

## Guidelines for Conducting Worship During Epidemic Transmission According to Islamic and Scientific Perspectives

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### Abstract

*The Coronavirus is a large family of viruses that cause illnesses ranging from the common cold to more severe diseases. COVID-19 is an infectious disease caused by the novel coronavirus (SARS-CoV-2). The government has issued guidelines to control the spread of the virus, including matters involving activities in mosques such as the implementation of prayer rituals. Some laws and practices in the prayer rituals, issued by the mufti and religious departments, initially caused confusion among the Muslim community because such matters had never occurred in Malaysia and there was a lack of explanation by religious experts. Thus, this study is conducted to obtain views from a panel of experts on matters that can be improved and enhanced in these guidelines. This study employs the method of focus group discussions (FGD) involving 6 expert panelists from the fields of religion, science, and medicine. All expert panelists agree that the development of these guidelines is very beneficial for the community to refer to in the event of airborne virus transmission such as COVID-19 in the future. These guidelines provide justification from both Islamic and scientific perspectives to make the community more confident and comfortable in practicing them.*

**Keywords:** COVID-19, Guidelines, Islamic, Science, Epidemic

## INTRODUCTION

Every decision made during the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic must take into account every aspect according to the current situation to avoid the risk of virus transmission, which is increasingly severe in Malaysia. In any decision made, there will inevitably be controversies and disputes, including in the context of fatwas. Since the early entry of the virus in early 2020 until now, disputes have persisted, exacerbated by netizens providing their views on social media. Differing opinions are normal, but the culture becomes unhealthy when etiquette is not maintained, especially when differences in fiqh legal issues are debated using disrespectful language and so forth.

The government has issued several restrictions and directives during the implementation period of the Movement Control Order (MCO). These directives are included in Regulation 16 P.U. (A) 293/2021. Act 342. Emergency (Prevention and Control of Infectious Diseases) (Amendment) Ordinance 2021. Subject to health regulations, local authority regulations, and directives or regulations of state religious authorities (Malaysian law). This includes the suspension of all mosques and surau activities involving Friday prayers, congregational prayers, Eid prayers, and social distancing in prayers. In the context of fatwas related to the COVID-19 pandemic, various pro and contra controversies arose initially. However, based on respect for the decisions made, the entire country has complied with the decisions of the MKI Consultative Committee and state fatwas. Furthermore, the fatwa institution is always open to healthy scientific discussions to avoid fatwa disputes (Salleh, 2020). Medical experts and the Ministry of Health Malaysia (MOH) also play an important role in

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providing explanations for every directive and control issued by the government. This includes matters related to prayer rituals.

### Existing Guidelines

To address the rapid and widespread transmission of this virus, the government has issued SOPs for every social activity relevant to the prevailing infection conditions in a particular area. Examples include sectors such as education, tourism, transportation, administration, and also matters of worship such as conducting prayers in mosques, performing sacrificial rituals, and managing funerals. Below are examples of phase 3 guidelines for mosque and surau activities outlined by the National Security Council (MKN, 2022).

**Table 1. National Recovery Plan - Phase 3 SOP for the Social Sector (Mosque and Surau Activities)**

Matters	Brief Explanations
Activities and Congregation Protocols	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Mosques and surau should have sufficient personnel to assist in controlling congregants;</li> <li>• Imams are encouraged to recite short surahs or verses.</li> <li>• The wearing of face masks is MANDATORY.</li> <li>• Mosque management should mark the distance between congregants at least 1 meter apart.</li> <li>• Only congregants who have received complete vaccination, are in good health, and asymptomatic are allowed to attend.</li> </ul>
Congregation Etiquette	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Congregants are encouraged to bring their own prayer mats.</li> <li>• Congregants should perform ablution at home, but they are allowed to renew it at the mosque/sarau.</li> <li>• Handshaking and physical contact between each other are not allowed.</li> </ul>
Friday Prayer	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The sermon leader takes his place immediately after the first call to prayer, and the second call to prayer is then sounded.</li> <li>• The first and second sermons are shortened as much as possible while maintaining the original pillars.</li> <li>• Friday prayers are conducted within the shortest possible time, and</li> <li>• The imam is encouraged to recite short surahs or verses.</li> </ul>
Congregation Capacity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• According to the capacity of mosques and suraus, with distancing subject to the determination of the State Religious Authorities</li> </ul>

