

Article

“You Are All Soldiers in the Battle against the Corona Virus and Your Commander Is the Prophet Muhammad”: The Fatwās of Sheikh Rāʿid Badīr Regarding COVID-19

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Abstract: This article deals with the rulings of Sheikh Rāʿid Badīr, who served as a mediator between the Israeli government and the Muslim community over the course of the pandemic. As a senior leader and scholar of the southern branch of the Islamic Movement in Israel, Sheikh Rāʿid Badīr’s *fatwās* have historically addressed the unique circumstances and situational difficulties faced by Muslims living in Israel.

Keywords: Muslim minority in Israel; *fatwās*; Sheikh Rāʿid Badīr; the Islamic Movement in Israel; pandemic; COVID-19; Islamic law

1. Introduction

The global impact of COVID-19 created unprecedented challenges for public health around the world. Religious leaders came to play a vital role bridging gaps between health-care professionals, state officials, and local communities in order to disseminate accurate scientific information about the virus and convince people from all walks of life to take the necessary precautions to prevent its spread. International actors such as the World Health Organization collaborated with religious leaders to advise their constituents (WHO 2022),¹ while academic institutions such as the Berkeley Center at Georgetown University developed databases focused on faith-based responses to the pandemic worldwide in order to provide empirically based insights for policymakers.²

Over the course of the pandemic, research has grown dramatically on the role of religious leaders and Muslim religious authorities in particular, in combatting COVID-19. Quantitative surveys have examined these leaders’ efforts to minimize disruption to their communities (Sonntag et al. 2020), qualitative interviews have investigated the use of religious credibility as a tool for disseminating health information (Rachmawati et al. 2022), literature reviews have focused on the Islamic ethical context of their responses (Shabana 2021), and articles have analyzed the destructive influences of recalcitrant social movements (Sihombing and Muassomah 2021) and the spread of religious misinformation (Alimardani and Elswah 2020). As lockdowns became a reality, Muslim leaders needed to reconcile the preeminent authority of Islamic law with the secondary authority of recommended health measures such as mosque closures. In many cases, the use of *istiqrāʿ* (Islamic methods of induction) demonstrated a shift among Muslim scholars to base their *fatwās* (Islamic rulings) on scientific findings rather than jurisprudential precedent, which was inconsistently applicable to the pandemic (Sodiqin 2021). This novel situation was reflected, for example, in the informal yet influential *fatwās* of Sheikh Muhammad Mustapha Ben Hamza, a member of the Moroccan *ʿulamāʾ* (scholarly body) who asserted that the unique circumstances of the pandemic warranted a ‘jurisprudence of necessity (*ḍarūra*)’ (Ezziti 2020). Other Muslim leaders such as Sheikh Muhammad al-Yaqoubi utilized *ijtihād* (scholarly reasoning) to conclude that COVID-19 preventative measures did not in fact contradict Islamic legal precedents, which elevate the concept of *hifz al-nafs* (the preservation of life) (Al-Astewani 2020). However, a UK study on the intersection of English common law and *fiqh* (Islamic



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law) during the pandemic documented the tendency of some Muslim leaders, such as Mufti Yūsuf Shabbir, to prioritize faith over personal health (Al-Astewani 2020).

Muslim communities in Israel defied expectations that they would be ‘super-spreaders’ of the virus. Despite constituting approximately 21% of the population, Israeli Arabs made up only 8.8% of the country’s reported cases and 3.6% of COVID-19 related deaths (Saban et al. 2020). This phenomenon was partly due to the Israeli government’s “cultural competency” efforts, which sought to stabilize infection rates by opening lines of communication between healthcare authorities and leaders of minority communities (Slobodin and Cohen 2020). Another reason for this success was that Muslim religious leaders promoted health measures within their own communities and combatted the proliferation of misinformation that was detrimental to COVID-19 relief efforts (Saban et al. 2020).

The present case study seeks to explore the impact of Arab Israeli Muslim leaders, their COVID-19 related rulings, and the rulings of Sheikh Rā’id Badīr in particular, who served as a mediator between the Israeli government and the Muslim community over the course of the pandemic. As a senior leader and scholar of the southern branch of the Islamic Movement in Israel, Sheikh Rā’id Badīr’s *fatwās* have historically addressed the unique circumstances and situational difficulties faced by Muslims living in Israel. Because a number of Sheikh Bader’s past rulings have engaged with medical issues, including artificial insemination, organ transplants, and the use of Israeli medical personnel and hospitals (Rubinstein-Shemer 2022), his scholarship is one of the most suitable for a case study on Islamic jurisprudence within the context of the frequently overlooked Israeli Muslim community.

From the beginning of the Corona crisis, jurisprudential literature was being written by Muslim sheikhs and Jewish rabbis in order to address the questions raised by the pandemic in their communities.³ These matters, as well as the challenges and opportunities faced by Jewish religious leaders both in Israel and globally, have been addressed in a comprehensive article published by the Israel Democracy Institute (Even-Tzur and Friedman 2020). The role of these religious leaders in ameliorating the effects of the crisis was no less significant than that of health professionals due to these leaders’ ability to translate health guidelines into the religious language and terminology of their constituencies. An article investigating the impact of the coordination between Muslim and Christian religious leaders in Israel and official state health bodies, and how this cooperation facilitated acceptance of official guidelines in their communities, was published recently (Essa-Hadad et al. 2022).

In this article, I would like to focus on the ways in which the Islamic Movement in Israel dealt with the Corona crisis by examining *fatwās* published by its religious leadership. *Fatwās* were published on the Facebook pages and individual websites of the Northern and Southern branches of the Islamic Movement by each of their senior clerics, Sheikh Mashour Fawwāz from Umm al-Fahm, and Sheikh Rā’id Badīr from Kufr Qāsim, respectively. I have chosen to limit the scope of this article to the *fatwās* of Sheikh Badīr due to the fact that he published far more than Sheikh Fawwāz, and that, unlike the Northern Branch, which is hostile to the State of Israel, the Southern Branch pragmatically coordinates with state bodies, as well as international actors like the World Health Organization (WHO). While Sheikh Fawwāz’s *fatwās* certainly deserve scholarly attention, this article’s focus on Sheikh Badīr provides a more solid starting point as there is more data available regarding the impact of these efforts, and it fills a lacuna in the emerging scholarly literature on the intersection of international health bodies, state institutions, and the local communities they seek to aid.

