

# Religious Discussions on Coronavirus in Yemen

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## Introduction

The newly emerged coronavirus disease (COVID-19) has triggered different types of reactions in Yemen. These reactions can be narrowed down into two: one has to do with the situation of the health care system during the war that is tearing the country and one is related to the capacity of a divided state to face the pandemic. The second type of discourse has taken a more religious orientation as it concentrates more on the metaphysical and messianic reasons behind the spread of the disease and its consequences on the different nations of the world including the Muslim countries.

Many lay Muslims as well as clergymen have expressed in different ways their shock to see the Holy Houses of God in Mecca and Madinah closed for the first time in their lives.<sup>1</sup> The calamity of Covid-19 can be classified according to Islamic Jurisprudence as *nāzila* a novel case or an emerging event that effects the Muslim individuals and/ or community and which requires *fatwā* a legal opinion to be issued by Muslim '*ulamā*' (*sing. 'ālim, lit. "learned"*), legal and theological experts or jurists. However, "a *nāzila* is not the opinion of a single jurist, but becomes part of a formal and comprehensive juridical consultation, together with non-legal experts relevant to the discussion."<sup>2</sup> In this direction of thinking, a legal opinion on a dangerous disease, such as Covid-19, should be promoted by both religious and epidemiologists.

Based on that, many '*ulamā*' and preachers have contributed to the heated discussions on this issue. The main feature of their contributions is that they have been quite diverse, and reached no status of 'Islamic consensus'. Ali Gomaa (b. 1952) an Egyptian Islamic scholar who served as Grand Mufti of Egypt (2003–2013) tended to adopt the theory that links the spread of the coronavirus to 5G wireless technology.<sup>3</sup> In Saudi Arabia, 'General Presidency of the Affairs of the Two Holy Mosques' has ordered distribution of Zamzam Water among coronavirus patients.<sup>4</sup> Like international political, medical and philosophical debates, the religious discussions in the Arab world on coronavirus have not been confined to the time of this disease but have tackled post-corona era. Egyptian cleric Sheikh Khaled Al-Gindi (b. 1961), for instance, maintained that a new interpretation of the holy Quran is required in the aftermath of this human crisis.<sup>5</sup> Islamic ritual washing, namely *Wuḍū* ablution, has been seen by many lay people and clerics alike as a hygienic practice that can prevent from the

<sup>1</sup> There is an exception to this generalization namely what has become known as 'Grand Mosque seizure' when armed civilians calling for the overthrow of the House of Saud took over Masjid al-Haram in Mecca in 1979. On this event see, for instance, Ménoret, P. (2008). "Fighting for the Holy Mosque: The 1979 Mecca Insurgency". In: Treading on Hallowed Ground: Counterinsurgency Operations in Sacred Spaces, edits. Christine Fair and Sumit Ganguly, Oxford: Oxford University Press. (pp. 117–39).

<sup>2</sup> Moosa, E. (1999). "Languages of change in Islamic Law: Redefining death in modernity. Islamic studies". In: Perspectives on Islamic Law, Justice, and Society, edit. R.S.Khare, New York: Rowman & Littlefield. (pp. 161–192). P.170. More interestingly *nāzila* in Islamic tradition can designate a calamity and hence *Qunūt al-Nāzila* is a special supplication or prayer in the times of calamities. Based on this special sense, Corona is defined as a *nāzila* 'calamity' requiring this type of supplication, see for example <https://aboutislam.net/counseling/ask-the-scholar/dhikr-supplication/is-it-permissible-to-offer-duaa-al-qunut-to-keep-coronavirus-away/>.

<sup>3</sup> See on this The New Arab (10. April 2020) "Egypt Cleric Promotes 5G Coronavirus Conspiracy Theory on Television". Retrieved on 16.4.2020 from: <https://english.alaraby.co.uk/english/news/2020/4/10/egypt-cleric-promotes-5g-coronavirus-conspiracy-theory-on-television>.

<sup>4</sup> See on this International Quran News Agency (14. April 2020) "Zamzam Water to Be Distributed among COVID-19 Patients in Saudi Arabia" retrieved on 16.4. 2020 from: <https://iqna.ir/en/news/3471124/zamzam-water-to-be-distributed-among-covid-19-patients-in-saudi-arabia>.

