

The pandemic between cyber *fatwā*-s and crisis management. The Islamic jurisprudence for minorities facing the Coronavirus

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ABSTRACT: During the global pandemic, cyber *fatwā*-s play a key-role in guiding European Muslims' religious and social conducts. Focusing on the ECFR jurisprudence, the paper unveils that the dramatic events were presented as the opportunity for a worldwide ethical and moral resurgence. A global pledge for social cohesion and change was advanced. Muslims were remembered to foster devotional aspects, to abide by Islamic provisions, and to support sick people and healthcare providers. Muslims were also urged to attentively conform to the official instructions issued by health authorities and State bodies. Specific attention was then paid to "fake news": Muslims were recommended not to foster hearsay regarding vaccines and the Coronavirus. Since late 2020, the ECFR resumed its *quasi* ordinary activities; this indicates that the once new anti-pandemic norms have now been normalised.

KEYWORDS: Pandemic; health crisis; muslim minorities; European Council for Fatwa and Research (ECFR); Ramadan

SUMMARY: 1. Introduction – 2. The European Council for Fatwa and Research (ECFR) – 3. The Council facing the Coronavirus – 4. Ritual fasting and further developments – 5. Recommendations in the course of the pandemic – 6. "Regular" online sessions and released statements – 7. Conclusions.

1. Introduction

In March 2020, soon after the World Health Organisation described the Covid-19 outbreak as a global pandemic of international concern,¹ the European Council for Fatwa and Research (ECFR) held an emergency session. The Islamic holy month of worship, prayer, and fasting (*Ramaḍān*) was approaching,² and European Muslims needed *ad hoc* guidance regarding the *sharī'ah*-compliant crisis management measures to be promptly enacted.³ The second *Ramaḍān* in pandemic times has

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¹ WHO Director-General's opening remarks at the media briefing on Covid-19, 11 March 2020, <https://www.who.int/director-general/speeches/detail/who-director-general-s-opening-remarks-at-the-media-briefing-on-covid-19---11-march-2020> (31/8/21).

² *Ramaḍān* is the name of the ninth month of the Muslims calendar; in 2020, it lasted from 23 April to 23 May in Central Europe. See M. PLESSNER, *Ramaḍān*, in P. BEARMAN, TH. BIANQUIS, C.E. BOSWORTH, E. VAN DONZEL, W.P. HEINRICH (eds), *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, II.

³ *Sharī'ah* identifies "the road to the watering place", therefore the term refers to the clear path to be followed, the path which the believer has to tread, namely, the canon law of *Islām* and the totality of *Allāh*'s

now passed,⁴ and the ECFR has resumed its “quasi-ordinary” activities. Adopting the Islamic viewpoint and analysing the Council material mostly available in Arabic language,⁵ the proposed essay intends to investigate the immediate responses to the Coronavirus emergency and the prospective series of measures as specifically developed by European Islamic authorities.

Since the outburst of Covid-19, studies addressing religious communities’ responses to the pandemic mushroomed. The topics broadly ranged from religious tourism to the health of ethnic groups and faith communities; from disease-containment measures (such as the closure of worship places) to moral and spiritual support to medical staff; from emergency burial provisions to the issue of care of elderly and fragile people, from (im)migration flows to vaccination. Whilst coping with the socio-economic impact of the pandemic and its global responses, Islamic scholars had to provide specific guidance by issuing legal opinions (*fatāwā*; the term *fatwā*-s is also used in English language and this will be used throughout the text),⁶ resolutions (*qarārāt*) and recommendations (*tawṣiyāt*) on urgent matters concerning Islamic medical ethics and the precise tasks and responsibility of European Muslims in light of the Islamic jurisprudence. The questions submitted to the Council indeed regarded *sharīʿah*-compliant therapies, ritual fasting, clinic and ethic responsibility, health supplements, Islamophobia, Islamic finance and Western economy-support mechanisms.

The key-role played by cyber *fatwā*-s in self-isolation and restriction times, as well as the position of religious authorities in guiding European Muslims’ responses and social conducts during the Covid-19 transnational crisis and the post-pandemic future, deserve thus to be scrutinised and brought to light. More specifically, the present paper pays attention to the official statements released by the European Council for Fatwa and Research from March 2020 to October 2021, whilst pending the next Session to be held in December 2021. The following sections therefore focus on the Islamic guidance issued by the ECFR whose sessions were held remotely via networking technology for the first time during the outburst of the pandemic. The proposed analysis aims at identifying *sharīʿah*-compliant strategies for health crisis management as developed by the recently re-organised transnational institution committed to elaborate the Islamic jurisprudence specifically for Muslim minorities.⁷ Attention will be firstly paid to the European Council for Fatwa and Research and then the focus will shift to the legal opinions, resolutions and recommendations published by the ECFR during the pandemic years 2020 and 2021.

commandments. See J. SCHACHT, *Sharīʿa*, in M.TH. HOUTSMA, T.W. ARNOLD, R. BASSET, R. HARTMANN (eds), *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, I, 1913-1936. In Italian, see R. ALUFFI BECK-PECCOZ, *Šarīʿa*, in *Enciclopedia del Diritto*, VIII, 2015, 741-754; F. CASTRO, *Diritto musulmano*, in *Digesto*, VI, 1990.

⁴ In 2021, the month of *Ramaḍān* began on 13 April and ended on 13 May. See *infra* sections Nos. 4-6.

⁵ The quotations reported in the text have been translated from Arabic to English language by the author.