**Source:** National Security Council (MKN), 2022.

However, the guidelines issued by the MKN (2022) are brief and concise. This has raised doubts among some members of the community in implementing them because they involve changes in prayer-related laws that have never been done before, such as distancing between rows and matters related to Friday prayers. The mufti's office also provided explanations on several issues but in a general and not detailed manner. Therefore, this study provides explanations regarding the worship guidelines issued by the government in more detail to facilitate the public in understanding and practicing worship with confidence.

The following are some of the social activities controls in mosques and suraus that will be discussed in this study: row distancing, wearing face masks, limiting prayer times, and using hand sanitizers during prayers.

### The Spacing Of Prayer Rows

"The government stipulates that the distance between congregants should be 1 meter apart from each other, and the entry and exit of the mosque must be done in orderly queues while maintaining controlled distancing." National Security Council (MKN) (2022).



Figure 1. Position of congregants during prayer with physical distancing.

Source: Jabatan Kemajuan Islam Malaysia (JAKIM).

Following the directive from the Ministry of Health Malaysia, Datuk Dr. Noor Hisham Abdullah, regarding the current situation of the Coronavirus disease 2019 on March 11, 2020, which included social distancing of 1 meter, the mufti's office also issued a fatwa regarding this issue in the context of prayer rituals. Muslims are advised to perform prayers at home to avoid large gatherings, but if conditions permit congregational prayers, precautionary measures need to be taken, such as distancing the rows by 1 meter. According to the statement issued by the mufti's office, the ruling on aligning the rows in prayer is *sunnah hai'ah*, meaning that spreading the rows is discouraged (*makruh*) but does not negate the rewards of congregational prayer. Dr. Labib's words from a fiqh perspective were also considered, stating that the ruling of *makruh* is lifted when it is necessitated by circumstances. Therefore, based on an article titled 'Arrangement of Rows in Funeral Prayers During an Outbreak' issued on April 2, 2020, the Malaysian mufti's office leans towards the opinion that congregational prayers should be performed with distancing during an outbreak if congregational prayer is still safe from the spread of the outbreak.

## **Face Mask**

It is been said;

"Every congregant is required to wear a face mask." (MKN, 2022)

COVID-19 spreads through respiratory droplets. Respiratory droplets are released into the air when coughing, sneezing, talking, shouting, or singing. Face masks serve as a simple barrier called "source control." The wearing of face masks is mandatory for everyone, even if they are asymptomatic or healthy (MaHTAS, 2020) (European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control, 2021). This is because several studies have found that individuals with COVID-19 who have never experienced symptoms (asymptomatic) or have not yet shown symptoms (pre-symptomatic) can still spread the virus to others (Howard et al., 2021). However, children aged (2) years and below, individuals who have difficulty breathing or are unconscious, are incapacitated, or are unable to remove the face mask without assistance do not need to wear a face mask. The efficiency of filtering aerosol particles ranging from 10 nm to 10 µm, which is the relevant size for respiratory viruses. The analysis results show that the filtration efficiency of various types of fabric (single layer) ranges from 5 to 80% for particles <300 nm and 5 to 95% for particles >300 nm. This filtration efficiency increases when additional layers of fabric are added. Higher weave/density (number of threads) shows significant differences in filtration efficiency.

## **Limiting Prayer Times**

"The Imam should take his place immediately after the completion of the call to prayer, and congregational prayers should be performed within the shortest possible time. The Imam is encouraged to recite short surahs or verses. After the prayer, the Imam gives the salutation, engages in remembrance and supplication (maximum 5 minutes). For Friday prayers, the Khateeb should take his place immediately after the completion of the first call to prayer, and the second call to prayer should be announced directly. The readings of the first and second sermons should be shortened as much as possible while maintaining the essential content." (MKN, 2022)