<sup>5</sup> See Ramdan, B. (09. April 2020) "Khalid al-Gindi: nahtāj l' ādat Tafāsīr al-Qūrān B' d Azmat Korona [ Khalid al-Gindi: We Need to Reinterpret the Holy Quran After Corona Crisis]", al-Masry al-Youm. Retrieved on 16.4.2020 from: <https://www.almasryalyoum.com/news/details/1936407>.

outbreak of the virus.<sup>6</sup> A recurrent theme in the Islamic of clergy men in the Arabic cyber space is the confirmation on the lessons that Muslim is ought to learn from this devastating catastrophe. At the center of these lessons is that God is all-mighty and possesses inexhaustible strength and he can punish those who commit sins and disobey him whether Muslims or non-Muslims whether big and strong states or small and weak ones.

In Yemen, it is safe to say, in general, that religious debate on this issue intersects with these different strands of religious discourse in the Arab world. However, there are some local features in these discussions that reflect the diversification of the religious and political landscape in Yemen. The paper, thus, aims at discerning this diversification and to point out to some discursive and theological implications that has to do with the current political conflict in Yemen, secularization processes and the polemical debates between the established traditional religious elite and the emerging young public intellectuals<sup>7</sup> who tend to use social media in this virtual battle. Based on our investigation of the data which is mainly collected from the bulk of material available online, we can classify the Yemeni religious debate on this issue into two main trends: Plain religious discourse and rationalized one. Within both trends we find different voices that belong to different sects and schools of thought in Yemen. Thus, our classification is based on the logical nature and mode of reasoning of a given discourse more than the sectarian affiliation of its producer. Nevertheless, sectarian and religious orientations of the main interlocutors of this debate are not ignored. Before addressing the debate on Covid-19 in Yemen, we give an overview of this pandemic in Yemen.

## Covid-19 in Yemen

The first confirmed case relating to the covid-19 in Yemen was announced by the internationally recognized government on April 10, 2020. The case was discovered in al-shihr town in Hadhramout east Yemen.<sup>8</sup> The Huthi movement who controls Sana'a and the surrounding northern highland areas has been announcing that there has been no occurrence of the virus in the regions they rule. However, on May 3rd, the Huthis reported their first case, a Somali national, who was found dead in a hotel in Sana'a.<sup>9</sup> On July 6th, there were 1265 confirmed cases 338 deaths according to the worldometers website.<sup>10</sup> The rise in the number of cases has coincided with a tendency in the behaviour of people towards relaxing the restricted procedures they had taken since mid-April 2020.

The World Health Organization has stated that it has provided Yemen with five functional laboratories and 6700 PCR reactions – which can diagnose COVID-19.<sup>11</sup> Nevertheless, people complain of the high costs of the medical treatment in the relatively good equipped hospitals in big cities such as Sana'a and Aden. In addition to the high costs of treatments, Covid-19 patients in some private hospitals in Sana'a pay more than 1500 USD as fees for merely getting the admission approval.<sup>12</sup> For the warring parties, the health situation and the inefficiency of the public health system in Yemen have been used as a tool in their discursive battle for achieving political gains.

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<sup>6</sup> See, for example, The Conversation (16. March 2020) "What Islamic Hygienic Practices Can Teach When Coronavirus is Spreading". Retrieved on 16. 4. 2020 from: <https://theconversation.com/what-islamic-hygienic-practices-can-teach-when-coronavirus-is-spreading-133221>.

<sup>7</sup> See al-Rubaidi, A. (2018). "Skepticism among emerging public intellectuals in post-revolution Yemen ", in: Marie-Christine Heinze (ed.): Yemen and the Search for Stability. Power, Politics and Society after the Arab Spring, pp. 27-46.

<sup>8</sup> Ghoari, M, April 10, 2020, War-ravaged Yemen Confirms First Coronavirus Case, Braces for More, Reuters. Retrieved on 05. 07.2020 from: <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-health-coronavirus-yemen-case/war-ravaged-yemen-confirms-first-coronavirus-case-braces-for-more-idUSKCN21S0E1>.

