On January 30, 2020, the Israeli Ministry of Health began to issue public guidelines in order to slow the spread of COVID-19. On March 12, 2020, the Ministry of Health intensified its guidelines, 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, disrupting daily life for 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 be creative in explaining to their communities why they should 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, with special attention paid 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; 3) The degree of his cooperation with national and international actors.

A Theological Approach to the Pandemic

On March 5, 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 was influencing our lives, be it from a theological, religious, educational, or humanitarian perspective. Sheikh Badīr spoke first about matters of faith: Should COVID be understood as a divine punishment for human actions? The high number of deaths resulting from COVID 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 pandemic is a divine punishment for human wickedness. Indeed, in the Qurʾān and the Muslim tradition, there are many sources that express this possibility. However, there are also several sources that view plagues as a sort of trial by which God tests humankind.[[1]](#footnote-1)

Badīr chooses to view the pandemic as a trial. In his opinion, the COVID pandemic is not a divine punishment (*ʿuqūba*), as other religious people in the Muslim world claim.[[2]](#footnote-2) In Badīr’s eyes, COVID 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).[[3]](#footnote-3) That is to say, according to this verse, COVID should be understood as a divine trial of humankind (*ibtilāʾ*) 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 to the COVID 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-ṣiḥī*) in cases of contagious illness from Job, who isolates 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 amongst the soldiers and so he separated the sick soldiers from the healthy ones. Elsewhere 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 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 course of the series. Whoever feels unwell, even if he is not sick with COVID, 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 (*hifẓ al-nafs*).[[4]](#footnote-4)

It is worthwhile to consider how Badīr chose to relate to COVID as a trial and not as a punishment. In my opinion, this choice was one that 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, such that which 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 appear the world? Badīr finds an allusion to COVID 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 gnaws through the stick until one day it suddenly breaks, causing Solomon to fall and die. Sheikh Badīr explains that the COVID pandemic is like the woodworm: It moves from place to place in secret, striking people down unopposed. Solomon’s walking stick is, therefore, 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 Qurʾān 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 his own incompetence to him. Further, just as Solomon’s death brought about a new order to the world, the COVID 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 Badīr 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 (*ʿajz al-bashriya*).[[5]](#footnote-5) On this reading, Sheikh Badīr is choosing to view the phenomenon of COVID 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.

Closure of Mosques

Sheikh Badīr was the first Muslim cleric to call for the closure of mosques in Israel. On March 9, 2020, he released the announcement above.[[6]](#footnote-6) The upper portion of the announcement contains a photograph of Badīr on the right-hand side accompanied by the text: “Sheikh Rāʾid Badīr, Member of the Institute for Islamic Law and Research” (*dār al-iftāʾwa-l-buḥūth al-islāmiyya*). The heading of the announcement advertises that it is a legal opinion (*fatwā sharīʿa*), the content of which is as follows: “Mosques will be closed for public prayer for a period of two weeks and closed for Friday prayer for the foreseeable future.” In a story released on i24 about his efforts to close mosques in Israel (including al-Aqsa—), Badīr 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. Badīr 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 Rāʾid also reiterated that the guidelines around social distancing could be traced back to the example of the Prophet. He explained how the Prophet was forbidden from shaking hands with a man who came to swear his loyalty to him because the man had a contagious disease.[[7]](#footnote-7)

In a video posted to Facebook on March 13, 2020, Sheikh Badīr spoke about gatherings.[[8]](#footnote-8) Badīr explains that while the law commands people to pray the Friday prayer communally in mosque, this law only applies in the general case. According to Badīr, the sharīʿa also contains special emergency ordinances (*khuṭaṭ al-ṭawāriʾ al-tashrīʿiyya*). 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.”[[9]](#footnote-9) Whoever is at home (*muqīm*) should pray the full prayer, but anyone who is traveling (*musāfir*) is permitted to shorten his prayer.[[10]](#footnote-10) All of these are examples of emergency ordinances (*fiqh al-istithnaʾāt* or *khuṭaṭ al-ṭawāriʾ al-tashrīʿiyya*). Badīr elaborates that these emergency ordinances include a few general principles: *fatḥ al-dharāʾiʿ*, or permitting something forbidden; and *sadd al-dharāʾi,* or forbidding something permissible. Islam is a religion that takes the temporal circumstances of reality (*sharīʿa wāqiʿiyya*) into consideration. Thus, if we once again consider the issue of holding Friday prayers in 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 mosque for prayer, regardless of whether they might have COVID or another illness. Badīr again insists that following the Ministry of Health’s guidelines is tantamount to following the path of the Prophet.[[11]](#footnote-11) In a video posted on April 6, 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 is one of the sharīʿa’s supreme goals. True belief thus entails doing everything possible to save lives and avoid endangering lives.[[12]](#footnote-12)