⁶ A *fatwā* (Arabic pl. *fatāwā*) is a formal legal opinion given by a *muftī* (or canon lawyer of standing) in answering to a question submitted to him either by a judge or by a private individual. See D.B. MACDONALD, *Fatwā*, in M.TH. HOUTSMA, T.W. ARNOLD, R. BASSET, R. HARTMANN (eds), *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, I, 1913-1936. A resolution (*qarār*) is a Council collective deliberation not bound by any specific question on issues that require an authoritative Islamic position. For details on ECFR deliberations, see i.a. A. CAEIRO, *The making of the fatwa: The minority fiqh project and the making of an Islamic counterpublic*, in *Archives de sciences sociales des religions*, 155, Jull/Sept 2011, 81-100, at 89-96.

⁷ During the ECFR meeting, held in Istanbul on 9 November 2018, a new leadership for the European Council for Fatwa and Research was indeed elected, <https://www.e-cfr.org/blog/2018/12/05/جديد-وأمل-جديدة-قيادة-المجلس> (31/8/21).

2. The European Council for Fatwa and Research

The European Council for Fatwa and Research (ECFR) has been defined as “one of the most renowned and the only ‘supranational’ *fiqh*⁸ council in Europe”, which was established to be the main independent body of jurisconsultancy for Muslims in Western Europe.⁹ Its principal aim is to cater for the needs of Muslims living in the West by elaborating the Islamic jurisprudence of Muslim minorities.¹⁰ The so-called *fiqh al-aqalliyāt* has indeed been described as “an attempt to think of Islamic norms in contexts where *Islām* is disconnected from the State and the majority society”.¹¹

In actual facts, the ECFR distinguishes itself from other authoritative *Sharīah* Councils and *fatwā*-issuing-institutions in Western countries by “adopting a distinctly European flavour”.¹² More specifically, it has been underlined that the Council’s decisions emphasise both facilitation – namely, “making the lives of Muslim minorities easier” – and proselytization – that is to say, “enhancing the prospect that non-Muslims convert to *Islām*”.¹³ To Caieiro, the ECFR seeks to protect the Muslims’ identity and, simultaneously, to integrate them into the European societies.¹⁴

It should be mentioned that lately the Council web-activity hit the headlines with regard to the so-called “Euro Fatwa App”, which was launched in April 2019. This was described by GooglePlay as “a simplified and concise *fiqh*-guide issued by the European Council for Fatwa and Research (ECFR) to enable the European Muslims to adhere to the regulations and manners of Islam and to fulfil their duties as Muslim citizens, while taking care of the legal, customary and cultural specificities of

⁸ The term *fiqh* refers to religious knowledge, especially to the knowledge of Islamic law as derived through legal reasoning, and the term *faqīh* (Arabic pl. *fuqahā*) identifies who possesses such knowledge. See A. EL SHAMSY, *Fiqh, faqīh, fuqahā*, in K. FLEET, G. KRÄMER, D. MATRINGE, J. NAWAS, E. ROWSON (eds), *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, III.

⁹ K.L.J. KARMAN, *Interpreting Islamic law for European Muslims: The role and the work of the European Council for Fatwa and Research*, in *Yearbook of Muslims in Europe*, 3, 2011, 655–693, at 655.

¹⁰ On the webpage of the ECFR details can be found regarding objectives and goals, as well as all the final statements of the Council sessions analysed in the present article; see <https://www.e-cfr.org> (31/8/21).

¹¹ A. CAEIRO, B. GRAFF, *The European Council for Fatwa and Research and Yusuf al-Qaradawi*, in R. PETER, R. ORTEGA (eds), *Islamic movements of Europe: Public religion and Islamophobia in the modern world*, London, 2014, 119–124, at 119. For a short summary in Italian language on Islamic *fiqh* in the UK and in the West, see respectively P. PAROLARI, *Shari’ah e corti islamiche in Inghilterra tra mito e realtà. Pluralità di ordinamenti giuridici e interlegalità nelle società multireligiose e multiculturali*, in *Materiali per una storia della cultura giuridica*, 2017, 157–191; A. RINELLA, *La shari’a in Occidente*, Bologna, 2020, 164–169.

¹² See A.H. KHAN, *Creating the image of European Islam: The European Council for Fatwa and Research and Ireland*, in J. NIELSEN (ed), *Muslim political participation in Europe*, 2013, 215–238.

¹³ U. SHAVIT, I. ZAHALKA, *The European Council for Fatwa and Research and the evolution of fiqh al-aqalliyat al-muslima*, in R. TOTTOLI (ed), *Routledge Handbook of Islam in the West*, 2014, 356–377, at 376. On this, see also M. PAPA, *fiqh al-aqalliyāt e il proselitismo islamico*, in *Quaderni di diritto e politica ecclesiastica*, 28, 1, 2020, 163–183.

¹⁴ It should be mentioned that the role played by the members of this institution in moulding and eventually delineating the image of European *Islām*, and even leading to a sort of politicisation of Muslim practices, had been highly debated; this discussion is beyond the scope of the present essay. For further details, see CAEIRO (2010), K.L.J. KARMAN, *Interpreting Islamic law for European Muslims: The role and the work of the European Council for Fatwa and Research*, cit., and KHAN, *Creating the image of European Islam: The European Council for Fatwa and Research and Ireland*. See also R. RUSLI, *Progressive Salafism in online fatwa*, in *Al-Jami’ah Journal of Islamic Studies*, 52, 1, 2014, 205–229.

