

Important Message to Muslims regarding COVID-19 and the 3 Principles Approach to Fake News

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We are currently going through a very challenging and testing time. The situation is challenging because we are losing our loved ones to the COVID-19 virus. The time is testing, because the priorities of Muslims are being challenged, and their ability to cope in a time of perceived confusion and despair is being tested.

Every so often, Allāh the Almighty challenges mankind with His might, so that we realize that our advanced technology and brains, is no match for our Creator and then to appreciate that we are wholly dependent on Him. The Covid-19 pandemic is just another example of that realization.

I wish to focus in particular on one major challenge our Muslim community is facing, which is infodemics. **Infodemics** is a blend of "information" and "epidemic" that typically refers to a rapid and far-reaching spread of both accurate and inaccurate information about something, such as a disease through social media platforms. As facts, rumors, and fears mix and disperse, it becomes difficult to learn essential information about an issue because social media is spammed with information overload causing confusion.

As Muslims, our century's long Islamic tradition provides some very important principles about how we ought to seek the truth, and then our obligations to uphold what is right.

Here is a list of 3 principles I highly recommend Muslims adhere to.

Principle 1 - Seek advice from those who possess knowledge about whether the vaccines are halal or haram.

Ask those 'ulamā' (Muslim scholars) who have a deep understanding of the *sharī'ah*, are God conscious (*taqwa*), and have either a very good grasp of the science of vaccines or have consulted those who have expertise

in the science. Usually these are 'ulamā' who are highly respected personalities in their communities, have been teaching these related subjects for some time, and have accountability to their communities.

Allāh, *the Wise*, has divided the Muslim community into two types of people: the *ahl al-dhikr*, and those that depend on the *ahl al-dhikr*.

فَاسْأَلُوا أَهْلَ الذِّكْرِ إِنْ كُنْتُمْ لَا تَعْلَمُونَ

"Then ask those who possess the knowledge (*ahl al-dhikr*) if you do not know." (Qur'ān 21:7 and 16:43)

If you are of the latter group (those dependent on the *ahl al-dhikr*) then it is incumbent on you to seek advice from these 'ulamā' (i.e., the *ahl al-dhikr*). If you are seeking your knowledge from those who are not of the *ahl al-dhikr*, then this is problematic and potentially dangerous for you and those you advise.

Problem: Unfortunately, there are many charlatans in this latter group, who are posing as experts, claiming to have consulted experts, or just blatantly stating whatever suits them without verifying. They usually take secondary or tertiary sources from the Internet which suits their agenda, and without question they forward this without having any ability to analyze or appraise the data. Unfortunately, few 'ulamā' have fallen prey to this group also.

Principle 2 - Verify information before passing on to others

يَا أَيُّهَا الَّذِينَ آمَنُوا إِنْ جَاءَكُمْ فَاسِقٌ بِنَبَأٍ فَتَبَيَّنُوا أَنْ تُصِيبُوا قَوْمًا
بِجَهَالَةٍ فَتُصْبِحُوا عَلَىٰ مَا فَعَلْتُمْ نَادِمِينَ

"O you who believe! If a sinning person (someone who is not considered upright) comes to you with news, verify it, lest you harm people in ignorance, and afterwards you

become regretful to what you have done." (Qur'ān 49:6) All of us have a responsibility to our communities and are obligated by Allah Almighty to only speak the truth. If you accept information, a report or news from a source and intend to forward to others, then it becomes a duty upon you to verify the information by ensuring it is **peer-reviewed** by experts. Just because somebody is claiming something out of passion and emotion, does not suggest that this person's claim is the truth.

Problem: Many of us are providing support and motivation (intentionally or unintentionally) to those charlatans who have little expertise, by simply forwarding their message. It is important that we verify whether it is a blatant lie, a misinterpretation of important

عَنْ أَبِي هُرَيْرَةَ قَالَ قَالَ رَسُولُ اللَّهِ صَلَّى اللَّهُ عَلَيْهِ وَسَلَّمَ كَفَى
بِالْمَرْءِ كَذِبًا أَنْ يُحَدِّثَ بِكُلِّ مَا سَمِعَ

information, or just a rant without any actual valid supporting proof.