<sup>9</sup> Al-Sharq al-Awsat, May 05, 2020, Houthis Report 1st Coronavirus Case, a Death in Sanaa Hotel. Retrieved on 05.07.2020 from: <https://english.aawsat.com/home/article/2269071/houthis-report-1st-coronavirus-case-death-sanaa-hotel>

<sup>10</sup> See <https://www.worldometers.info/coronavirus/country/yemen/> Retrieved on 05.07.2020.

<sup>11</sup> See <http://www.emro.who.int/health-topics/corona-virus/who-yemen-responds-to-covid-19.html> Retrieved on 05.07.2020.

<sup>12</sup> An interview with an employee in 'Saudi German Hospital', Sana'a, on 16.06. 2020.

## Plain Religious Discourse and its Detractors

Here we discuss the ideas and religious opinions on this issue of different religious public figures in Yemen. Despite the fact that each one of these four belongs to a different school of thought within the Yemeni Islamic landscape they have one common ground: they use a plain religious language that depends on canonical Islamic scriptures in describing this phenomenon and its relation to the overall existential fate of humanity. Their ideas are rejected and often disdained by their opponents who tend to use a secular language in their critique.

Habib Abu Bakr al-Mashhur (b.1945)<sup>13</sup> links the spread of this virus to the signs of the End of Time.<sup>14</sup> According to him, it doesn't matter whether it has a man-made cause or a natural, Covid-19 diseases is a sign sent by God in this period of human deterioration *ghuthā*. As a traditionalist Shafii scholar, al-Mashhur had, before the emergence of this pandemic, dedicated a big part of his religious work to the idea that we live in the end of times. About this subject he wrote several theologian treatises in which he adds the believe in the signs of the end of time as the fourth element of the Islamic religion<sup>15</sup> in addition to the three elements that are well known as the three main dimensions of religion: *Islam* submission, *Iman* faith, and *Ihsan* (seeking excellence in one's own work).<sup>16</sup> His interpretation of the phenomena Covid-19 pandemic as an apocalyptic sign that comes right before the last and big signs of the approaching of the day of judgment pours in this accumulations of apocalyptic ideas that he developed during the last three decades.<sup>17</sup> The video in which he delivers his lecture got 232,944 watches, 5349 likes, and only 264 dislikes. Most of the comments by people who belong to different Arabic countries praise this cleric and the knowledge of Yemenis about the principles of Islam.<sup>18</sup> However, one of the commenters states that "only God knows the end of time calling the other commenters to use their minds".<sup>19</sup>

Shaykh Muhammad Abdulmajid al-Zindani<sup>20</sup> and his sister Shaykha Asma'a Abdulmajid al-Zindani<sup>21</sup> follow their father Shakh Abdulmajid al-Zindani, who belongs to the salafi strand within the Islah party, in releasing legal opinions about some problematic medical issues based on their interpretation of the medical practices and advices of prophet Mohammad. Recently, Shaykh Muhammad claimed that he has found a medication for Covid 19 disease, which triggered a controversial discussion in Yemen's social media. His sister, Shaykha Asma'a stated that "coronavirus is a Satan and it enters human beings body."

Many Yemeni activists and social media users criticized Sheikh Muhammad and Sheikhha Asma al-Zindani. However, the critique of the Yemeni comedian actor Ali al-Hajuri is of a special interest. Al-Hajuri was himself a preacher belonging to al-Islah party, but he quitted his religious activism and opted for an acting career in local TV channels as a comedian actor. Al-Hajuri since 2015 has had his own Youtube channel through which he launched his 'battle for raising awareness' as he describes it. Generally speaking, he criticizes the practices of Islamic elites in Yemen and he holds them responsible for distorting the critical consciousness of their followers. As for the religious discourse on Coronavirus, al-Hajuri thinks that what the Islahi cleric Shaykh

<sup>13</sup> Habib Abu Bakr al-Mashhur was born in Ahwar town, Abyan governorate, in South Yemen 1945, he is a shafi' sufi cleric. Al-Mashhur belongs to a hadhrami alawi religious family. He studies in Aden, Hadhramout, Mecca and Madinah.