European societies”.¹⁵ In point of fact, it has been highlighted that the proponents of the jurisprudence for Muslim minorities maintain that a specialised field of *fiqh* is necessary in order to provide answers and to develop a normative framework for preserving Islamic values in minority contexts, whilst adapting juridical opinions to new situations.¹⁶ And this becomes specifically relevant in transnational contexts, where Muslims belonging to diverse religious denominations, or schools of Islamic thought, relocate to Europe from different Muslim-majority countries.¹⁷

From a historical perspective, the first meeting of the ECFR took place in London in March 1997 on the initiative of the Federation of Islamic Organisations in Europe (FIOE).¹⁸ And, since then, sessions have taken place once or twice a year. From the early 2000s, the ECFR secretary-general finalises and disseminates the Council’s general statement from the Islamic Cultural Centre of Ireland in Dublin.¹⁹ During the present global crisis, the European Council for Fatwa and Research organised three sessions: two in early spring 2020 and one in late 2020, additional guidance on ritual fasting was then provided in February 2021. The next session is currently planned to take place in December 2021. The outcome of these decisions deserves to be properly studied by paying specific attention to emergency and regular sessions as held amid the Coronavirus pandemic.

As a matter of fact, in early 2020, a number of issues were raised by Muslims and submitted to the ECFR General Secretariat. Accordingly, in late March 2020,²⁰ an Emergency Session (ES) entitled “Jurisprudential developments of the Coronavirus Covid-19” was held by the ECFR as a response to the Coronavirus outbreak as a pandemic. This XXX Session was exceptionally convened “via Zoom communication technology” and shortly after followed by another online Supplementary Session (SS). As a result, a rich number of formal legal opinions, resolutions and recommendations were put forward by the ECFR between March and April 2020.

The legal opinions were primarily aimed at understanding epidemic and pandemic diseases whilst highlighting the role played by religion in managing the emergency. The issued *fatwā*-s also encompassed spiritual and practical instructions; whereas the recommendations listed specific provisions to be

¹⁵ GooglePlay continues: “The Euro Fatwa App contains all fatwas and decisions issued by the ECFR since 1417AH/1997 to date. The Council is a specialized independent Islamic body, composed of a large group of more than 30 known qualified scholars, working on the European arena, who enjoy the knowledge of legal jurisprudence (*fiqh*) as well as awareness of current environment”, <https://apps.apple.com/de/app/euro-fatwa-app/id1459535227?l=en>, (31/8/21). For a commentary, see i.a. R. SANTORO, F. GRAVINO, *Internet, culture e religioni. Spunti di riflessione per un web interculturale*, in *Stato, Chiese e Pluralismo Confessionale*, 20, 2020, 1-20.

¹⁶ N. CALDER, J.A. KÉCHICHIAN, F.J. ZIADEH, A. SACHEDINA, J. HENDRICKSON, A.E. MAYER, I.A. RABB, *Law*, in *The Oxford Encyclopedia of the Islamic World*.

¹⁷ In effect, the ECFR defines Western Europe as “a new local jurisdiction” also as a *raison d’être* among *fatwā*-issuing bodies. See L. LARSEN, *Islamic jurisprudence and transnational flows: Exploring the European Council for Fatwa and Research*, in A. HELMUM, S.S. ALI, A.M.O. GRIFFITHS (eds), *From transnational relations to transnational laws: Northern European laws at the crossroads*, Farnham, 2011, 139-164.

¹⁸ For an introduction, see i.a. A. CAEIRO, *Transnational Ulama, European Fatwas, and Islamic Authority: A case study of the European Council for Fatwa and Research*, in M. VAN BRUINESSEN, S. ALLIEVI (eds), *Production and dissemination of Islamic knowledge in Western Europe*, London, 2011, 121-141.

¹⁹ *Ivi* at 83, also with reference to the previous sentence.

²⁰ More precisely, from 1 to 4 *Sha’bān* 1441AH, corresponding to 25-28 March 2020.

followed by Muslims in the West “in light of this critical ordeal and difficult conditions that Europe and the world are going through”.²¹

3. The Council facing the Coronavirus

During the March Emergency Session, the Council issued twenty-one *fatwā*-s and all specifically regarded the Coronavirus. First of all, the ECFR briefly introduced the Islamic understanding of plagues and epidemics. Building upon the *Qur’ān* and the *Sunnah*,²² the scholars clarified that “the logical explanation of phenomena may relate to specific goals that the entire cosmic system seeks to have within a system of higher laws, which were originally designed to tighten the present towards the future”.

The Council continued in explaining that “the Covid-19 or Corona epidemic is one of the laws of affliction” and it identified three main causes that generated this phenomenon: “corruption in dealing with the environment and natural resources, the injustice that we are witnessing of all kinds, and the underestimation of faith, morals and values”. As a result, the ECFR elucidated that recently “the general cosmic equilibrium has been imbalanced”. Nonetheless, a remedy did exist; the scholars in effect maintained that, “after a conscious awareness of reality according to divine law, we must strive to change that reality for the better, on all levels”. Should this be the case, the virus “will circulate the circles of days, and it will go, God willing, as the plagues of all history have gone, and the sermons and lessons will remain for those who are considered”. The global pandemic is thus to be understood as a divine lesson to be mastered by humanity.

The first *fatwā* (1/30) then specifically addressed the question whether viruses and disasters are to be regarded as divine punishment. The scholars clarified that people are reminded that calamities “come due to a deliberate judgement” and aim at alerting people about the pivotal importance of “the constant recourse to *Allāh* Almighty and to seek protection and help from Him”. Furthermore, misfortunes worn believers and worshippers “from falling into sins”, and “the affliction, which comes as a warning against sins, includes every behaviour whereby a person sets aside the path of righteousness” towards the natural environment, the “other” and the divine alike.²³ The Council also identified a sort of parallel suffering and uncertainty affecting the whole humankind; in effect, it clarified that “the affliction is general for the believer and the non-believer” and, presently, “it is not clear to anyone what violations are committed by people, on all these levels”.