2. The Islamic Movement in Israel: A Brief Background

The Islamic Movement in Israel, founded in 1972 by Sheikh ‘Abdallāh Nimr Darwīsh, sought to revive Islamic observance among what had become the Muslim minority in Israel. The movement split into two factions in 1996, following a disagreement about voting in the national election for the Knesset (the Israeli Parliament). The more pragmatic and moderate southern branch, led by Sheikh Darwīsh of Kafr Qāsim, recognized the political legitimacy

and sovereignty of Israel as a *fait accompli*, and favored participation in the elections. The northern faction, headed by Sheikh Rāʾid Ṣalāḥ of Umm al-Faḥm, remained hostile to the state and its institutions; it called on Muslims to boycott the election and advocated for the creation of an “independent Islamic enclave” within the country. In 2015, the northern branch of the Islamic Movement was outlawed in Israel (Al-Atawneh and Ali 2018).

2.1. Sheikh Rāʾid Badīr: A Short Biography

Sheikh Rāʾid Badīr, born in Kafr Qāsim in 1968, is considered the senior authority on religious law (*muftī*) for the southern branch of the Islamic Movement in Israel today. He completed a bachelor’s degree in Arabic language and Islamic law (*fiqh*) at the Islamic Sharīʿa College in Bāqa al-Gharbiyya in 1998. In 2004, he received a master’s degree in Islamic law from al-Najāḥ University in Nablus. In addition to these academic degrees, he has pursued advanced studies in several fields and serves as a pleader in the Sharīʿa courts and as a mediator. In 2010, Sheikh Badīr was one of the founders of the Supreme Council for Islamic legal opinions (*al-hayʿa al-ʿulyā li-l-iftāʾ*) of the southern branch of the Islamic Movement (Zahalka 2017). Since 2013, he has been a member of the Council of Religious Scholars of Palestine (*hayʿat al-ʿulamāʾ wa-l-duʿāʾ fī filastīn*), which sits in Jerusalem.

Since 2006, Sheikh Badīr has served as President of the Adam Center for Interreligious Dialogue,⁴ one of the two pillars of the Religious Peace Initiative (RPI).⁵ The RPI was established in 2007 by Rabbi Michael Melchior, President of Mosaica, the second pillar of the RPI, then a deputy minister in the Israeli government, and by Sheikh ʿAbdallāh Nimr Darwīsh, Sheikh Badīr’s ‘spiritual father’. Badīr was Darwīsh’s personal assistant for some thirty years. After Sheikh Darwīsh’s death in 2017, Sheikh Badīr, together with Rabbi Melchior, have worked closely to advance peace based on explicitly religious principles and to mitigate crises as they arise in the context of the Israeli–Palestinian conflict and beyond. This is primarily done through discrete meetings with influential religious and political leaders (Roth 2021).⁶ Sheikh Badīr maintains two websites on which he publishes legal opinions and articles.⁷

On 30 January 2020, the Israeli Ministry of Health began to issue public guidelines to slow the spread of COVID-19. On 12 March 2020, the Ministry of Health made the guidelines more stringent, expanding them to include the closure of all educational establishments, the prohibition of gatherings of ten or more people, and the closure of public spaces in general. The result was the disruption of the daily life of nearly all Israelis. This article will focus on the disruption these guidelines posed to the lives of religious people, which generally include gatherings for the sake of prayer and study. Religious leaders in Israel had to come up with creative explanations to convince their communities to uphold the state’s regulations when these contradicted religious commandments. In what follows, we shall examine a selection of subjects with which Sheikh Badīr engaged during the COVID-19 crisis, paying special attention to the following aspects: (1) the manner in which Sheikh Badīr crafted his messages in Arabic; i.e., into a form that suited the cultural perspective of his intended audience; (2) the messages that the sheikh chose to emphasize; and (3) the degree of his cooperation with national and international actors.

2.2. A Theological Approach to the Pandemic

On 5 March 2020, Sheikh Badīr began a series of public lectures on Facebook under the title “Coronavirus in the Eyes of the Sharīʿa”. The goal of the series was to discuss the various ways in which COVID-19 was influencing our lives from a theological, religious, educational, or humanitarian perspective. Sheikh Badīr spoke first about matters of faith: Should COVID-19 be understood as a divine punishment for human actions? The high number of deaths resulting from COVID-19 raised the question of divine punishment: Do good deeds guarantee one a comfortable life, while wicked actions condemn one to suffer? Such a principle is well established in the sacred writings of many religions, including the Qurʾān, which promises reward for those who follow the path of God and punishment for those who do not. On this principle, it would seem to follow that the COVID-19 pandemic

is a divine punishment for human wickedness. Indeed, in the Qurʾān and the Muslim tradition, many sources express this possibility. However, there are also several sources that view plagues as a sort of trial by which God tests humankind (Shabana 2021).

Badīr chooses to view the pandemic as a trial. In his opinion, the COVID-19 pandemic is not a divine punishment (*uqūba*), as other religious people in the Muslim world claim (e.g., Käsehage 2021; Altioru 2021; Svenson 2021). In Badīr’s eyes, COVID-19 is a trial of faith for humanity, as the Qurʾān says: “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” (2:155).⁸ According to this verse, Badīr claims, COVID-19 should be understood as a divine trial of humankind (*ibtīlāʾ*) which was sent to test peoples’ faith in God in the face of fear and other obstacles to that faith. As an example of such a divine trial, Badīr cites the Quranic story of Job (21:83–84), who is tested repeatedly and severely despite not having sinned. So too in our days, Sheikh Badīr contends, people are afflicted by hardships despite not having sinned. As another example, Badīr cites the existence of infants and young children who suffer from serious illnesses. The Quranic story of Job not only provides an example of divine trial but offers insight into the COVID-19 pandemic in other ways as well, serving as a scriptural source for the obligation to isolate. Sheikh Badīr claims that we learn of the obligation to isolate (*al-ḥajr al-ṣiḥḥ*) in cases of contagious illness from Job, who isolates himself outside of his village when he becomes ill so that he only comes into contact with his wife and caretaker—even his two brothers only speak to him from a distance. This story constitutes proof that the Qurʾān taught of the obligation to isolate long before the present day. Having mined the Qurʾān, Sheikh Badīr turns to the Hadīth for more prooftexts relating to the obligation to isolate. He cites hadīth that seem to signify that it is necessary to isolate people who are ill. For example, when the Prophet arrived in Greater Syria, a plague broke out among the soldiers and so he separated the sick soldiers from the healthy ones. Accordingly, the Prophet taught: “flee from the leper as you would flee from a lion” (*firr min al-majdūm firaruka min al-asad*). Badīr pleads with the public to heed the Ministry of Health’s guidelines, insisting that COVID-19 is an issue affecting the lives of all people, with no relation to national, political, or ideological differences among communities; it is an international humanitarian crisis that does not discriminate between borders and boundaries. For this reason, Badīr insists, it is incumbent upon anyone who returns from a trip abroad to follow the Ministry of Health’s guidelines and enter isolation. Following the Ministry of Health’s guidelines *is* following the sharīʿa, Badīr teaches, and he reprises this point multiple times throughout the series. Whoever feels unwell, even if he is not sick with COVID-19, should not attend Friday prayer in the mosque, and should instead pray at home. We must follow these guidelines to uphold the value of saving a life (*hifz al-nafs*) (Badīr 2020a).