<sup>14</sup> Al-Mashhur, A. (1.4.2020). *Zāhirat Kūrūnā*.

<sup>15</sup> See for instance al-Mashhur, A. (2010). *Al-U'sis wa al-Muntalagāt: Tahlīl wa Tafṣīl Lighwamidh Figh al-Tahawlāt [Basics and Departure Points: An Analysis and Explanation for Understanding the Mysteries of Transformations ]*, Markaz al-Ibda' al-Thagafī wa Khidmat al-Turāth, Aden, p.58.

<sup>16</sup> For a full explanation of these three main elements of Islamic religion and their centrality in Muslim traditions, see Murata, S., & Chittick, W. C. (2006). *The Vision of Islam*, London: IB Tauris, p. xxxii.

<sup>17</sup> See <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tjcb5zdcNds> Retrieved on 21.05.2020.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

<sup>20</sup> Mohammad Abdulmajid al-Zindani was born in Sana'a. He was an instructor in al-Iman university, a private religious establishment found by his father. He was also the chairman of 'Center for Research in Prophetic Medicine' in al-Iman university. Currently shaykh Muhammad lives in Istanbul.

<sup>21</sup> Asma'a Abdulmajid al-Zindani was born in Sana'a. She has BA in Political science from Sana'a university and MA and PhD in Islamic Jurisprudence and theology from al-Iman university. Before the Huthis took control of Sana'a in September 2014 she had worked as head of Higher Studies in the Department of Women in al-Iman university.

Mohamad Naser al-Hasmi<sup>22</sup> propagates that this disease is a sort of divine punishment, is a sheer ignorance. Al-Hajuri states that coronavirus is a catastrophe and knows no race and no religion and that all people must work in favor of humanity instead of this malicious joy.

## Rationalized and politicized Discourse

Habib Ali Zain al-Abidin al-Jifiri<sup>23</sup> in one of his lectures criticizes those who believe that the pandemic is a wrath of God directed against non-Muslim Chinese people because they oppress the Chinese Muslims. According to him, there are some verses in the Holy Quran that implicate God punishment of certain people by natural disaster, but there is no evidence that coronavirus belongs to this kind of religious punishment. Habib al-Jifiri, who lives in united Arab Emirates and adopts a Sufi mode of discourse that differs from that of political Islamists and Jihadi Salafists, believes that there is a political agenda behind this propaganda against China; it is similar to the propaganda that spread in 1980s against communist Soviet Union when United States of America made use of Salafis in its war against communism in Afghanistan.<sup>24</sup> Al-Jifiri states that the Chinese regime is not oppressing only Muslims but also non-Muslims.<sup>25</sup>

Al-Jifiri's is a public figure not only in Yemen, the land of his origin, but also in Egypt, Gulf states and other Arab and Muslim countries. During the last few years, he has been involved in heated discussions with the Islamists who opposed the Egyptian regime and its supporters in Gulf states. Thus, al-Jifiri's discourse is distinguished in its agenda and features from that of those who belong to the same Sufi school of Hadhramout who tends to use an apolitical religious language in describing the Covid-19 disease.

In Sana'a, the Huthis, who are involved in a war against the Internationally recognized Government and against the Arab coalition lead by Saudi Arabia, they tend to frame the phenomenon of coronavirus within their political and conflictual concerns. Dhayfallah al-Shami,<sup>26</sup> Minister of Information in the Huthi government of Sana'a, states that the USA is using biological infectious agents to fight its economic and ideological enemies such as Iran and China.<sup>27</sup> He also thinks that the closure of the Holy mosques in Mecca and Maddinah is a result of this planned spread of the virus.<sup>28</sup> Similarly, Dr. Taha al-Mutawkil, the minister of Public Health in the Huthi government,<sup>29</sup> who is also a preacher and a Zaidi ideologue, believes that the USA stands behind the spread of this disease. According to him, the government of the USA can easily destroy the lives of people in many countries of the world including the lives of its own people, citing the terrorists attack on September 11, 2001 as an example of the deeds of the US government.<sup>30</sup>

Apart from conspiracy theory, Akram al-Ruqayhi,<sup>31</sup> a Zaidi preacher and Judge, thinks that God stands behind what has happened during the last few months. He thinks that USA and its allies have imposed sanctions on Yemen and thus God is punishing them. He said that "they stopped our airports; God stopped theirs, they

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<sup>22</sup> Shaykh Mohammad Naser al-Hasmi was born in Ibb north Yemen in 1965. He is an Islah party member and a parliamentarian. Beside his political activism, he had been a preacher and Imam in Sana'a.

