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How are Muslim authorities fighting against coronavirus?

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Aden – Yasmine El Tohamy – The rapid spread of the novel coronavirus in countries where Muslims constitute a majority – as well as those where they are a minority – presents a major challenge to Islamic religious authorities across the world.

Large gatherings of worshippers are a reality of religious practices, which in the case of Islam are the five mandatory daily prayers, as well as the Friday congregational service.

With international organisations and regional governments under immense strain to contain the virus, how have Imams harnessed their powers of influence to raise awareness among their congregants and inculcate simple habits which could save lives?

Pragmatism during a pandemic

Last Wednesday, Saudi Arabia took the unprecedented step of banning the holy pilgrimage of Umrah for both residents and citizens, leaving the Muslim world reeling in a state of shock, with the doomsday-esque images showing Islam's holiest city nearly devoid of worshippers.

During the following Friday sermon, Imams of the Grand Mosque in Mecca and the Prophet's Mosque in Medina stressed the paramount importance of adhering to the "precautionary measures" taken by the Saudi government to prevent the outbreak.

Authorities which lie beyond the spiritual heartland of the Muslim world are now reinforcing the concrete advice of governments and public health bodies.

The Muslim Council of Britain, an umbrella body with over 500 mosques, educational and charitable associations affiliated to it, has shared comprehensive advice ahead of expected government plans to introduce emergency legislation.

The organisation advises its affiliated bodies to "proactively plan" for the "likely suspension" of congregational prayers.

In the meantime, it has suggested introducing more gradual contingency plans, such as mosques abandoning optional Sunnah and Nawafil prayers as well as hosting external events and fundraising for charity.

In a poster on the MCB's website, those who show even minor symptoms are advised to pray at home, with volunteers encouraged to send food to the elderly and most vulnerable in the community.

The instructional Khutbah

On Friday, around 10,000 worshippers performed the congregational prayer at the Al-Aqsa mosque compound in Israeli-annexed East Jerusalem.

Heeding the advice of officials, the majority gathered in the courtyard of the third holiest site in Islam to avoid crowding inside the mosques, where they listened to a 13-minute sermon focused on raising awareness of how to stop the spread of the contagious disease.

Coronavirus has become central theme of Friday sermons, even in countries which have still seen relatively few cases.

In South Africa, which now has a total of 13 cases, Imam Rashied Omar, an Islamic studies scholar at the University of Notre Dame, addressed Muslim staff attending a January Friday prayer service at a hospital in Cape Town.

In a transcript of the lecture, Omar invoked directives from the Quran and teachings of the Muslim Prophet Muhammad, which promotes personal and environmental hygiene in the form of a religious obligation known as *fiqh al-taharah*.

With public information campaigns launched by governments built around the simple act of frequent hand washing, Imam Omar drew parallels with performing *Wudu*, the Muslim practice of ritually washing limbs prior to commencing the five daily prayers.

Even in Uganda, where there are no recorded cases, the country's Inter-Religious Council held a meeting with the Ministry of Health on Thursday, to discuss ways of mitigating the spread of the disease.

Spiritual leaders in the landlocked African country, where over 10 per cent of the population are Muslim, drafted a range of guidelines, which include allocating time to medical professionals during Khutbahs to educate "congregants on how they can stay safe".

Curbing congregations

In comparison, some Muslim countries are taking completely different measures, going so far as to ban congregational prayers altogether.

Authorities in Muslim-majority Malaysia, where there are currently 149 cases of Covid-19, are tracking thousands of people after at least 12 infections were linked to a three-day gathering of Islamic missionaries at a mosque in the outskirts of Kuala Lumpur.

In a bid to stop the virus, the country's Minister of Health reissued guidelines for holding Friday prayers at mosques, including shortening sermons and for ablution rites to be carried out at home.

The religious event in the Malaysian capital, which drew in some 10,000 participants, also included scores of visitors from neighbouring Singapore, prompting the Southeast Asian island country to take the much more dramatic measure of closing all mosques in the country for a five day period of "deep-cleaning", *Reuters* reported.

In countries home to substantial Shia populations, Friday prayer services have been either suspended altogether until further notice, such as in Lebanon and Kuwait, or in major cities, such as hard-hit Iran and Iraq.

Ayatollah Ali Al-Sistani, whose Friday sermons from the Shia holy city of Karbala provide guidance for millions, last week urged worshippers to abide by a ban on mass prayers, according to *AP*.

Avoiding affection

Iraq's Sunni authorities have also taken action to fight the spread of the infectious disease in the country, which has 80 recorded cases, *Arabi21* reported, advising adherents to avoid visiting mosques, as well as suspending their norms of physical contact, which including cheek kissing and hugging as greetings.

In neighbouring Jordan, religious and government leaders have explored more creative avenues to change deeply-ingrained habits.

An instructional video, which shows the Hashemite Kingdom's Minister of Health accompanied by the Minister of Religious Endowments, has been produced, where the two advise the country's faithful to abandon their traditional greetings.

Agencies contributed to this report.

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