In order to scatter the confusion, it is important stressing that a dichotomy characterises Islamic theology. On the one hand, suffering is regarded as being part of the divine plan for the betterment of

²¹ For a comparison with other religious responses see i.a. C. PELLEGRINO, *Le autorità religiose islamiche al tempo del Coronavirus*, in *Oasis*, 30, 4, 4-5.

²² *Al-Qur’ān* is the Muslim scripture, containing the revelations recited by Muḥammad and preserved in a fixed written form. It consists of 114 sections of widely varying length, which are divided into a number of verses. The Arabic term *Sunnah* identifies the generally approved standard or practice introduced by the Prophet Muḥammad and the pious Muslims, as well as how faithful followers had acted under particular circumstance during olden days. See F. BUHL, *Koran*, in *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, I, M.TH. HOUTSMA, T.W. ARNOLD, R. BASSET, R. HARTMANN (eds), 1913-1936; and G.H.A. JUYNBOLL, D.W. BROWN, *Sunna*, in P. . BEARMAN, TH. BIANQUIS, C.E. BOSWORTH, E. VAN DONZEL, W.P. HEINRICHS (eds), *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, II.

²³ The ECFR stated “whether in his relationship with his Lord, or in his relationship with his fellow man, or in his relationship with the universe that surrounds him”.

humanity. All forms of adversities and tribulations – including illnesses and diseases – are therefore either a form of punishment suitable for the atonement of sins, or a test of the believers’ spiritual coherence. On the other hand, suffering is the consequence of human free will, this means that a person can choose to believe or not to believe. Disbelief is therefore the source of human misconduct, which leads to psychological and/or physical pain. In this case, suffering can have two functions: educational and disciplinary. Dichotomous is also the *sharīah*-compliant response to afflictions and misfortunes. People can indeed embrace a passive or active response; accordingly, individuals can either patiently endure the divinely ordained suffering or undertake righteous acts.²⁴

The ECFR primarily understood the current Covid-19 pandemic as the result of sins against God, humankind, and nature, and therefore presented it as an opportunity for a world-wide ethical and moral resurgence for all (religious) people. The Council in effect maintained that “after the occurrence of this Coronavirus epidemic, the voices of the wise in the world are louder calling for a review of the many wrong behaviours that dominated people’s lives in all aspects”. Religion and faith, in particular, were described as being of pivotal importance in “dealing with viruses and disasters” by providing human beings with “the energy of faith” and “moral strength”.²⁵ In light of Islamic principles, Muslim believers were urged to conform to “a healthy system in life” ranging from food prescriptions to purity provisions, from prevention to temporary movement limitation, by carefully following the health instructions issued by official authorities and State bodies.

During the pandemic, in particular, the ECFR identified “the feeling of a duty to ward off this epidemic for everyone who has the ability to do so by various means, according to the capabilities of every one”. This believers’ call to action in health-emergency times was more detailed by specifying that “the doctor and the nurse must do their duty in treating patients”; similarly, “the researcher must strive to uncover preventive medicines and vaccines” and “the wealthy must donate from his money to help scientific research, treatment and meet people’s needs”. Various potential contributions to the global pandemic-related effects were thus singled out and linked to individual capabilities. More broadly, the scholars agreed in highlighting that “every person must assist the disabled and the elderly in need of help” and “every person should be reminded that the pursuit of people’s needs is one of the greatest means of drawing closer to *Allāh* Almighty”.

Similarly to other religious actors, the Council of Islamic scholars advanced a global pledge for action. In particular, building upon the *Sunnī* Muslim idea of the unity among body, mind and spirit, as opposed to the Cartesian dualism,²⁶ Muslim believers were invited to act spiritually and pragmatically at the same time. On the one hand, extra time for worship “with the intention of lifting the calamity” should

²⁴ Sachedina also clarifies that theological and ethical debates are grounded on two forms of Islamic theodicy: the free-will and the determinist ones. For further details, see A. SACHEDINA, *Can God inflict unrequited pain on his creatures? Muslim perspectives on health and suffering*, in J.R. HINNELL, R. PORTER (eds), *Religion, health and suffering*, London, 1999, 65-84. For a comparison, see i.a. S.J. FITZPATRICK, I.H. KERRIDGE, C.F.C. JORDENS, L. ZOLOTH, C. TOLLEFSEN, K.L. TSOMO, M.P. JENSEN, A. SACHEDINA, D. SARMA, *Religious perspectives on human suffering: Implications for medicine and bioethics*, in *Journal of Religion and Health*, 2016, Feb, 55, 1, 159-173.

²⁵ *Fatwā* 2/30, also with regard the following sentences.