It is worthwhile to consider how Badīr chose to relate to COVID-19 as a trial and not as a punishment. In my opinion, this choice allowed him to enlist the public’s participation more easily. For in most cases, a man who suspects that God is punishing him even though he is innocent will become embittered and suffer, and it will be more difficult to enlist his participation. Throughout the series, Badīr notes the importance of approaching issues from a theological perspective, for the believer relates to reality differently than the nonbeliever. One ought to consider how Badīr uses hadīth from the life of the Prophet to show that the Ministry of Health’s guidelines are not original to them and can indeed be traced back to the Prophet himself. For this reason, Badīr argues, following the Ministry of Health’s guidelines is effectively identical to upholding the sharīʿa and sunna.

Why did COVID-19 appear in the world? Badīr finds an allusion to COVID-19 in a Quranic story about the worm that ate Solomon’s walking stick (cf. 34:14). According to the Qurʾān, a small worm made its way into Solomon’s walking stick in secret. The worm gnawed through the stick until one day it suddenly breaks, causing Solomon to fall and die. Sheikh Badīr explains that the COVID-19 pandemic is like the woodworm: It moves from place to place in secret, striking people down unopposed. Solomon’s walking stick is a symbol of stability and support. Sheikh Rāʾid elaborates that the walking stick also alludes

to might, power, law, justice, and the economy, all of which were stable in Solomon's time. Even the jinn, to which the Qur'an attributes the ability to know secrets, did not know what the worm was doing. The jinn's lack of knowledge in this story thus parallels the lack of knowledge and confusion of modern man: like the jinn, modern man is accustomed to believing that he is powerful and all-knowing when suddenly, a plague breaks out and demonstrates to him his own powerlessness. Further, just as Solomon's death brought about a new order to the world, the COVID-19 pandemic has brought about stillness in place of activity, lack of knowledge in place of knowledge, isolation in place of freedom, sadness in place of joy, and the end of life as we knew it, perhaps also bringing about a new world order. Sheikh Badir wonders whether the coronavirus has a function identical to that of the woodworm: just as the woodworm brought about the revelation of Solomon's death, so too the coronavirus is revealing the limitations of humanity (*'ajz al-bashriya*) (Badir 2020b). On this reading, Sheikh Badir is choosing to view the phenomenon of COVID-19 in a positive light, not as the end of the world, but rather as the herald of a new stage, heretofore unknown, in the development of humanity.

3. Closure of the Mosques

Sheikh Badir was the first Muslim cleric to call for the closure of mosques in Israel. On 9 March 2020, he released this announcement efforts (Saban et al. 2020). The upper portion of the announcement contains a photograph of Badir on the right-hand side accompanied by the text: "Sheikh Ra'id Badir, Member of the Institute for Islamic Law and Research" (*dār al-iftā' wa-l-buḥūth al-islāmiyya*). The heading of the announcement advertises that it is a legal opinion (*fatwā sharī'a*), the content of which is as follows: "Mosques will be closed for public prayer for two weeks and closed for Friday prayer for the foreseeable future" (see Figure 1). In a story released on i24 about his efforts to close mosques in Israel (including al-Aqsa), Badir claimed that his office had been the first to call for the closure of mosques, and from there the call to close mosques had spread to neighboring states in the Middle East. Badir explained that this regulation would be difficult for the Muslim community to swallow: while the Muslim community is accustomed to gathering for prayer more frequently in times of hardship, in this case, they were being asked to do precisely the opposite. In the same story, Sheikh Ra'id also reiterated that the guidelines around social distancing could be traced back to the example of the Prophet. He explained how the Prophet refrained from shaking hands with a man who came to swear loyalty to him because the man had a contagious disease (Badir 2020c; Rocca and Marson 2020).



Figure 1. Announcement to Local Muslim Community on Mosque Closure. Image distributed by Sheikh Badir, and shared directly with Author (1 April 2020).

In a video posted to Facebook on 13 March 2020, Sheikh Badir spoke about gatherings (Badir 2020d). Badir explains that while the law commands people to pray the Friday prayer communally in the mosque, this law only applies in the general case. According to Badir, the sharī'a also contains special emergency ordinances (*khūṭaṭ al-tawāri' al-tashrī'iyya*).