<sup>23</sup> Habib Ali al-Jifiri is a Sunni Sufi figure. He was born in 1971 to an educated Sayyid family that belongs to Shabwah South Yemen. His father Abdurhman al-Jifiri was vice prime minister and the leader of al-Rabitah party. Habib Ali studied Islamic sciences in Jeddah in Saudi Arabia, and in Tarim, al-Baydha and Sana'a in Yemen. He is based in United Arab Emirates and is considered one of the very influential clerics in the muslim world. He has several books such as "Priority of Being Humane to Being Religious".

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

<sup>26</sup> Dhayfallah al-Shami was born in Amran north Yemen in 1979. He is a member of The Supreme Political Council of Ansar Allah Huthis and minister of propaganda in their government in Sana'a. Al-Shami is also a preacher delivering his religious lectures in different mosques and media platforms.

<sup>27</sup> See <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=P57luL9L4P4> Retrieved on 15.6.2020.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid.

<sup>29</sup> Dr. Taha al-Mutawkil is obtained PhD in medicine from Damascus university. He is minister of Huthi government since 2018. Al-Mutawkil belongs to a well-known Zaidi family and he is an Imam and preacher in al-Hashush Mosque in Sana'a.

<sup>30</sup> See <https://twitter.com/i/status/1261891750542692352> Retrieved on 13.6.2020.

<sup>31</sup> Judge Akram al-Ruqayhi is the head of Department of Islamic Studies in the Higher Judicial Institute in Sana'a. Al-Ruqayhi is a preacher in Grand Mosque in Old city in Sana'a and in al-Saleh Mosque in al-Sab'een district.

closed our sea-ports; great God closed theirs, they destroyed our economy and imposed sanctions on our children and women; God hit their economy and imposed on them quarantine.”<sup>32</sup>

These statements reflect the ideological and political polarization at the local level in its connection to regional and international levels. The war in Yemen and the political climate in the whole region have impacted the very structural religious discourse on this issue. Coronavirus and the ways of confronting it in this discourse are not addressed in isolation of the existential questions of the main actors in the Yemeni political and religious landscapes.

## Conclusions

Since 2011, clerics in Yemen have been involved in articulating their religious opinions on different complex and thorny issues such as 2011 revolution and the question of legitimacy, the ongoing civil war, sectarianism, disengagement of the South and the North and recently the spread of Covid 19 disease. These opinions have been characterized as being politicized, conflicting, logically inconsistent and sometimes in compliance with modern sciences and international human rights laws. This religious scene may bring about a lack of trust in the viability of Islamic legal and theologian frameworks. For some young generation of Islamists in Yemen who have been exposed to globalization, this shaky and uncertain ideas of their religious leaders and jurist-consultants might lead to a new situation where secularist ideas and practices live side by side with religious beliefs and practices.

It is not sure, though, that this religious conflicting discourses would bring about any change amidst Muslim commoners in Yemen who mostly tend to venerate religious leaders. The more reflecting and sceptic intellectuals, who emerged as a strong trend since a decade, have found in this contradictory and rather hasty religious opinions on the virus a chance to attack the foundational epistemological and theological basis of these discourses. The critics, who are not necessarily composing a homogeneous group, tend to use the virtual space to reach their different followers and to present their new critical and secular parlance and logic as an alternative to the religious ones that have been dominating Yemeni media since decades. Optimists of this trend would tend to consider this catastrophe as an awakening force for the consciousness of those who still take the opinions of clerics on scientific issues seriously. However, given that Yemen is still not widely and heavily affected by this pandemic, one cannot predict the trajectories and transformations of both religious discourses on this issue and the opposing positions of their critics.

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<sup>32</sup> See <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Bh1KHa-r6W0> Retrieved on 13.6.2020.

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