Turning to the Youth

In a video posted on March 26, 2020, Sheikh Badīr spoke forcefully to young people who were not obeying COVID safety guidelines. He enjoined them to not join the ranks of those who create death (*ṣunāʿal-mawt*) by leaving the house and breaking isolation, transmitting their contagious COVID 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.[[13]](#footnote-13) On March 29, 2020, in the wake of the first COVID death in Israel, Sheikh Badīr issued a legal opinion solely devoted to explaining the importance of isolation to young people.[[14]](#footnote-14)

Cooperation with National and International Actors

On April 6, 2020, a video was posted to the Facebook page of the IDF spokesperson for the Arab media, Lieutenant Colonel Avichay Adraee.[[15]](#footnote-15) 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 May 3, 2020, another of Sheikh Badīr’s videos was released, this time on the Home Front Command’s YouTube channel.[[16]](#footnote-16) 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. 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 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-related news and guidelines.

It is extremely significant that a member of the Islamic Movement produced a video in cooperation with the IDF: While the Southern Branch of the Islamic Movement eventually 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 December 31, 2020, a video entitled “The Doctor and the Religious Man” (*ṭabib wa-faqīh*)[[17]](#footnote-17) was posted to the Facebook page of the Islamic Institute for Legal Decision-Making. The video opens on 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 vaccine. Rather than immediately offering his own opinion, Badīr instead turns to pose the same question to his family doctor, Dr. Salaḥ 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 vaccine is safe and effective, and not something to be afraid of. In this video, we can clearly see Sheikh Badīr’s 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,[[18]](#footnote-18) 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 among the Arab community, e.g., that WHO was bribing hospitals to report higher numbers of COVID 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.[[19]](#footnote-19) Badīr joined forces with Rabbi Steinberg and Archbishop Yousef Matta to produce a movie with the support of WHO entitled “The Bishop, the Sheikh, and the Rabbi: Battling COVID-19 in the Holy Land.”[[20]](#footnote-20) In the movie 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 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."[[21]](#footnote-21) On March 15, 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.[[22]](#footnote-22)

Learning from Past Plagues

The Muslim tradition contains many materials relating to instances of plague—and Muslims’ dealings with those plagues—throughout history.[[23]](#footnote-23) 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 Muʾādh 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 ʿAmwās. The plague of ʿAmwās broke out in 639 during the caliphate of ʿUmar ibn al-Khaṭṭāb, a year after ʿAmwās was captured from the Byzantines by the Muslim Army. The plague spread from ʿAmwās to Syria, Iraq, and Egypt, and had a huge death toll among 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 ʿUmar 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, Muʾādh 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 towards the plague: he relates to the plague as to 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 then hide in the mountains so as to not breathe in the dangerous smoky air. Thus does Amr remove 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.[[24]](#footnote-24)

On the basis of 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.”[[25]](#footnote-25) 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.”[[26]](#footnote-26) 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’s 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.”[[27]](#footnote-27) 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;”[[28]](#footnote-28) and “whoever goes to bed satiated while his neighbor is hungry should not be called ‘believer.’”[[29]](#footnote-29) 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. In sum, Badīr exhorts those with COVID symptoms 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,”[[30]](#footnote-30) 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.”[[31]](#footnote-31)

If all these active strategies, after the spirit of Amr ibn al Aṣ, prove ineffective, then we can turn to the passive strategy of Muʾādh 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). On this view, individuals should assume ultimate responsibility for whatever happens, as it says in the Qurʾān: “Whatever misfortune befalls you, it is because of what your own hands have done, for God forgives much” (42:30). COVID should be understood as a divine judgement, as it is written in the Qurʾān: “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 Rāʾid 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 pandemic, in particular. Accordingly, our only option is to pray to Allah that vaccinations speedily increase or that the pandemic come 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;”[[32]](#footnote-32) 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.”[[33]](#footnote-33)