Giving an example, Badīr explains that according to the Qurʾān (5:3), it is forbidden for a Muslim to eat pork. However, the Qurʾān goes on to say that if a Muslim finds himself in a situation in which his life would be endangered were he *not* to consume pork, it is of course permissible for him to eat it. In Islamic law, such an instance of breaking the general law is called *darūra* (necessity); that is to say, it is necessary to break the general law for the sake of life, since otherwise, man would die. Badīr demonstrates this principle with additional examples from the Qurʾān and hadīth: the Qurʾān (2:183) commands a Muslim to fast on Ramaḍān, but in the following verse (2:184), it is written that anyone who is ill or traveling is, in fact, free of the obligation to fast. “Pray while standing”, the Prophet says, “but if one is not so able, pray while sitting” (al-Bukhārī 2002).⁹ Whoever is at home (*muqīm*) should pray the full prayer, but anyone who is traveling (*musāfir*) is permitted to shorten his prayer (al-Tirmidhī 1996).¹⁰ All of these are examples of emergency ordinances (*fiqh al-istithnāʾāt* or *khutāṭ al-ṭawāriʾ al-tashrīʿiyya*). Badīr elaborates that these emergency ordinances include a few general principles: *fath al-dharāʾiʿ*, or permitting something forbidden; and *sadd al-dharāʾiʿ*, or forbidding something permissible. Islam is a religion that takes the temporal circumstances of reality (*sharīʿa wāqīʿiyya*) into consideration. Thus, if we once again consider the issue of holding Friday prayers in the mosque, not praying inside the mosque would not only *not* be considered a breach of the sharīʿa, but would moreover be considered as upholding the sharīʿa since in times of emergency one should not undertake to fulfill those commandments that are only intended for normal circumstances. It is for this reason that Badīr forbids anyone who is sick or feels unwell from attending the mosque for prayer, regardless of whether they might have COVID-19 or another illness. Badīr again insists that following the Ministry of Health’s guidelines is tantamount to following the path of the Prophet (Badīr 2020d). In a video posted on 6 April 2020, Sheikh Badīr elaborates that anyone who follows the Ministry of Health’s guidelines will receive the same divine reward as he would for fulfilling a commandment, since saving a life (*hifz al-nafs*) is one of the sharīʿa’s supreme goals. The intentions or goals of the sharīʿa (*maqāṣid al-sharīʿa*) are five elements that are most essential for humankind, namely: religion, the soul, offspring, property, and knowledge (Opwis 2017).¹¹ True belief thus entails doing everything possible to save lives and avoid endangering lives (Badīr 2020m).

4. Addressing Youth

In a video posted on 26 March 2020, Sheikh Badīr spoke forcefully to young people who were not obeying COVID-19 safety guidelines. He enjoined them to not join the ranks of those who create death (*ṣunāʿ al-mawt*) by leaving the house and breaking isolation, transmitting their contagious COVID-19 to sick and elderly people. More broadly, Badīr called upon young people to take responsibility for the sick and vulnerable, imploring them to respect and honor the elderly, for it is by honoring the elderly that *we* ultimately merit entrance into Heaven (Badīr 2020e). On 29 March 2020, in the wake of the first COVID-19 death in Israel, Sheikh Badīr issued a legal opinion solely devoted to explaining the importance of isolation to young people (Badīr 2020f).

5. Cooperation with National and International Actors

On 6 April 2020, a video was posted to the Facebook page of the IDF spokesperson for the Arab media, Lieutenant Colonel Avichay Edreʿi (Badīr 2020g). In this video, Sheikh Rāʾid Badīr discusses the need to obey guidelines set by medical and governmental professionals and claims that obeying these is tantamount to obeying the words of the Prophet. Badīr explains that in ancient times, there was another version of the call to prayer, in which the muezzin would recite Muhammad’s injunction to “pray in your homes” (*ṣalū fī buyūtikum*) instead of the standard call to pray in the mosque. He emphasizes that in light of this hadīth, people should pray in their homes and observe social distancing and public health measures, thereby fulfilling their obligation to heed the Ministry of Health’s guidelines. On 3 May 2020, another of Sheikh Badīr’s videos was released, this time on the Home Front Command’s YouTube channel (Badīr 2020h). The video featured the seals of both the

State of Israel and the Home Front Command. In this video, Badīr discusses a hadīth about contagious illnesses as a source for thinking about how to address COVID-19. The hadīth relates a story about a man with a contagious illness who came to meet the Prophet, but whom the Prophet sent back home, instructing him that he was forbidden from praying in public spaces. Badīr also details several of the Prophet's habits such as covering his mouth while sneezing and coughing and maintaining his personal hygiene (e.g., purifying himself before prayer), both of which principles are crucial to safeguarding public health. The end of the video features contact information for the Home Front Command so that viewers can receive updates on COVID-19-related news and guidelines.

It is not insignificant that a member of the Islamic Movement produced a video in cooperation with the IDF: while the Southern Branch of the Islamic Movement has accepted the existence of the State of Israel *ex post facto*, it does not support it actively. Both branches of the Islamic Movement naturally identify with Palestinians in the Territories and the Gaza Strip and accordingly perceive the IDF in a negative light, as an oppressive force. In contrast, Shaikh Badīr demonstrates a willingness to cross the aisle to reach the widest possible audience with his message.

On 31 December 2020, a video entitled “The Doctor and the Religious Man” (*ṭabīb wa-faqīh*) (Badīr 2020i) was posted to the Facebook page of the Islamic Institute for Legal Decision-Making. The video opens with Sheikh Badīr in the Klalit clinic in Kfar Qasim, with Badīr explaining that several people have solicited his legal opinion as to whether they are required to take the COVID-19 vaccine. Rather than immediately offering his own opinion, Badīr instead turns to pose the same question to his family doctor, Dr. Salah Badīr. We see Dr. Badīr examining the sheikh's medical file and recommending that he be vaccinated immediately. Sheikh Badīr then asks the doctor whether he recommends that *everyone* be vaccinated. The doctor replies that while he does recommend that everyone get vaccinated, people should consult with their own doctors before so doing. The video concludes with Dr. Badīr explaining that the COVID-19 vaccine is safe and effective, and not something to be afraid of. In this video, we can see Sheikh Badīr's clearly acting in cooperation with Klalit, the largest HMO in Israel, in an effort to encourage vaccination among the Arab community.