Abu Huraira reported: The Messenger of Allāh, peace and blessings be upon him, said, "It is enough falsehood for someone to speak of everything he hears." Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim

Principal 3 - Ask for a character profile and verify expertise of the one who challenges or makes a serious claim

It is important to get into the head of these strange individuals who are amongst the group of "anti-vaxxers" and are pushing their five-minute videos on social media.

Most of their lives they have been refusing vaccinations and peddling conspiracy theories at every opportunity - blaming the 'kuffār' (non-Muslims), distorting theological positions and claims of classical Muslim scholars, and accusing respected Muslims or organizations of hypocrisy.

Now is the opportune time for them to really let it out, and prey on people's despair. Since there is a serious need for mass population public health interventions, like lockdowns and vaccinations, it is easier to feed off the fear and anxieties of the public by producing short videos with little accountability to the truth. People are vulnerable and are more likely to accept news which promotes hesitancy, fear, skepticism and anxiety.

يَا أَيُّهَا الَّذِينَ آمَنُوا اتَّقُوا اللَّهَ وَكُونُوا مَعَ الصَّادِقِينَ

O you who believe! Be afraid of Allāh and be with those who are true (in word and deeds). (Qur'ān - 9:119)

Some common attributes of these individuals.

1. Most of them tend not to be so intelligent, are known not to be very bright amongst members of their communities, or people of their expert community, and do not have much social standing amongst communities except their elite groups, and hence lack accountability.

2. They are known for making rash decisions and are known for having outlandish or extreme opinions on issues amongst their peers. At times respected members of the community tend to warn you against them. They can be somewhat emotionally unstable, argumentative or have anger or other emotional issues.

3. They bring Islam into the discourse yet have very little knowledge of the related Islamic sciences or use Islam inappropriately to suit their ends. They are usually not known to possess a good character amongst the 'ulamā' and can sometimes be critical of 'ulamā' if they are not supported by them. Sometimes they make serious claims about Islam without any hesitation.

4. They thrive on others passing and sharing their fake messages and tend to promote their message through emotional appeal without any valuable proof or evidence. A good litmus test to determine their nature is that if you pass on any false information to them, which supports their agenda, they will not scrutinize or verify it, but rather, they will use without question in support of their claim.

5. They appeal to the betterment of society and because of their concern for public interests, yet their track record shows no or very little community service or charitable works.

Avoid these people as they can be harmful with their fake news, even if they believe it and seem sincere in what they claim.

وعن ابن مسعود رضي الله عنه قال: قال رسول الله صلى الله عليه وسلم: "إن الصدق يهدي إلى البر، وإن البر يهدي إلى الجنة، وإن الرجل ليصدق حتى يكتب عند الله صديقًا، وإن الكذب يهدي إلى الفجور، وإن الفجور يهدي إلى النار، وإن الرجل ليكذب حتى يكتب عند الله كذابًا"

Sayyiduna 'Abd Allāh ibn Mas'ūd (may Allāh be pleased with him) said: The Messenger of Allāh (peace and blessings of Allāh be upon him) said: You must be truthful, for truthfulness leads to righteousness and

righteousness leads to Paradise. A man will keep speaking the truth and striving to speak the truth until he will be recorded with Allāh as a *siddīq* (speaker of the truth). Beware of telling lies (and conveying unverified information from unreliable sources), for lying leads to immorality and immorality leads to Hellfire. A man will keep telling lies and striving to tell lies until he is recorded with Allāh as a liar. (Reported by Saḥīḥ Bukhārī and Muslim).

Finally, COVID 19 is a serious viral illness, especially for our elderly and vulnerable. It has cost them their lives and has severely tested those who have been debilitated by its effects.

Please do not treat this situation as a game. Take your information from reliable sources. Ask expert Muslim scholars, Muslim medical organizations who consult with experts and remember...

The level of scrutiny vaccines are facing at the present moment is unprecedented. There are so many safety checks and measures in place to scrutinize its safety. Everything, even the most minor of symptoms is reported or recorded and this information is transparent and readily available to all.

Drug companies and regulatory bodies are being regulated very carefully and are under serious public scrutiny. This in itself is reassuring to some degree. We consume all sorts of flavourings and additives in our food and trust food companies, yet they don't have this level of scrutiny.

We turn to Allāh our Creator and Lord and pray that He removes this pandemic from our lives as soon as possible and cures us of our physical and social ills.