During breathing, speaking, coughing, and sneezing, thousands of droplets are emitted from the mouth and nose. These droplets vary in size, ranging from possibly millimeters to possibly thousands of times smaller. These droplets can become trapped and move in warm, humid environments, traveling several meters in just a few moments. Larger droplets carry more virus particles and settle faster due to gravity. Smaller droplets carry fewer particles but can remain airborne for hours. Normal conversation produces thousands of oral fluid particles (aerosols and droplets) ranging in size from 1 µm to 500 µm and may contain respiratory pathogens, including SARS-CoV-2. Respiratory aerosols or droplets can shrink to sizes 3 to 5 times smaller and remain in the air for 10 minutes or more. Therefore, the duration of worship in mosques should be limited to reduce the risk of exposure to potentially virus-contaminated air.

## **Hand Sanitization During Prayer**

"The mosque and surau authorities should regularly sanitize prayer spaces and surrounding areas, including toilets and ablution areas. Congregants must use hand sanitizers upon arrival and departure." (MKN, 2022)

Alcohol is an organic compound that contains a hydroxyl functional group (-OH). Wine or intoxicants (khamr) and alcohol have different meanings. Alcohol is prohibited when it becomes one of the ingredients in wine. The alcohol in medicines is not the alcohol extracted from the process of making wine. This alcohol functions as a solvent or antiseptic (Mohd Noor et al., 2018). Alcohol is also commonly found in various types of hand sanitizers. The Food and Drug Administration (FDA) stipulates that every content of marketed hand sanitizer products must contain primary ingredients such as ethyl alcohol (ethanol), isopropyl alcohol (isopropanol), or benzalkonium chloride. The World Health Organization (WHO) sets chemical composition standards for hand sanitizers. A 10-liter hand sanitizer must contain 8333ml of 96% ethanol, 417ml of 3% hydrogen peroxide, and 145ml of 98% glycerol, or 7515ml of 99.8% isopropyl alcohol, 417ml of 3% hydrogen peroxide, and 145ml of 98% glycerol. The use of hand sanitizer aims to kill bacteria on the skin surface. It is also an effective agent in killing germs and bacteria besides washing hands with water and soap (Najiha & Wan, 2014). Solutions with

higher alcohol concentrations (exceeding 60%) will be more effective in killing bacteria and viruses (Kimberly Hickok, 2020).

Among the objectives of this study is to analyze the worship guidelines issued by the government, from an Islamic perspective, including the issuance of fatwas, the fiqh methods employed, and the arguments used in the formation of prayer laws during this pandemic outbreak.

## **METHOD**

### **Focus Group Discussion (FGD)**

To obtain expert opinions and validation on the developed guidelines, this study utilizes the method of Focus Group Discussion (FGD). FGD is a popular and effective technique for gathering qualitative research data. Methodologically, the researcher selects individuals with specific characteristics to come together and engage in discussions. A moderator is appointed to facilitate the discussion and steer it towards the intended direction. Group members provide opinions and views based on their experiences, knowledge, and skills related to the issues presented by the researcher. FGD is used to obtain information intensively and deeply in research and to enhance understanding of a particular topic (Jasmi, 2012). A semi-structured focus group is a facilitated group discussion in which general open questions are asked through a semi-structured process and interview guide to increase the quality of information and the procedure (Cohen et al., 2017).

This FGD was conducted on October 3, 2022, online via the Google Meet application. Initially, the researcher contacted the selected panel of experts through invitation letters sent via email and was given a week to respond to their attendance at the FGD session. The panel of experts was also contacted via the *Whatsapp* application to ensure they received the email. Panel experts who agreed to participate in the FGD session were provided with details regarding the discussion to be conducted. The FGD took place on October 3, 2022, from 10.00 am to 2.00 pm. Before the FGD session began, the panel of experts were given the drafted guidelines document for review and enhancement during the FGD session.