Through his activity in the nonprofit Mosaica, Sheikh Badīr also participated in several of the World Health Organization's (WHO) initiatives in Israel (WHO 2022),¹² including The Kavod-Karama (Dignity) Project: Insider Religious Meditation in the Context of COVID-19. The main goal of this project was “to strengthen and expand Mosaica's religious and community mediators' capacity to respond more effectively to both the current COVID-19 pandemic and future emergencies”. As part of the project, Sheikh Badīr worked to refute conspiracy theories that were widespread in the Arab community, e.g., that WHO was bribing hospitals to report higher numbers of COVID-19 deaths. He also organized meetings between the religious community at large, senior medical authorities in the Arab community, and Dr. Dorit Nizan of WHO, which he subsequently wrote about in the Arabic-language media.¹³ Badīr joined forces with Rabbi Steinberg and Archbishop Yousef Matta to produce a video with the support of WHO entitled “The Bishop, the Sheikh, and the Rabbi: Battling COVID-19 in the Holy Land” (Badīr et al. 2022). In the video, they describe their struggles with their respective communities, principally relating to their efforts to impress upon their communities the importance of following public health guidelines as part and parcel of upholding the religious value of the sanctity of life. Mosaica also organized a forum in which senior religious leaders could discuss the various medical and religious challenges with which their communities were struggling because of the pandemic. At the end of the forum, they signed a declaration—written in Hebrew, Arabic, and English—that details the obligation to save human life and that specifies that “The sanctity of life is the supreme value and saving every person created in the image of God is the highest religious obligation” (Kavod-Karama Project 2022).¹⁴ On 15 March 2022, Sheikh Badīr participated in the Second International Congress for Religious Diplomacy as part of the Conflict Resolution, Management, and Negotiation program

at Bar Ilan University, the focus of which was “Religious Leaders Contending with the Common Enemy of COVID-19”. The Congress addressed questions surrounding religion’s role in responding diplomatically to crisis situations and encouraging the participation of religious leaders in both the short and long term.¹⁵

6. Learning from Past Plagues

The Muslim tradition contains many materials relating to instances of plague—and Muslims’ dealings with those plagues—throughout history (Shabana 2021). In September 2020, Sheikh Badīr proposed two different strategies for dealing with the pandemic based upon the worldviews of two of the Prophet’s friends: Amr ibn al Aṣ and Mu’adh ibn Jabal. Badīr does not explain the historical context of these two different worldviews, so to understand them fully we shall turn to the major plague that occurred in the period of the Rāshidun, known as the plague of ‘Amwās. The plague of ‘Amwās broke out in 639 during the caliphate of ‘Umar ibn al-Khaṭṭāb, a year after ‘Amwās was captured from the Byzantines by the Muslim Army. The plague spread from ‘Amwās to Syria, Iraq, and Egypt, and had a huge death toll in the Muslim Army, killing nearly 2500 soldiers and slowing the momentum of the Muslims’ conquest. Many of the Prophet’s companions (*ṣaḥābah*) were killed by this plague; the commander of the Muslim Army, Abu Ubayda ibn al-Jarrah, did not want to abandon his troops, and so refused ‘Umar ibn al-Khaṭṭāb’s directive to return to Medina. He successfully escaped with his troops to Hauran, but eventually caught the plague in Jabiya and died. Before dying, he appointed another of Muhammad’s companions, Mu’adh ibn Jabal, as his successor, but ibn Jabal too caught the plague and died immediately thereafter, along with his wives and children. The Muslim tradition characterizes ibn Jabal as exhibiting a passive attitude toward the plague: he relates to the plague as a heavenly decree, accepting his fate with an attitude of submission. Following his death, yet another new commander is appointed for the Muslim Army, Amr ibn al Aṣ. When Amr is appointed commander, he orders his soldiers to light the lower fields on fire and then hide in the mountains to avoid breathing the dangerous smoky air. Thus, Amr removes the plague from the people of Greater Syria (*al-shām*). Amr’s active approach to the plague stands in clear contrast to the passive attitude assumed by his predecessors, who simply accepted the plague as a divine decree (Dols 1974).

Based on this story, Sheikh Badīr proposes two different strategies for dealing with the pandemic in his article “Islam: The Way to Prevent Disaster in Our Battle Against COVID-19” (Badīr 2020j). First, in the spirit of Amr ibn al Aṣ, he presents an active strategy, the core of which consists of shutting down the entire economy and entering a full lockdown for thirty days. He urges readers to recognize that the pandemic is dynamic, clever, and lethal, supporting this idea with the Quranic verse: “It and its forces can see you when you cannot see them” (7:27). For this reason, Badīr insists, it is necessary to halt the proceedings of everyday life, obligations included, for a month, so that people can lock down and avoid contact with one another. This strategy aligns with a principle set forth in the hadīth: “if you know of a plague in some region, do not enter it, and if the plague comes to a region in which you dwell, do not leave it”.¹⁶ Likewise, Badīr says, we ought to pause the usual operations of democracy and turn instead to a system of emergency ordinances, since democratic negotiations pose an obstacle to swiftly dealing with the pandemic. The best solution is for every family to isolate in their homes, just as the Prophet directed his soldiers to avoid the men of Quraysh following the capture of Mecca: “Whoever closes the door to his home, he is most certainly safe” (Abū Dā’ud 2009).¹⁷ Badīr also calls for every household to be supplied with food, drink, and medicine throughout the full duration of the lockdown, supporting this with yet other principles from the hadīth: “Inform them that Allah commands them to give charity, that the wealthy among them should give to the poor among them”;¹⁸ and “whoever goes to bed satiated while his neighbor is hungry should not be called ‘believer’” (al-Nīsābūrī 1990).¹⁹ Badīr calls upon those whose net income exceeds 15,000 INS to donate (*zakāt*) 2.5% of their earnings to a mutual fund for those struggling with COVID-19. In sum, Badīr exhorts those with COVID-19 symptoms

to self-isolate until their health is restored. In support of this, he cites the hadīth that “the sick person should not come before the healthy under any circumstance”,²⁰ and the legal principles that “the individual should be willing to endure harm in order to prevent harm from coming to the public at large” and that “preventing harm is prior to producing benefits” (al-Būrnū 1996).²¹

If all these active strategies in the spirit of Amr ibn al Aṣ prove ineffective, then we can turn to the passive strategy of Mu’ādh ibn Jabal. According to this strategy, citizens should prepare themselves for the impending disaster, readying themselves to accept the physical, psychological, spiritual, economic, social, and educational tolls of the pandemic, and to relate to these as a divine decree which they are to endure bravely, according to the Quranic dictum: “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” (2:155). In this view, individuals should assume ultimate responsibility for whatever happens, as it says in the Qur’ān: “Whatever misfortune befalls you, it is because of what your own hands have done, for God forgives much” (42:30). COVID-19 should be understood as a divine judgment, as it is written in the Qur’ān: “No misfortune can happen, either in the earth or in yourselves, that was not set down in writing before We brought it into being, that is easy for Allah” (57:22). Sheikh Rā’id claims that the world will not return to its previous state and that instead, a new order will be established. The significance of this transformation lies in our recognition and admission that we are powerless both in general and in our struggle against the COVID-19 pandemic in particular. Accordingly, our only option is to pray to Allah that vaccinations speedily increase or that the pandemic comes to an end. He supports this idea with the hadīth that “Allah does not bring about any sickness in the world without also bringing about its cure; those who know this know, and those who do not know, do not;” and that “Allah does not create any sickness without also creating its cure, save one sickness. They asked: Messenger of Allah, what is this [incurable sickness referred to]? He answered: Old age” (Badīr 2020j).²²