²⁶ See i.a. V.J. HOFFMAN, *Islamic perspectives on the human body: Legal, social and spiritual considerations*, in L.S. CAHILL, M.A. FARLEY (eds), *Embodiment, morality, and medicine. Theology and medicine*, 6, Dordrecht, 1995, 37-55; D.M. TOBER, D. BUDIANI, *Introduction: Why Islam, health and the body?*, in *Body & Society*, 13, 3, 2007, 1-13.

have been determined.²⁷ Additionally, it was stressed that prayers could have included invoking the recovery of non-Muslims as well.²⁸ Muslims were also remembered that bullying or being disgusted by people ‘afflicted with Corona or any other calamity’ was not Islamically permissible.²⁹ *Islām* indeed emphasises that the cornerstone of human relationships is based on respect and dignity.³⁰

More pragmatically, Muslims were urged not to leave their houses unnecessarily in quarantined areas and not to travel to and from epidemic areas.³¹ Similarly, hugging and shaking of hands were forbidden.³² In respect of economic aspects, the *zakāh*³³ for European mosques and Islamic centres was permitted to be accelerated.³⁴ Furthermore, Muslims were discouraged from stowing food commodities above the usual needs on the grounds that excessive storage “leads to harm the needs of others” and “it contributes to raising prices”. With this regard, the ECFR also warned that “it is not permissible for a Muslim merchant to exploit the people’s needs by raising prices, or storing goods while waiting for their price to rise”.³⁵

The responsibilities of healthcare providers and some (bio)medical implications during this unprecedented crisis management were specifically addressed by another *fatwā* (18/30). In light of the large number of patients and the lack of ventilators, the Council stated that “Muslim doctors must abide by the medical rules and regulations in the hospitals in which they work”. In case of rationing of medical goods and services, should they be compelled to decide on the patients’ allocation of ventilators, “they must judge [relying upon] medical, ethical and humanitarian standards [...] with the predominance of speculation and medical appreciation”. It was thus acknowledged that the burden of decision affected mostly clinicians and caregivers, but recurring to clinical protocols should have mitigated their difficult tasks and responsibility.

A number of *fatwā*-s then addressed practical issues related to worship practices in light of the restrictions that were gradually enforced worldwide. Accordingly, the ECFR discussed the prospect of prayer-suspension and the possibility to follow sermons through the means of networking communication. It was concluded that “suspending prayers in mosques in order to preserve lives and souls from

²⁷ *Fatwā* 8/30; whereas the so-called legal *ruqīah* (usually translated as exorcism) is not legitimate (*fatwā*, 12/30).

²⁸ *Fatwā* 10/30. In particular, the Council highlighted that “[s]ome Muslims have a misconception that dealing with the morals of *Islām* is between Muslims only, and this is contrary to the correct Islamic understanding because the morals of *Islām* are applied to all people”.

²⁹ *Fatwā* 11/30. At the same time, “[a] person must take all the measures that must be taken to protect himself and others, and if a person knows that he is infected with the virus, he must stay away from people, otherwise he should be a sinner and held accountable before *Allāh* Almighty” (*fatwā*, 16/30).

³⁰ See i.a. M. SWAY, *Human vulnerability in Islam*, in J. THAM, A. GARCIA, G. MIRANDA (eds), *Religious perspectives on human vulnerability in bioethics*, Dordrecht, 2014, 95-102.

³¹ *Fatwā* 13/30 and 14/30.

³² *Fatwā* 15/30.

³³ This is the obligatory payment by Muslims of a determinate portion of specified categories of their lawful property for the benefit of the poor and other enumerated classes or, as generally in Quranic usage, the portion of property so paid. See A. ZYSOW, *Zakāt*, in P. BEARMAN, TH. BIANQUIS, C.E. BOSWORTH, E. VAN DONZEL, W.P. HEINRICH (eds), *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, II.

³⁴ The ECFR clarified that “[i]t is permissible to expedite the payment of *zakāh* for a year or more according to the needs of mosques and Islamic centres in Europe, as long as the money reaches the minimum threshold, and if the year has not come to pass” (*fatwā* 9/30).

³⁵ *Fatwā* 17/30.

transmitting the Coronavirus infection is correct, and prayers are [to be] performed at home”.³⁶ Congregational prayers held in mosques where worshippers maintained appropriate distancing was also discouraged since this “contradicts the spirit of group prayer” and “does not protect people from infection”.³⁷ Building upon Islamic teachings calling for the protection of human life, the disease-spreading prevention was perceived as one of the main goals to be promptly achieved; accordingly, Muslim believers were encouraged to abide by containment strategies.

Nonetheless, the Council underlined that “Friday prayer in homes behind the radio, television, live broadcast or other means of networking communication is not permissible”.³⁸ In real terms, the *Ṣalāt al-ġumu‘ah*³⁹ is “an obligation that has a form of a legal prescription” – the ECFR elucidated – therefore, the original meaning of the gathering, the ritual and the weekly feast are to be preserved. As a result, performing Friday prayers in a group at home, or at the workplace, is not legally permissible, according to the Islamic scholars.⁴⁰

As per the burials of those who passed away during the pandemic, these should happen in the very same place where the person died and must be expedite. At any rate, ‘the religious specificity of burial among Muslims’ are to be specifically taken into consideration, possibly avoiding cremation as well as collective graves, despite the emergency situation. In actual terms, issues were first raised before the ECFR with regard to the possibility of corpses being cremated.⁴¹ In the Supplementary Session (as specifically addressed in the following section No. 4), the ECFR returned to this matter recommending “every Muslim [to] write a recorded legal will in which he requests to deal with his corpse after his death in accordance with Islamic teachings in order to prevent any other contravention”.⁴² In addition, the Council underlined that “[i]n case of necessity and exceptional circumstances (such as a large number of deceased people with narrow graves available) and [when] alternatives cannot be found, collecting more than one deceased person in one grave is possible, all of this provided that the bodies of the deceased are treated with dignity and respect”.⁴³

4. Ritual fasting and further developments

In mid-April 2020,⁴⁴ further to consultations with researchers and healthcare personnel, a Supplementary Session was held by the Council and this was aimed at issuing thirteen *fatwā-s* and nine recommendations specifically concerning “Fasting provisions and the developments in light of the outbreak

³⁶ *Fatwā* 3/30. Provided the closure of worship centres adheres with the decisions of the competent authority and the health organisation (*fatwā* 6/30).