### **FGD Protocol & Data Analysis**

The FGD document set was produced based on a literature review, primarily from guideline documents published by the National Security Council (MKN, 2022) and the Islamic religious departments of each state. The results of the literature review were translated and formed into guidelines, which were validated by supervisors before being used in the FGD session. Each topic presented by the moderator was given a time slot for the panel members to provide their opinions and discuss relevant matters related to the study. This document set was provided to the panel members via email after they expressed their consent to attend the FGD discussion session. This was to ensure that the panel of experts had an overall understanding of the ideas regarding the topics to be discussed during the FGD. At the beginning of the FGD session, the moderator introduced themselves and the research background to the respondents. The moderator also briefly explained the profile of each respondent to the other respondents and provided an explanation regarding the expected duration of the FGD session discussion.

The steps taken by the researcher to ensure the reliability of the study before conducting the FGD included obtaining feedback from supervisors regarding the FGD document set formulated from the literature review. Open-ended questions were provided during the FGD to allow respondents to provide feedback based on their expertise (Patton 1990). Suggestions and opinions expressed by the panel during the FGD session were also written down and saved by the researcher for reference during data analysis. The researcher remained focused during the discussion session, even when assisted by recording and video tools. Additionally, panel data, such as location, time, and panelist names, were also stored for reference.

Interview data were thematically analyzed based on verbatim transcriptions. The transcripts were also reviewed alongside the audio for accuracy. Based on expert opinions, the researcher has improved the guidelines that were formulated.

## RESULT AND DISCUSSION

All panel experts agreed that the construction of these guidelines is very beneficial to serve as a reference for the community in the event of future airborne virus transmissions. These guidelines also provide justification from both Islamic and scientific perspectives to instill confidence and ease of practice among the public. It is hoped that these guidelines will be beneficial and adhered to by the Muslim community to perform their worship perfectly. This study employed the method of focus group discussions (FGD) with 6 panel experts, including 4 lecturers and 2 professionals from the fields of religion, science, and medicine. There were more females (66.6%, n = 4) than males (33.3%, n = 2). All the suggestions from the experts is important to be recorded in order to ensure the proposed guidelines is comprehensive and practical to the future users.

### Guidelines

This section discusses the results of Justification of the guidelines according to Islam and science. The following are the comments and suggestions provided by the panel of experts.

#### *The spacing of prayer rows*

Panel P5 stated that in order to establish that a change in a law occurs, there must be strong reasons and evidence that the necessity exists based on scientific research by establishing a percentage of confidence.

"It means that for the Friday prayer to be valid, there must be certainty of existence or reasonable certainty. It's not acceptable if our judgment is based solely on personal opinion. It means the judgment must be supported by scientific evidence. In fiqh terms, it's called *tahaqququl wujud* (certainty of existence), meaning not weak conjecture, but strong conjecture. Meaning, anything above 70%, 90% is considered okay actually, 100% is impossible." (P5)

Panel P2, on the other hand, mentioned that in the field of science, the use of percentages is not suitable because the matter changes according to the situation.

"Okay, so I feel like using percentages is difficult. From a scientific standpoint, we don't consider percentages as safe. For example, if we say 90% is safe compared to 70%. If it's a dangerous transmission, even 90% is still dangerous. So, what I suggest is, instead of using percentages, we can say, studies prove that SARS-CoV-2 can spread... what? Can spread. Or this outbreak is safest when distance exceeds 2 meters." (P2)

Therefore, the panel of experts agreed to revise the statement as follows: "SARS-CoV-2 can spread within a 2-meter range based on scientific evidence and expert opinions, especially in crowded spaces through coughing, sneezing, shouting, and hand contact."

Physical distancing or social distancing is an important aspect in preventing the transmission of COVID-19. Studies have found that setting a physical distance (1 to 2 meters) between individuals can reduce the transmission of SARS-CoV-2, the virus that causes COVID-19. The number and size of droplets also vary depending on the activity. Coughing produces more droplets overall, and most of them are larger. Breathing produces fewer droplets overall and generally smaller ones. The speed at which droplets leave the mouth and nose also affects how far they travel. For example, sneezing droplets will move the fastest and farthest (Jones et al., 2020). Viral load, which refers to the amount of virus in a respiratory sample. For example, droplets emitted from the mouth and nose of COVID-19 patients can vary from several thousand to hundreds of billions per milliliter depending on the stage experienced by the patient. Additionally, asymptomatic COVID-19 patients have been found to be able to spread the virus. Ventilation, airflow patterns, types of activities, viral load, duration of exposure, and individual susceptibility to infection are also factors that affect the movement of viral particles. Several studies have also shown that SARS-CoV-2 can spread beyond 2 meters, especially in crowded spaces through coughing, sneezing, and shouting. Physical distancing should be viewed as one of the broader public health approaches to controlling the COVID-19 pandemic. This should be implemented alongside other strategies such as air management, hand hygiene, space density, and appropriate protective equipment.