7. Encouraging the Community to Follow the Ministry of Health’s Guidelines

To address the Arab community’s failure to follow the Ministry of Health’s guidelines, Sheikh Badīr composed a lengthy article entitled “Letter to the Cities defined as ‘Red’²³ in General and to Kfar Qasim in Particular”. He begins this letter with a hadīth about the Prophet and Abū Bakr:

From the mouth of Asmā’, the daughter of Abū Bakr (Asmā’ bint Abī Bakr), who related: We went with the Prophet, peace and prayers be upon him, to fulfill the commandment of pilgrimage, when suddenly, upon arriving in the village of al-‘Araj, the Prophet stopped on the side of the road, and we stopped there with him. The Prophet’s wife Aisha sat beside him, while I sat beside my father. Abū Bakr and the Prophet’s provisions were being transported by a camel led by Abū Bakr’s servant, and Abū Bakr sat waiting for him to arrive. Eventually, the servant arrived, but without the camel who was carrying the food and drink. When Abū Bakr asked him to explain what had happened he said that the previous day he had lost the camel on the road. In response, Abū Bakr screamed: “There was only one camel, and you managed to lose it?!” and then began hitting him. The Prophet watched Abū Bakr, then smiled and said: “See what this pilgrim is doing!”. (Ibn Māja n.d.)²⁴

In this hadīth, the servant failed to carry out the task with which he was charged, and because of his irresponsibility, the pilgrims’ lives were put in danger when they were stuck on the road without any food or drink. Abū Bakr’s hitting of his servant illustrates that the servant’s losing of the camel should not be simply excused or dismissed as an act of fate. The servant was charged with protecting the well-being of other people and he failed to carry out his task, thus he is responsible for bearing the burden of punishment.

Allegorically, the servant in the story symbolizes the Arab community's failure to follow the Ministry of Health's COVID-19 guidelines. According to Sheikh Badīr, anyone who willfully neglects to uphold guidelines is endangering the lives of others and threatening peoples' economic, social, psychological, and spiritual interests, causing schools to close and tens of people to go into isolation unjustifiably, since they knew that it was their responsibility to self-isolate. The negligent must bear responsibility for the consequences of their actions before Allah. Sheikh Badīr insists that the believer should always keep in mind the verse "Does he not realize that Allah sees all?" (96:14), for while the negligent may be saved in this world, they shall certainly not be saved in the world to come. At the same time, Sheikh Badīr implores those who must stay in isolation to understand that Allah is doing this for their benefit and in order that they receive an unparalleled reward. It is incumbent upon the believer to consider every affliction that befalls him as Allah's way of getting him to atone for his sins, as it says in the hadīth:

Abū Hurayra transmitted from the Prophet, peace and prayers be upon him: Allah, may He be exalted, said: My servant considers all My actions to be good. He also said: Afflictions do not befall the believer—whether it be weariness, exhaustion, worry, sorrow, regret, or even the smallest of burdens in the world—unless Allah is making him atone for his sins.²⁵

How part of the Arab community relates to the Ministry of Health's guidelines is similar to the way people related to Noah's admonitions of the impending flood: "they thrust their fingers into their ears, cover their heads with their garments, persist in their rejection, and grow more insolent and arrogant" (71:7). Nothing can improve this sector of the community: it was the cause of the flood in Noah's day, just as it is the cause of the COVID-19 pandemic, and just as it will, in the future, cause harm for us in other arenas: in the areas of physical, psychological, and spiritual health, in the social sphere, in the realm of economics, in the sciences, plus in other domains besides these. Still, another part of the Arab community considers the COVID-19 pandemic to be a conspiracy or an elaborate lie. Badīr writes that we are forbidden from dismissing these people and rather must engage them in conversation, just as Moses engaged the children of Israel in conversation about the cow that God sought as a sacrificial offering (2:67–71). Even though the children of Israel wearied Moses with many questions and made him turn repeatedly to God for answers, Moses did not abandon his conversation with them and answered all of their questions patiently (Badīr 2020k).

8. Prohibition of Large Wedding Parties

In October 2020, Sheikh Badīr released an article whose purpose was to combat the phenomenon of large weddings in the Arab community, which had started to be held again following the end of the first wave of COVID-19 in April 2020. Against state government prohibitions against large wedding parties, people in the Arab community continued to hold wedding parties in parks and forests (Nusbaum 2020). In the Arab community, the wedding season extends from April to August, and virtually every wedding has hundreds of guests, meaning that these weddings caused a huge number of people to contract COVID-19. Accordingly, the goal of Badīr's article was to explain to the community why it is important for people to have smaller wedding parties, and that to do anything else ran contrary to established custom since small wedding parties were in accordance with the sunna of the Prophet:

To my brothers and sisters and cousins in Kfar Qasim: All of you are soldiers in the battle against COVID, and your commander in chief is the Prophet, peace and prayers be upon him. Glory be to you, for you are fighting COVID under his banner. Just as you have prevailed in the realm of mosques, so too shall you prevail in the realm of weddings! (Badīr 2020l)

Sheikh Badīr describes the struggle experienced by the people of Kfar Qasim during the first wave of COVID-19, during which time mosques were completely closed and both

Friday prayers and *tarāwīh* prayers, recited at night during Ramaḍān, were canceled. Badīr praises the people of Kfar Qasim who have acted as soldiers and prevailed in battle: you deserve glory, Badīr writes, on account of your emerging victorious under the leadership of the Prophet, who taught us how to vanquish plagues by his own example. Badīr cites the following hadīth as exemplary guidelines for how people dealt with plagues in the time of the Prophet: “we do not bring the sick into contact with the healthy”, and “flee from plague as you would flee from a lion”. He also cites ‘Abd Allah ibn ‘Abbās’ instruction to his muezzin on a rainy day, namely, that instead of reciting “come to prayer” during adhān he should say “pray in your homes” (*ṣalū fī buyūtikm*). The son of caliph ‘Umar ibn al-Khaṭṭāb also modified the adhān for rainy days, adding the call “pray upon the saddles of your beasts of burden” (*ṣalū fī riḥālikum*); that is to say, do not descend from your beasts of burden to pray with all of the usual bodily motions, but rather pray as you sit upon your saddles, simply by bowing your head (Rubinstein-Shemer 2012).²⁶ In other words, Badīr finds hadīth sources for the Ministry of Health’s guidelines, transforming these into part of the tradition of the Prophet and so the obligation to heed them into a religious obligation.