³⁷ The ECFR continued: “as they mix with each other entering and exiting the mosques, prostrating in one place, and touching the doors when they are opened” (*fatwā* 7/30).

³⁸ *Fatwā* 4/30. Building upon the *Qur‘ān* and the *Sunnah*, the ECFR detailed five reasons supporting this statement.

³⁹ This expression refers to the weekly communal worship on Friday. See *Qur‘ān* (LXII: 9-11).

⁴⁰ *Fatwā* 5/30. Building upon the *Qur‘ān* and the *Sunnah*, the Council detailed six reasons supporting this statement.

⁴¹ *Fatwā* 19/30, 20/30 and 21/30.

⁴² *Fatwā* 28/30.

⁴³ *Fatwā* 34/30.

⁴⁴ More precisely, on 20-21 *Sha‘bān* 1441AH corresponding to 13-14 April 2020.

of the Coronavirus Covid-19". It was indeed broadly reported that a widespread confusion surrounded the practice of ritual fasting amid the Coronavirus pandemic.⁴⁵

As a preliminary statement, the ECFR determined that *Ramaḍān* could have not been postponed because of the Covid-19 crisis.⁴⁶ Accordingly, fasting from dawn to sunset remained a *farḍ* (obligatory) prescription.⁴⁷ This statement was supported by the fact that "what has been proven by many scientific studies is that fasting has health benefits, and among these benefits is strengthening the body's auto-immunity to ward off epidemics".⁴⁸ Accordingly, ritual fasting was understood and described as a way to combat the Coronavirus both on spiritual and physical levels. In actual facts, prayer, fasting and pilgrimage have an important impact on the physical conditions of human beings, according to *Islām*.⁴⁹ Nonetheless, the Council continued, "[i]f the patient is infected with Coronavirus, he must break his fast and take medicine, because he is granted legal license".⁵⁰ As per the physically-fit believers who were fasting during the pandemic, they were prescribed to "strive to maintain a healthy and balanced diet during the month of fasting". At the same time, they were compelled to "adhere to the health rules that require them to physically distance", while also refraining from customary festive collective gatherings, which used to take place in the month of *Ramaḍān* "until the official authorities lift the ban on such".

Analogously to the approach followed in the former Emergency Session held in March 2020,⁵¹ official state provisions were referred to when the Council touched upon economical aspects linked to the pandemic. More specifically, a number of *fatwā*-s were issued to stress the prohibition of usury in *Islām*. The ECFR stated the impossibility (except to the extent of necessity) to recurring to both interest loans in case of Islamic institutions affected by the Coronavirus,⁵² and usurious loans for investment companies that are liable to bankruptcy due to the emergency.⁵³ State provisions aimed at large-scale economic assistance programmes for business activities were thus to be resorted to only when being *sharī'ah*-compliant.

Additionally, the Council scholars reasserted the call to action for Muslim believers. The ECFR stated that "Muslim should be the initiator of aid in this crisis and the critical stage that Europe and most of

⁴⁵ See for instance, A. TOOTEE, B. LARIJANI, *Ramadan fasting during Covid-19 pandemic*, in *Journal of Diabetes & Metabolic Disorders*, 19, 2020,1-4.

⁴⁶ The *fatwā* 23/30 ruled: "it is not possible for Muslims to delay *Ramaḍān* fasting for another period".

⁴⁷ *Farḍ* literally means "something which has been apportioned, or made obligatory"; as a technical term, this refers to a religious duty or obligation, the omission of which will be punished and the performance of which will be rewarded. This is one of the so-called *al-aḥkām al-khamsa*, namely the "five qualifications" by which every human act is qualified in Islamic law. See TH.W. JUYNBOLL, *Farḍ*, in P. BEARMAN, TH. BIANQUIS, C.E. BOSWORTH, E. VAN DONZEL, W.P. HEINRICHS (eds), *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, II.

⁴⁸ *Fatwā* 22/30, also with regard to the quotations in the next paragraph.

⁴⁹ These are three "pillars of the religion" (*arkān al-dīn*). See B. KRAWIETZ, *Body, in law*, in K. FLEET, G. KRÄMER, D. MATRINGE, J. NAWAS, E.E. ROWSON (eds.), *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, III2012.

⁵⁰ The ECFR also clarified that "[a] person who is not able to fast during *Ramaḍān* due to a disease that has no hope of recovery, must pay the *fidīah* [e.g. ransom] for fasting each day in the amount of feeding a poor person. [...] It is not permissible for him to pay the ransom before the month of *Ramaḍān*" (*fatwā* 29/30).

⁵¹ See above section No. 3.

⁵² *Fatwā* 33/30.

⁵³ *Fatwā* 32/30.

the world are experiencing due to the outbreak of the Corona epidemic and the various crises”.⁵⁴ As a consequence, Muslim believers acting as “initiators of aid” were encouraged to take a proactive role in attempting to manage the Covid-19 crisis. The Council continued in detailing the financial support programme that should be followed when clarifying that “we see prioritising the multiplicity of needs so that balance occurs [...] so that hospitals are given from the general money of charity and *zakāh* remains to be spent today in meeting the needs of the poor as well as of disadvantaged individuals and families [...] and it is also possible directing an amount of *zakāh* to meet the needs of Islamic centres”.