### Face Mask

Studies have found that the use of face masks can reduce the risk of transmission by 70 - 80%. Wearing a face mask can prevent the virus from spreading to the wearer, or protect the wearer from infected individuals, or both (CDC, 2021). In summary, all panel members agreed with the explanation provided regarding the wearing of face masks during prayers.

### Limiting Prayer Times

Originally, the researcher did not include Islamic justification for limiting the duration of prayer rituals, but Panel P6 stated that it is necessary according to Islamic law.

"In my opinion, the justification from the Islamic perspective should not be overlooked. Because in terms of its legality, it means it's necessary. Limiting the duration of worship in mosques and surau actually serves a *maslahah* (public interest) due to the presence of infectious diseases. If we write 'not relevant,' it feels inappropriate as if there's no justification from a legal standpoint. Whereas the other side has justification from a health perspective." (P6)

### Hand Sanitization During Prayer

Panel P2 stated that the use of soap is more effective in preventing virus transmission, while hand sanitizer is used to eradicate bacteria. This was agreed upon by panel P1.

"Actually, the use of hand sanitizer, it's effective mainly against bacteria, right? For viruses, it's not really effective. If we look at the studies conducted by researchers—coincidentally, I've done some research on this matter—actually, for viruses, the most efficient thing is just soap. Washing hands with soap alone. Sanitizer is more for bacteria. For viruses, they're not really affected by alcohol, actually." (P2) "That makes sense, Dr., because soap contains SLS, it's fat." (P1)

CDC (2020) also advises that washing with soap and water is more effective at removing germs and chemicals on hands through proper washing techniques. However, if soap and water are not available, then the use of hand sanitizer with an alcohol content of at least 60% is highly recommended to prevent the spread of germs to other surfaces.

The National Fatwa Council states that alcohol in medicine is not intoxicating and harmful, and its use is permissible if it brings benefit to humans as long as the quantity is controlled. Scholars have differing views on whether alcohol is impure (*najis*) or not. Essentially, scholars agree that alcohol is impure, but they differ on the nature of its impurity. Additionally, the Seventh Conference of the Fatwa Committee of the National Council for Islamic Religious Affairs Malaysia, held on April 11-12, 1984, discussed Alcohol According to Islamic Views. The conference decided that every alcoholic beverage contains alcohol (Noordin, 2020). Not all alcohol is liquor. Alcohol produced through the process of making liquor is both prohibited (*haram*) and impure (*najis*), but alcohol made through other processes is not impure but still prohibited for consumption. Light drinks made in the same way as liquor, whether containing a small amount of alcohol or distilled alcohol, are forbidden to drink. Light drinks made not for intoxication and not in the same way as the liquor-making process are permissible. Medicines and fragrances containing alcohol are permissible and forgiven. Therefore, hand sanitizers are not impure and can be used when preparing for prayer without considering them to be carrying impurities (Noor, 2017). The table 2 below shows the items that have been modified and validated upon by the expert panel.

**Table 2. Justification of SOP According to Islam and Science**

SOP	Islamic Justification	Science Justification
The spacing of prayer rows	-The ruling for aligning the rows tightly is <i>sunnah bai'ah</i> . (Al-Fiqh Al-Manhaji)  -The ruling for spreading out the rows is discouraged ( <i>makruh</i> ) and diminishes the reward of congregational prayer.	-The directive to implement physical distancing measures is aimed at preventing congregants from coming into contact with each other to curb the spread of infection.  -SARS-CoV-2 can spread within a range of 2 meters