After you conquer the arena of prayer, Badīr writes to the people of Kfar Qasim, it will be time to turn to another battle, namely, that of large wedding parties, which are customary among the Arab community. Large wedding parties spread COVID-19 which is then transmitted to other venues, such as schools, universities, and workplaces. We should not depend upon the rapid development of a vaccine that will solve all our problems, and should instead assume the worst-case scenario, behaving with extra caution and following guidelines, since this is what has proven to be effective. Accordingly, Badīr claims that there is a need to establish a new, smaller format for wedding parties. While having a wedding is a commandment, Badīr reasons that since this commandment is less important than the commandment to pray, and that since even regarding the latter, Muslim law allows for flexibility in emergency situations, it must follow that Muslim law is also flexible on the subject of weddings. Badīr reiterates the idea that in both cases, the reason that the law is flexible is because the most fundamental value in the sharī‘a is that of saving a life (*ḥifz al-nafs huwa al-maqṣad al-a‘lā fī al-sharī‘a*) (Badīr 2020I). It is impossible, Badīr writes, that weddings should be a cause for the disruption of young children’s studies, resulting in a generation that would not know how to read or write; or else that weddings should be a cause for people not being able to open their businesses and support their families. Badīr draws inspiration for the model small wedding from a hadīth that recounts the marriage of one of the Prophet’s friends, ‘Abd al-Raḥmān ibn ‘Awf:

‘Abd al-Raḥmān ibn ‘Awf related: When we arrived in Medina, the Prophet turned me and Sa‘d ibn al-Rabī‘ into brothers. Sa‘d ibn al-Rabī‘ said to me: I am the wealthiest among the *ansār*,²⁷ I shall give you half of my possessions, and you may choose for yourself whichever you prefer of my two wives; I will divorce her and after she completes the period of *‘idda*,²⁸ you can marry her. ‘Abd al-Raḥmān ibn ‘Awf replied to him: I have no need for this. Is there a marketplace here where one can trade? Sa‘d replied to him: The marketplace of the Banu Qaynuqa. He went there to trade what he had with him, which was only a small amount of oil and cheese. One day he came to the Prophet and there was yellow on his clothes. The Prophet asked him: “Are you beloved?” He answered: “I have married”. The Prophet asked him: “How much did you pay for her?” ‘Abd al-Raḥmān answered: “The weight of a date-seed in gold”. The Prophet said to him: “May God bless you, a wedding party has now been set, even if it is for only one little lamb”.²⁹

‘Abd al-Raḥmān ibn ‘Awf was married without anyone knowing of his marriage; the Prophet only knew of his pauper’s wedding from the scent of perfume that lingered on him. ‘Abd al-Raḥmān did not invite anyone to his wedding, which did not include a feast (*walīma*). Not only did the Prophet not consider his behavior impolite or scornful, but moreover, he blessed him for his marriage. Additionally, most marriages are established in exchange for only a very small dowry. Even these modest marriages are not in accord

with the noble rank of ʿAbd al-Raḥmān, who was among the eight first Muslims, the ten Muslims who were told that they had merited entrance into Heaven, and the six individuals who made up the *shūrā* counsel. He joined the Prophet in all the major battles and made *hijra* twice from Mecca, first from Mecca to Habash, and then from Mecca to Medina. ʿAbd al-Raḥmān’s modest marriage, Badīr writes, can serve as a model for us of what weddings should look like in the time of COVID-19 (Badīr 2020l).

In a time of confusion, as we seek leadership to guide us to safety until the long-awaited vaccine is developed, Badīr claims that we in fact already have such leadership in the form of the Prophet, whose guidelines can lead us to conquer COVID-19. In the Qurʾān it is written that Allah guarantees victory to whoever follows the Prophet, e.g., “and obey God and the Prophet so that you may be given mercy” (3:132); and “so accept whatever the Messenger gives you and abstain from whatever he forbids you” (59:7) (Badīr 2020l). If this is the case, then obeying COVID-19 guidelines is tantamount to not only following the path of the Prophet but, moreover, to obeying God Himself.

A month after composing his article on model small weddings (i.e., in November 2020), c published another article calling upon couples to not delay their weddings on account of COVID-19, and to instead have their weddings on the planned date (Badīr 2020n). In this article, Badīr lays out ten reasons why it is not worthwhile to delay weddings. He discusses the characteristics of those people who remain in denial of reality and refuse to accept that COVID-19 will continue to be around for the foreseeable future. Unable to accept reality as it stands, these people struggle in vain to return to their former lives. Their condition is similar to that of the second caliph, ʿUmar ibn al-Khaṭṭāb, who refused to accept the Prophet’s death and claimed that he had not died but had only ascended to God for forty days, as had Moses. His denial was so absolute that he commanded that the hands and feet be cut off of anyone claiming that Muḥammad had died. Those who are unable to accept reality are the most wretched, Badīr writes, for they struggle to resume their former lives, even as reality fails to align. COVID-19 has forced new conditions upon the whole world, in which markets, airports, and even schools, are all closed; there is no reason why weddings should be an exception to this rule.

Even before COVID-19, Badīr writes, we were concerned with easing expenditures on weddings. Although weddings pose a serious expense for families, people are reluctant to have more modest weddings because they are concerned with what others will say about them. COVID-19 presents a perfect opportunity to normalize modest weddings without being concerned with what others will say.