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 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 Asmāʾ, the daughter of Abū Bakr (Asmāʾ 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-ʿAraj, 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!’”[[34]](#footnote-34)

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 his servant illustrates that the servant’s losing 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 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.”[[35]](#footnote-35)

The way in which part of the Arab community relates to the Ministry of Health’s guidelines is similar to the way in which 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 for the flood in Noah’s day, just as it is the cause for the COVID 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 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.[[36]](#footnote-36)

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 in April 2020. Against state government prohibitions against large wedding parties, people in the Arab community continued to hold wedding parties in backyards…[[37]](#footnote-37) 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. 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 moreover, 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!”[[38]](#footnote-38)

Sheikh Badīr describes the struggle experienced by the people of Kfar Qasim during the first wave of COVID, during which time mosques were completely closed and both Friday prayers and *tarāwīh* prayers, recited at night during Ramaḍān, were cancelled. 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 ʿAbd Allah ibn ʿAbbās’ 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 ʿUmar 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.[[39]](#footnote-39) 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 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 weddings 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 in regard to 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 sharīʿa is that of saving a life (*ḥifẓ al-nafs huwa al-maqṣad al-aʿlā fī al-sharīʿa*).[[40]](#footnote-40) 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’s 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, ʿAbd al-Raḥmān ibn ʿAwf:

“ʿAbd al-Raḥmān ibn ʿAwf related: When we arrived in Medina, the Prophet turned me and Saʿd ibn al-Rabīʿ into brothers. Saʿd ibn al-Rabīʿ said to me: I am the wealthiest among the *anṣār*,[[41]](#footnote-41) 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*,[[42]](#footnote-42) you can marry her. ʿAbd al-Raḥmān ibn ʿAwf replied to him: I have no need for this. Is there a marketplace here where one can trade? Saʿd 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. 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? ʿAbd 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.”[[43]](#footnote-43)

ʿAbd al-Raḥmān ibn ʿAwf was married without anyone knowing of his marriage; the Prophet only new of his pauper’s wedding from the scent of perfume that lingered on him. ʿAbd 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 *shura* 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.[[44]](#footnote-44)

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 to us to conquer COVID. 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).[[45]](#footnote-45) If this is the case, then obeying COVID guidelines is tantamount to not only following the path of the Prophet, but moreover, obeying God Himself.

A month after composing his article on model small weddings (i.e., in November 2020), Badīr published another article calling upon couples to not delay their weddings on account of COVID, and to instead have their weddings on the planned-for date.[[46]](#footnote-46) 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 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 a period of 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 Muhammad 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 has forced new conditions upon the whole world, in which markets, airports, even schools, are all closed—there is no reason why weddings should be an exception to this rule.

Even before COVID, 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 presents a perfect opportunity to normalize modest weddings without being concerned with what others will say.

Summary and Conclusions

In this article, we have surveyed Sheikh Rāʾid Badīr’s efforts to protect the Muslim community in Israel from the COVID 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 promoting the idea that saving a life (*ḥifẓ al-nafs*) is the most important principle of the sharīʾa. To uphold this principle, people must follow the Ministry of Health’s social distancing and hygiene guidelines. What’s more, these guidelines predate the current COVID 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-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 Mosque, Sheikh Badīr attempts to send the message that in the era of COVID, 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 cooperated with both Christian and Jewish leaders in Israel to present a united religious front in the struggle against COVID 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 article 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 have the ability to act for the benefit of their communities in times of crisis.

