprosy spread by the release of air droplets containing the bacteria, known as *Mycobacterium leprae*, when a person with the disease coughs or sneezes,[[25]](#footnote-25) it is highly recommendable to stay away from him at a distance of a spear. Staring a leper continuously cannot transmit the disease, but it might arouse sympathy for him that will cause the viewer to get close to him and social distancing might be breached.

Another *ḥadīth* refers to the concept of social distancing. “Amr b. Sharīd reported on the authority of his father that there was in the delegation of Thaqīf a leper. Allāh's Prophet (peace be upon him) sent a message to him: We have accepted your allegiance, so you may go.”[[26]](#footnote-26) The leper was sent back to maintain distancing. His presence would have allowed mixing with the healthy and caused spread of infection.

Based on these guidelines, whenever there is a risk of an epidemic, adequate preventive measures would be required. The decision to stop religious ceremonial activities should be obliged after consultation with public health professionals. Handshaking with other Muslims is not obligatory in Islam; it is a recommended act. The gestures of fist bump (punch) or putting one hand over the heart are enough to convey love, respect, and send greetings to others. Friday congregational prayer is obligatory for adult men only, and a minimum number of four persons may be allowed to attend the prayer in mosques. Individuals associated with a higher risk of infection, i.e. in old age and immune-compromised may be distinguished under “sick” category and may not be allowed to attend the congregational pray. The “risk” is relative, but attention should be paid to the severity of the coronavirus mortality in susceptible individuals.

1. **Vaccination and other Medication**

Use of vaccines, antibiotics, and antivirals, depending on the etiology of infection, can play a key role to mitigate the effect of contagious diseases by reducing the infectivity of symptomatic patients and the susceptibility of uninfected people. Such medicines may be used to save human life which is tantamount to saving the humanity at large. The Qur’ān states: “*And if any one saved a life, it would be as if he saved the life of all humankind.”[[27]](#footnote-27)*

Covid-19 has posed a serious challenge to pharmacological companies to prepare vaccine to cope with this infection. Many attempts are in progress but no one has claimed success yet. Even when a vaccine will come, a large amount of it would be needed to fulfill the need of mankind. Its cost-effectiveness will be another issue. Despite all restraints and failures, the struggle to prepare vaccine shall not be stopped because the Prophet Muḥammad (peace be upon him) has said that there is a cure to every illness. *“Allāh has sent both the disease and cure, and there is a cure for every illness, therefore be treated but do not be treated with haram.”[[28]](#footnote-28)*

1. **Prohibition on Eating Vermin**

According to the Islamic teachings, all evil and unlawful as regards things, deeds, beliefs, persons and foods is prohibited. It has been summed up in the Quran as a single term, *al-khabā’ith*. It says: *“He (the Prophet Muḥammad)) commands them to do good and forbids them from evil, permits for them what is lawful and forbids to them what is impure. (al-khabā’ith).” [[29]](#footnote-29)* What has been prohibited includes impure food, including the practice of eating vermin, such as scorpions, dung beetles, rats, insects, reptiles are prohibited (*haram*).

The Prophet Muḥammad (PBUH) states that*“(There are) five animals, all of which are evil and should be killed in the Haram (Sanctuary of Makkah). These include crows, kites [a kind of bird], scorpions, rats and vicious dogs.”[[30]](#footnote-30)* Imam Bukhari narrated that the Prophet used to seek refuge from every vermin in these words: *“O Allāh! I seek refuge with Your Perfect Words from every devil and every vermin, and from every bad eye.”[[31]](#footnote-31)* These traditions indicate his aversion to the concept of eating vermin.

The origin of the Covid-19 pandemic is thought to be eating of seafood in Wuhan city of China, according to early reports. Prof Stephen Turner, head of the department of microbiology at Melbourne’s Monash University, says what’s most likely is that virus originated in bats.[[32]](#footnote-32) A general prohibition on eating such animals, as prescribed in Islam, would have prevented mankind from this catastrophe. Now, according to media reports, the Government of China has announced a ban on consuming wild animals and put restrictions on hunting, transporting and trading of forbidden species.[[33]](#footnote-33)

1. **Ritual Cleansing of the Deceased**

It is a religious obligation on Muslims to bury corpses with respect and dignity as accorded to the deceased. Muslim funeral rites include washing, shrouding in white cloth and praying in the honour of the dead. Ritual bathing, clothing and burial demand special attention in case of dead bodies with infectious diseases, such as Covid-19 infection. The rites must be performed by someone who has protective clad or who is vaccinated against that particular infection which the dead body carries. The funeral prayer must be performed by a very limited number of people to fulfill the obligation (*farḍ kifāyah*). This may be allowed to perform funeral prayer of such patients in absence of dead body. Islamic teachings recommend immediate burial whose wisdom is to avoid the spread of infection from the deceased.