9. Summary and Conclusions

In this article, we have surveyed Sheikh Rāʿid Badīr’s efforts to protect the Muslim community in Israel from the COVID-19 pandemic. Given that Islamic law implicitly includes guidelines for protecting public health, Badīr chose to make the Ministry of Health’s guidelines accessible to the Muslim community by presenting them in a way that spoke to them. Central to Badīr’s project was his promotion of the idea that saving a life (*ḥifẓ al-nafs*) is the most important principle of the sharīʿa. To uphold this principle, people must follow the Ministry of Health’s social distancing and hygiene guidelines. What is more, these guidelines predate the current COVID-19 era, and, in fact, can be traced back to the Prophet. Sheikh Badīr attempts to find a source in the Muslim tradition for every COVID-19-related guideline, drawing parallels from stories about the Prophet and his companions. In this way, Badīr uses characters from the Qurʾān and the tradition—such as Noah, Job, Abū Bakr, ʿAbd al-Raḥmān ibn ʿAwf, and above all, the Prophet—to wage his public health campaign. To overcome the Muslim community’s resistance to disruptions of their routine religious practices, such as holding Friday prayers in the mosque, Sheikh Badīr attempts to send the message that in the era of COVID-19, different rules apply out of necessity (*ḍarūra*), for the sake of saving lives.

Badīr cooperated with national governmental actors, such as the Ministry of Health, HMOs, and even the IDF to spread his message to the widest audience possible. He also co-

operated with both Christian and Jewish leaders in Israel to present a united religious front in the struggle against COVID-19 and worked closely with the World Health Organization to supply the most up-to-date medical and scientific information to the Arab community to refute prevalent conspiracy theories. Badīr attempted to reach his intended audience in the most diverse manner possible, and so wrote dozens of articles and legal opinions, all of which he published on his website. To this end, he also posted videos to Facebook and YouTube on different platforms, from Kfar Qasim’s municipal website to the Home Front Command’s YouTube channel. Taking Sheikh Badīr as a test case, it is clear that religious leaders can act for the benefit of their communities in times of crisis.

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Notes

- ¹ The Israel-based CSO Mosaica worked with the WHO to link health professionals with Muslim, Christian and Jewish religious leaders in an effort to combat the pandemic.
- ² Acting as an information hub, the Faith and COVID-19: Resource Repository compiled research, news articles, policy reports and data collected by international institutions to provide religious leaders and policymakers with resources and opportunities for collaboration in strategic responses to the pandemic. See: <https://covidfaithrepository.georgetown.domains/> (accessed on 9 January 2023).
- ³ For examples of Jewish jurisprudence, see: [Steinberg \(2020\)](#). See also: [Ochana \(2020\)](#). Both of these sources were uploaded directly to the internet in order to facilitate their speedy distribution. See also: [Feldman \(2020\)](#). Muslim jurisprudential literature may be found on the respective websites of the Islamic Movement: The Northern Branch: <http://www.fatawah.net/Fatawah/1081.aspx> (accessed on 9 January 2023); The Southern Branch: <https://nawazel.net/> (accessed on 9 January 2023).
- ⁴ For Sheikh Badīr’s curriculum vitae, see <https://tinyurl.com/ymtu8vzy> (accessed on 12 January 2020).
- ⁵ On the RPI see <https://tinyurl.com/4tvrxy73> (accessed on 25 May 2022).
- ⁶ On Sheikh Badīr’s activities in Mosaica, see [Roth \(2021\)](#), pp. 49–50.
- ⁷ Badīr’s websites are: <https://nawazel.net/> and <http://scharee.com/>. Sheikh Badīr also posts many *fatwās* and articles on the Kafr Qāsīm website: <https://tinyurl.com/yd24jc57>.
- ⁸ Here and elsewhere, all Quranic citations are taken from [Haleem \(2010\)](#).
- ⁹ For this ḥadīth see [al-Bukhārī \(2002\)](#), p. 271, ḥadīth no. 1117 (hereafter: Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī).
- ¹⁰ For this ḥadīth see [al-Tirmidhī \(1996\)](#), p. 85, ḥadīth no. 715.
- ¹¹ On *maqāṣid al-sharīʿa*, see *El²*, s.v. Maqāṣid al-Sharīʿa (R.M. Gleave).
- ¹² On the collaboration with WHO see [WHO \(2022\)](#).
- ¹³ On the Kavod-Karama (Dignity) Project see, <https://tinyurl.com/dwpyfbsr> (accessed on 21 August 2022). Rabbi Dr. Daniel Roth, Director of Mosaica’s Religious Peace Initiative presents the project, The Role of Religious Leaders in Responding to COVID 19: A Case Study of Sheikhs and Rabbis in the Holy Land at a WHO Europe RCCE Webinar.
- ¹⁴ On the declaration see, <https://tinyurl.com/dwpyfbsr> (accessed on 21 August 2022).
- ¹⁵ For the recording of the conference see (20+) Facebook.
- ¹⁶ For this ḥadīth see Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī, p. 1451, ḥadīth no. 5728.
- ¹⁷ [Abū Dāʿūd \(2009\)](#), p. 633, ḥadīth no. 3022.
- ¹⁸ al-Bukhārī, Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī, p. 338, ḥadīth no. 1395
- ¹⁹ [al-Nīsābūrī \(1990\)](#), p. 15, ḥadīth no. 2166.
- ²⁰ al-Bukhārī, Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī, p. 1461, ḥadīth no. 5771.
- ²¹ On this legal principles see [al-Būrmū \(1996\)](#), p. 263.
- ²² al-Nīsābūrī, al-Nustadrak, vol. 4, p. 15, ḥadīth no. 8206.
- ²³ The Israeli government used a color-coded system to classify cities in terms of the occurrence of COVID-19 per capita. Red signified the highest level.

- 24 Ibn Māja (n.d.), p. 978, ḥadīth no. 2933; al-Bukhārī, Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī, p. 1827, ḥadīth no. 7405.
- 25 Al-Bukhārī, Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī, p. 1431, ḥadīth no. 5642.
- 26 Prayer by nodding the head only is called in Islamic law *al-ṣalat bi-l-īmāʿ*. Muslims pray this way in situations where they cannot pray normally, as in a state of illness or fear. See Rubinstein-Shemer (2012).
- 27 The Anṣār were the local inhabitants of Medina who, in Islamic tradition, took prophet Muhammad and his followers (the *Muhājirūn*) into their homes when they emigrated from Mecca during the *hijra*.
- 28 The length of time a woman has to wait between divorcing her husband and the time she can marry another man.
- 29 al-Bukhārī, Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī, p. 927, ḥadīth no. 3780.

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