With regard to congregational prayers, in line with the pathogens-containment strategies previously embraced, the Council maintained that “*Tarāwīḥ*”⁵⁵ prayers are held in homes with the imamate of their readers of the *Qur’ān*”.⁵⁶ Four reasons were listed to support this decision: “to protect people from infection, and in compliance with the institutions’ and health authorities’ decision”, and also “in the face of the continuation of the Corona epidemic and the banning of holding rituals in mosques”. Referring to one of its previous *fatwā* (4/30),⁵⁷ however, the ECFR stressed that “*Tarāwīḥ* prayer is not valid with following the *imām* from live broadcasts, or other means of online communication”; and analogous rulings were issued with regard to *ṭd* prayers.⁵⁸ This provision was justified on account of the paramount importance of ritual gatherings in worship places in compliance to *sharī’ah*. As a result, the Council scholars agreed that norms aimed at preventing the spreading of infection were to be observed although this highly affected the rituals and their validity in light of Islamic principles.

In effect, the ECFR stated on numerous occasions that “[g]roup prayer – whether it is one of the five daily prayers or a prayer for the absent – is only performed in the presence of the *imām* and the congregation in one place”;⁵⁹ consequently, “prayer via live broadcast, where they [i.e. the worshippers] are not with the *imām*, this is not valid”. Nonetheless, “[d]ue to the lack of worshipers for those who die because of Corona, or the possibility of not praying over them”, Muslim believers were permitted “to perform the absentee prayer with the intention of praying for the Muslim deceased who did not pray, on the condition that it is not set aside for a specific time, such as Friday of every week”.⁶⁰ During pandemic times, special concessions were thus made within the boundaries of *sharī’ah*. Similarly, the Council ruled that pilgrimage to the holy city of Mecca (*ḥaǧǧ*)⁶¹ could be postponed.⁶²

⁵⁴ *Fatwā* 30/30, also with regard to the quotations in the following sentences.

⁵⁵ This word is the plural of *tarwīḥa*, the term for ritual prayers or divine services, which are performed in the nights of the month of *Ramaḍān*.

⁵⁶ *Fatwā* 24/30, also with regard to the quotations in the following sentences.

⁵⁷ This established that “Friday prayers are not valid in homes behind direct broadcasts or modern means of communication”. See *supra*.

⁵⁸ *Fatwā* 25/30. The Muslim year counts two canonical festivals: the *ṭd al-aḏḥā* (sacrificial festival, also *ṭd al-nahr*) and the *ṭd al-fīṭr* (festival of breaking the fast) that takes place on 1 *Shawwāl*.

⁵⁹ *Fatwā* 26/30. The *imām* is originally the “leader” and therefore also the person leading the prayer. See CL. HUART, *Imām*, in M.TH. HOUTSMA, T.W. ARNOLD, R. BASSET, R. HARTMANN (eds), *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, I, 1913-1936.

⁶⁰ *Fatwā* 27/30. The Council clarified that this happens “[b]ecause this determination is illegal, and there is no evidence for it”, and referred to a previous *fatwā* 21(1/2).

⁶¹ The pilgrimage to Mecca is the fifth of the so-called “five pillars of *Islām*” (*arkān ad-dīn al-Islām*). See also *infra* footnote No. 64.

⁶² *Fatwā* 31/30.

It should be mentioned that the ECFR was formerly faced with questions regarding the possibility to perform pilgrimage during health-crisis when the Swine-flu pandemic influenza (H1N1) was spreading across the world. On that occasion, the Islamic scholars issued one *ad hoc* resolution⁶³ while reporting that, based on the collected and examined documentation, the Council did “not see a justification for any *fatwā* to the effect of discouraging those who intend to perform *ḥaǧǧ* or ‘*umrah*’.⁶⁴ Nonetheless, the scholars also recommended “postponing the performance of these rituals for the elderly and those with debilitating diseases, or those taking drugs that reduce immunity, as it recommends for those who have previously performed *ḥaǧǧ* or ‘*umrah*’ to relieve crowding”. In real terms, globally, at the outbreak of the pandemic in early 2020, pilgrimages to sacred places were stopped, mass gatherings were halted, religious events were cancelled or largely scaled down. In the attempt to prevent the risk of overcrowding and to mitigate the spreading of the Coronavirus, the religious tourism industry was thus highly impacted on as well as pilgrims.⁶⁵

Further attention should be paid to the statements released by the ECFR at the time of the Swine-flu pandemic; the chosen wording in effect resonates the official statements and legal opinions delivered during the Coronavirus emergency. By way of illustration, the Council did highlight that “in any case, it is necessary to take preventive measures against this disease and other epidemics. And these measures are summarised primarily in [the following]: refraining from hugs and kisses, reducing handshakes as much as possible, washing hands after every contact with a patient, or after contamination, and covering the nose and mouth in case of sneezing, and coughing with a tissue”. The ECFR did continue in stressing that “during gatherings, it is best to use masks and veils with the attention to changing these masks or veils frequently, and disposing of them in a healthy way”. Additionally, the ECFR did maintain that “[a]mong the means of prevention is also adherence to the recommendations⁶⁶ regarding taking the necessary vaccinations or taking the necessary medicines, bearing in mind that these recommendations may be relaxed, or strengthened, in accordance with the prevailing health situation”. The need to abide by State official rules grounded on scientific evidence and clinical protocols was therefore already pinpointed during the 2009-2010 influenza health-crisis by the Islamic scholars.

5. Recommendations in the course of the pandemic

In addition to the *fatwā*-s analysed in the two sections above, a number of recommendations (*tawṣiyāt*) specifically tailored to meet the needs of Muslims living in Western countries were put forward by the Council between March and April 2020; more precisely, ten during the Emergency Session (ES) and nine during the Supplementary Session (SS).