1. **Remedy is from *Allāh***

Other than the medical preventive measures, the theological measures must also be borne in mind. The faith in the trust on Allāh is also essential. It brings hope and an optimist’s immunity is better than a pessimist’s. The Prophet *Ibrahim* taught us that remedy of ever illness comes from the Bounty of Allāh: *“And when I am ill, it is He who cures me”.[[34]](#footnote-34)*

Muslims must keep faith in Allāh Almighty and agree with what is destined for them. In addition to this, they must also use rational personal protective equipment as precautionary measures in high risk threat such as coronavirus pandemic. In the Qur’ān, Allāh has stressed upon “*Taqwā*” (God-fearing) and “*Tawakkul*” (reliance upon God) side by side. According to Islamic teachings, certain things are not in the control of human beings. Therefore, we should strengthen our beliefs concerning to happiness, death, calamity, honor, respect and disrespect as all of them come from Allāh Almighty. The current coronavirus outbreak also justifies turning to Islamic teachings to deal with this global pandemic.

1. **Constant Supplications**

Constant supplications to AllāhAlmighty are needed to protect oneself from this Covid-19 outbreak, because Allāh is the Only, Ultimate Sanctuary and Savior. Several *aḥādīth* urge Muslims on reciting *adhkār* and *du‘ā*  to protect themselves from evils and threats, whose general meaning includes roll-over protection against various diseases and epidemics. These supplications include the following: *“In the name of Allāh with Whose name nothing can harm on earth or in heaven, and He is the All hearing, All knowing”*.[[35]](#footnote-35) Such supplications pursue refuge with Allāh Almighty. These supplications, which come from the Qur’ān and *ḥadīth*, are the means to ensure the protection, safety and security of all harms.

1. **The Balance Between Precautions and Reliance on God**

A medical-theological debate has always run among Muslims scholars in the past; it is present even today. Muslim scholars are divided on the subject of communicable or infectious diseases into two groups. The reflection of this division is also present in case of Covid-19 infection. Some of them say that the emergence of Covid-19 is an active creation of Allāh Almighty. On the other hand, some have faith in that such pandemics are a sort of warning and punishment from God for and personal excesses, environmental destruction and consumerism, so to fight with Covid-19 is useless and people should rely (*tawakul*) on Allāh Almighty.

Islamic intellectuals oppose this fatalistic approach by giving argument that if the pandemics such as Covid-19 emergence were not under human control, the spread of the infection is certain. Our beloved Prophet Muḥammad(peace may be upon him) guided his follower who didn’t tie his camel because he trusted in Allāh Almighty:

Anas (may Allāh blessed with him) reported that a man asked the Prophet Muḥammad (peace be upon him) that; “May I tie my camel and have trust in Allāh for their protection, or should I leave her untied and have trust? The Prophet replied, “Tie her (camel) and have tawakul”.[[36]](#footnote-36) Additionally, Prophet hasnot only asked himselffor medical treatment but also he encouraged his disciples for seeking treatments. He says; *“God has not made a disease without appointing a remedy for it, with the exception of one disease – old age”*.[[37]](#footnote-37)

**Conclusion**

These medical and theological Islamic bioethical guidelines are aimed to benefit humankind in enhancing their well-being.  Quarantine or isolation, use of face masks and sanitizers, social distancing and limited movements are comprehensive and effective public health strategies. These methods, adopted in the 21st century, to prevent the transmission of Covid-19 outbreak almost exactly toe the line of the infection control and hygiene practices which our beloved Prophet Muḥammad (peace be upon him) has taught us in the seventh century. As a nation, we have a duty for responsible behavior during the outbreak of covid-19 in order to act according to the government instructions. The 10 bioethical guidelines listed above increase awareness of the teachings of the Qur’ān and Prophet Muḥammad(peace be upon him) on protective measures against global pandemic coronavirus.

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3. Al-Baqarah 2:195‎ [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Iḇn Mājah, Muḥammad b. Yazīd, Sunan ibn Mājah, Kitāb al-Aḥkām 13, Ḥadīth No. 2340. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Al-Baqarah 2:155‎ [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. J.N. Hays, *Epidemics and Pandemics:* *Their Impacts on Human History* (Santa Barbara, California: ABC-CLIO, Inc., 2005), ix [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. https://www.euro.who.int/en/health-topics/health-emergencies/coronavirus-covid-19 [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
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14. Ibid., Book: Manners, Chapter: There is no contagion and no bad omen, Ḥadīth:2220 [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
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26. Muslim, Al-Ṣaḥīḥ, Ḥadīth: 5541 [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. Al-Mā’idah 5:32 [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
28. Abū Dā’ūd, Sulaymān b. al-Ash‘ath, *Sunan Abī Dā’ūd*, Book of Medicine 29, Ḥadīth 3874 [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
29. al-A‘rāf 7:157 [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
30. Muslim, Al-Ṣaḥīḥ, The Book of Ḥajj 15, Ḥadīth 1200 [↑](#footnote-ref-30)
31. Al-Bukhārī, Al-Jāmi‘ al- Ṣaḥīḥ, Book of Prophet 60, Ḥadīth 3371 [↑](#footnote-ref-31)
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36. Al-Tirmidhī, Al-Jāmi‘ al-Tirmidhī, Book No. 37, Ḥadīth 2517 [↑](#footnote-ref-36)
37. Ibid., Book of Medicine 28, Ḥadīth 2038 [↑](#footnote-ref-37)