<p>Face Mask</p>	<p>-The discouraged ruling (makruh) is lifted if there are legitimate reasons and necessity (strong judgment).</p> <p>-Praying while maintaining distance is permitted due to necessity, and it does not nullify the reward of congregational prayer.</p> <p>Ulama have differing views on the act of closing one's mouth during prayer, which is considered <i>makruh</i>. This action does not affect the validity of the prayer.</p> <p>However, if there is a necessity, then it is considered obligatory (Federal Territories Mufti Office).</p>	<p>based on scientific evidence and expert opinions, especially in crowded spaces through coughing, sneezing, shouting, and hand contact (Thebmi).</p> <p>-The use of face masks can reduce the risk of infection transmission by 70 - 80%. Wearing a face mask can prevent the virus from reaching the wearer, or protect the wearer from potentially being infected by others, or both (ECDC).</p> <p>-The number and size of fluid droplets vary depending on the activity. For example, coughing produces more water droplets than breathing. The speed at which fluid droplets leave the mouth and nose also affects how far they travel. For instance, sneezing droplets move faster and farther compared to coughing or talking, thereby increasing the risk of virus transmission.</p> <p>-Ventilation systems, airflow patterns, types of activities, viral load, duration of exposure, and individual susceptibility to infection are also factors that influence the transmission of virus particles.</p>
<p>Limiting prayer times</p>	<p>It is obligatory and serves as a benefit to avoid being infected with diseases.</p> <p>Based on the fiqh principle of '<i>tasarraful imam manutum bil maslahah</i>' (the actions of the ruler should prioritize benefits).</p>	<p>-During breathing, talking, coughing, and sneezing, thousands of fluid droplets are emitted from the mouth and nose. These droplets can be trapped and move in warm, humid environments, carrying them more than a few meters in just a few moments. Larger droplets carry more virus particles and settle more quickly due to gravity. Smaller droplets carry fewer particles and are lighter, causing them to remain suspended in the air for longer periods.</p> <p>-Therefore, the duration of worship in mosques should be limited to reduce the risk of exposure to potentially virus-contaminated air.</p>
<p>Hand sanitization during prayer</p>	<p>-Alcohol in medicine does not intoxicate and harm, and its status is PERMISSIBLE if it brings benefit to humans as long as the quantity is controlled (Federal Territories Mufti Office).</p> <p>-Medicines and fragrances containing alcohol are PERMISSIBLE and excused. Therefore, hand sanitizer is NOT IMPURE and CAN be used when preparing for prayer.</p>	<p>-The Food and Drug Administration (FDA) mandates that all hand sanitizer products marketed must contain at least 60% alcohol content, with main ingredients being ethyl alcohol (Ethanol), isopropyl alcohol (isopropanol), and benzalkonium chloride.</p> <p>-The use of hand sanitizer aims to kill bacteria on the skin's surface. It is also an effective agent in killing germs and bacteria besides washing hands with soap and water (CDC).</p> <p>-However, the practice of handwashing with soap is more encouraged compared to the use of antimicrobial agents to eliminate bacteria or viruses.</p>

Source: Guideline 2022 (author records)

## CONCLUSION

In this study, the analysis of the guidelines for the implementation of prayer rituals during a pandemic was conducted through several research methods, including literature review and field study (FGD). The study found that there are several aspects that need to be elaborated and improved in the construction of guidelines to serve as a reference for the community in the event of airborne virus transmission in the future, providing justification from both Islamic and scientific perspectives to instill confidence and ease of adoption among the



public. Guidelines for conducting worship during epidemic transmission are crucial for several reasons. Firstly, they prioritize the safety and well-being of worshippers, clergy, and the community at large by minimizing the risk of virus transmission. Secondly, they provide clear protocols and procedures for conducting religious services in a way that respects public health guidelines and regulations. This helps to maintain trust and credibility within the community and demonstrates a commitment to responsible behavior. Additionally, these guidelines ensure continuity of worship practices, albeit in adapted forms, during challenging times, providing spiritual support and comfort to individuals who may be facing heightened stress and uncertainty. Overall, having clear and comprehensive guidelines for conducting worship during epidemic transmission is essential for balancing religious freedom with public health imperatives and fostering resilience and solidarity within communities.

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