1. On the ethical justification for plagues in Islamic tradition see Ayman Shabana, "From the Plague to the Coronavirus: Islamic Ethics and Responses to the COVID-19 Pandemic", *Journal of Islamic Ethics*, (Apr 2021), 7-10. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. See for example, Nina Käsehage, "The Impact of Covid-19 on Abrahamic Fundamentalist Groups", *Interdisciplinary Journal for Religion and Transformation in Contemporary Society*, 7 (2021), 416-419; Ateş Altiordu, "Divine Warning or Prelude to Secularization? Religion, Politics, and the COVID-19 Pandemic in Turkey", Sociology of Religion: A Quarterly Review 2021, 82:4, 458-461; Jonas Svenson, "Minding the pandemic A CSR perspective on patterns in Muslim religious responses to COVID-19", *Approaching Religion*, 11:2, (2021), 24-28. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Here and elsewhere, all Quranic citations are taken from Haleem, 2010. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. ʿAbdallāh Rāʾid Badīr, "*firus Corona fī Mizān al-Sharʿ*", (5 March 2020), *Hunā Kafr Qāsim*, [www.facebook.com/KQPress/videos/2577187949074446/](http://www.facebook.com/KQPress/videos/2577187949074446/), (Accessed 18 August 2022). [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. ʿAbdallāh Rāʾid Badīr, "*Hal Muhimat Firus Corona Covid 19 ka-Muhimat Ḍabatu al-Arḍ alatī Akalat Minsat Sulīmān ʿAlayhi al-Salām* (*Daqiqū fī Awjah al-Subh, naḥwa niẓām ʿĀlamī Jadīd*)" tinyurl.com/4za7jevn (Accsessed 19 August 2022). [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. See Saban, M., Myers, V., & Wilf-Miron, R. (2020). "Coping with the COVID-19", 5. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. "Islamic cleric advocates for temple mount closure", (30 April 2020), *i24 news*, <https://tinyurl.com/bdh4hptx>, (Accessed 21 August 2022); Francis X. Rocca & James Marson, "Priests, Rabbis, Imams Wrestle With Coronavirus Constraints", (28 March 2020), *Wall Street Journal*, (accessed 21 August 2022). [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. "Al-Sheikh Rāʾid Badīr: Masʾalat Waqt lā Akthar…wa-Sayataḥadathu Ighlāq al-Masājid Nihāʾyan ḥasb al-Taṭawurāt bi-Sabab Firus Corona", (12 March 2020), [www.facebook.com/113093663429316/posts/217411142997567/](http://www.facebook.com/113093663429316/posts/217411142997567/) (accessed 21 August 2022). [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. For this ḥadīth see <https://tinyurl.com/3vvhxusu> [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. For this ḥadīth see <https://tinyurl.com/ynxe5bc8> [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. "Al-Sheikh Rāʾid Badīr: Masʾalat Waqt lā Akthar…wa-Sayataḥadathu Ighlāq al-Masājid Nihāʾyan ḥasb al-Taṭawurāt bi-Sabab Firus Corona", (12 March 2020), [www.facebook.com/113093663429316/posts/217411142997567/](http://www.facebook.com/113093663429316/posts/217411142997567/) (accessed 21 August 2022). [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. www.facebook.com/watch/?v=2932272780226965 [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. www.facebook.com/100006283241917/videos/2601792276706855 [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Dār al-Iftāʾwa-l-buḥūth al-Islamiyya fī al-Dākhil al-Filasṭīnī 48, "Bayān Sharʿī 5", (29 March 2020), <https://tinyurl.com/y7fxr3f5>, (accessed 21 August 2022). [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. <https://tinyurl.com/ckzbndze> [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RWPT7Q-OYgM> [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. <https://m.facebook.com/DarEftaa48/videos/186185329903100/?refsrc=deprecated&_rdr> [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. On the collaboration with WHO see "Israel: Religious Leaders bolster COVID-19 response with civil society and WHO/Europe support", (14 January 2022), *World Health Organization*, <https://tinyurl.com/33hzn97r>, (accessed 21 August 2022). [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. On the Kavod-Karama (Dignity) Project see, <https://tinyurl.com/dwpfybsr> (accessed 21 August 2022). Rabbi Dr. Daniel Roth, Director of Mosaica’s Religious Peace Initiative present the project, [The Role of Religious Leaders in Responding to COVID 19: A Case Study of Sheikhs and Rabbis in the Holy Land](https://who.zoom.us/rec/play/2c3BWvJ0PEiTESPoZOfJcWf6AKvCd8nXCt53iBsjj6qDh3oJYh-zoyL3EG611FWRBqCu1nXLk08FfJAc.6SOAGDBigV54iUQ7?continueMode=true&_x_zm_rtaid=Pldk7oZGQG-Qna1oGWZuYA.1638781626748.30bbd2e2fa4843331dd7e6e81d688b40&_x_zm_rhtaid=58) at a WHO Europe RCCE Webinar [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. [(116) The Bishop, the Sheikh and the Rabbi: Battling COVID-19 in the Holy Land - YouTube](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EEmlcLgmUXE) (accessed 21 August 2022). [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. On the declaration see, <https://tinyurl.com/dwpfybsr> (accessed 21 August 2022). [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. For the recording of the conferencr see [(20+) Facebook](https://www.facebook.com/pconfl/videos/909040149772834/?extid=NS-UNK-UNK-UNK-IOS_GK0T-GK1C&ref=sharing) [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. On epidemics in Islamic history see Shabana, A. (2021). From the Plague to the Coronavirus, 6-7. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. On the plague of ʿAmwās see Michael W. Dols, "Plague in Early Islamic History", *Journal of the American Oriental* Society, vol. 94:3, (1974), 376-379. [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. ʿAbdallāh Rāʾid Badīr, "*Al-Islam huwa al-ḥall fīMuwājahat Corona li-Manʿal-Kāritha*", (11 September, 2020), *nawazel.net,*tinyurl.com/2fmc7reb, (Accessed 19 August, 2022). [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. For this *ḥadīth* see dorar.net/hadith/sharh/24621 [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. For this *ḥadīth* see <https://tinyurl.com/2dydvtpe> [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
28. For this *ḥadīth* see www.dorar.net/hadith/sharh/4294 [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
29. For this *ḥadīth* see dorar.net/hadith/sharh/135234 [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
30. For this *ḥadīth* see www.dorar.net/hadith/sharh/25680 [↑](#footnote-ref-30)
31. For this *ḥadīth* see al-maktaba.org/book/8379/253 [↑](#footnote-ref-31)
32. For this *ḥadīth* see dorar.net/hadith/sharh/147431 [↑](#footnote-ref-32)
33. For this *ḥadīth* see tinyurl.com/2fmc7reb [↑](#footnote-ref-33)
34. For this *ḥadīth* see tinyurl.com/t6h4my4d [↑](#footnote-ref-34)
35. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-35)
36. ʿAbdallāh Rāʾid Badīr, "Risālatī ilā al-Buldān al-Mudaraja ʿalā al-Qāʾima al-Ḥamrā ʿĀma wa-Kufur Qāsim Khāṣa", 3 September 2020, tinyurl.com/t6h4my4d, (Accessed 19 August, 2022). [↑](#footnote-ref-36)
37. About the weddings in the Arab sector in Israel during the Corona period see Moshe Nusbaum, "*Mezafzefim ʿal ha-Takanot: 12,000 ḥatonot neercho ba-Migzar ha-ʿaravi ba-Ḥodashim ha-Akhronim*, (26 October 2020), *News 12*, <https://tinyurl.com/6zab4ran>, (Accessed 19 August, 2022). [↑](#footnote-ref-37)
38. tinyurl.com/3672s3hr [↑](#footnote-ref-38)
39. Prayer by nodding the head only is called in Islamic law *al-ṣalat bi-l-īmāʾ*. Muslims pray this way in situations where they cannot pray normally, as in a state of illness or fear. See Nesya Rubinstein- Shemer, "Larger than Life: Prayer during Wartime in Islamic Law", *Studia Orientalia Electronica*, 2012, vol. 12, 120. [↑](#footnote-ref-39)
40. tinyurl.com/3672s3hr [↑](#footnote-ref-40)
41. The Anṣār were the local inhabitants of [Medina](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Medina) who, in Islamic tradition, took prophet [Muhammad](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Muhammad_in_Islam) and his followers (the *[Muhājirūn](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Muhajirun" \o "Muhajirun)*) into their homes when they emigrated from [Mecca](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mecca) during the [*hijra*](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hijra_(Islam)) [↑](#footnote-ref-41)
42. The length of time a woman has to wait between divorcing her husband and the time she can marry another man. [↑](#footnote-ref-42)
43. For this ḥadīth see Muḥammad ibn ʿAlī al-Shinqitī, "Qiṣṣat zawāj ʿabd al-Raḥmān ibn ʿAwf", *Youtube*, [(116) قصة زواج عبدالرحمن بن عوف - محمد بن على الشنقيطي - YouTube](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-79MYZ3Keto), (Accessed 19 August, 2022). [↑](#footnote-ref-43)
44. tinyurl.com/3672s3hr [↑](#footnote-ref-44)
45. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-45)
46. tinyurl.com/swd969cf [↑](#footnote-ref-46)