⁶³ *Qarār* 78(4/19).

⁶⁴ ‘*Umrah*’ is the (little) pilgrimage to Mecca; *ḥaǧǧ* identifies the annual (great) pilgrimage to Mecca. See R. PARET, E. CHAUMONT, ‘*Umra*’, and A.J. WENSINCK, A.J. WENSINCK, J. JOMIER, B. LEWIS, *Ḥadǧǧ*, both in P. BEARMAN, TH. BIANQUIS, C.E. BOSWORTH, E. VAN DONZEL, W.P. HEINRICHS (eds), *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, II.

⁶⁵ See i.a. W. MOSIER, T. ELHADARY, I.A. ELHATY, M. SAFAEI, *Crisis management and the impact of pandemics on religious tourism*, in *International Journal of Religious Tourism and Pilgrimage*, 8, 7, 3, 2020, 9-22.

⁶⁶ Namely those “issued by the health authorities in Saudi Arabia, or in the countries to which the pilgrims and ‘*umrah*’ performers belong to”.

When analysing and comparing the recommendations issued during the two above-mentioned online meetings, it emerges that the Council followed a similar pattern in both sessions. First of all, emphasis was put on the need to abide by official provisions aimed at disease containment and health-crisis management on European soil. More specifically, the ECFR Emergency Session stated that “[t]he Council calls on European Muslims to adhere to the authorities’ decision, to stay at home, to continue not to hold rituals in mosques, and to prevent gatherings until the distress is exposed”.⁶⁷ The Council also paid attention to the spreading of the so-called “fake news” by stressing that Muslims were warned against “transmitting and spreading rumours that harm the public interest, underestimating or exaggerating [the pandemic]”. The Supplementary Session then added that Muslims were exhorted “[t]o abide by the decision of the civil and health authorities, to stop gatherings and visits, and to take all preventive and protective measures to impede infection and contagion for themselves or others”.⁶⁸ Furthermore, the ECFR recommended that “all Muslims should interact with their European homelands in this ordeal”.⁶⁹ Accordingly, the Council encouraged “all positive initiatives presented by Muslims and Islamic institutions in a number of countries – such as campaigns for donating money to support hospitals, blood donation campaigns, volunteering to serve the needy and the elderly, and volunteering with ambulance teams and protection institutions”. The demand of strong cooperation and social cohesion continued when declaring that the ECFR called “on all Muslims to have compassion and cooperation with the society”, and this was specifically aimed at showing “the spirit of altruism and solidarity” and at embodying “the morals and values of *Islām* in times of crisis and adversity”.⁷⁰ Accurate reference was also made to healthcare providers and medical institutions. In March 2020, the Council reported its “sincere thanks to the medical staff, who ensure the care and service of patients”, whilst also calling “on *Allāh* Almighty to protect them and save them from every disease and evil”.⁷¹ In April 2020, Muslims were encouraged to “continue their initiatives in support of hospitals, caring for the elderly, [showing] solidarity with medical staff, and embodying the values of good citizenship”.⁷² Humanitarian and charitable responses to the pandemic were thus presented as an opportunity to promote dialogue and cooperation in Muslim minority contexts. Additional recommendations touched upon topics formerly addressed by some *fatwā*-s issued during the XXX Council Sessions,⁷³ and also focused on ethics, moral and spiritual aspects. Accordingly, in the final statements of both 2020 Sessions, the first recommendation (i.e. *tawṣīya* 1) concerned devotional matters during pandemic times. In March, Muslims were advised to “renew their connection with their Lord” and to “increase their closeness to Him through obedience, such as prayer, charity, fasting, etc.”; whereas in April Muslims were encouraged “to seize the month of *Ramaḍān* in worship and self-purification”, and also “to increase supplication and invocation to *Allāh* Almighty to expedite the removal of calamity and the plague on all of humanity, so that fate will not return anything but supplication”.

⁶⁷ ECFR, XXX ES, *tawṣīya* 2 also with regard to the next quotation.

⁶⁸ ECFR, XXX SS, *tawṣīya* 2.

⁶⁹ ECFR, XXX ES, *tawṣīya* 5 also with regard to the next quotation.

⁷⁰ ECFR, XXX ES, *tawṣīya* 8.

⁷¹ ECFR, XXX ES, *tawṣīya* 4.

⁷² ECFR, XXX SS, *tawṣīya* 6.

⁷³ E.g. burials (ECFR, XXX SS, *tawṣīya* 9; ECFR, XXX ES, *tawṣīya* 10) and food commodities (ECFR, XXX ES, *tawṣīya* 6).

As far as *Ramaḍān* is concerned, the Supplementary Session was specifically addressing rituals and fasting during the ninth month of the Muslim calendar. The importance of strengthening familial relationships was highly underlined,⁷⁴ as well as the need “to avoid extravagance in food and drink” in order to “save its expenses to meet the necessities of the poor, the needy and those who cannot find food for their day”. Welfare and financial assistance towards “the other” were thus highly recommended as an emergency etiquette, particularly during the holy Islamic month.

Ad hoc recommendations were then addressed to religious authorities, who were asked by the ECFR to “strive to seize the month of *Ramaḍān* for the spiritual and cultural advancement of people”. They were also exhorted “to coordinate as much as possible with each other in the programs transmitted through social media, so that people do not lose themselves in it because of the multitude and overlapping of times”. During the March session, the Council similarly called upon European *imām*-s and preachers “to play their role in guiding people and supporting them spiritually and culturally through modern means of communication”. The ECFR encouraged (local) Islamic leaders to adopt “a civilised global humanist discourse” and to spread “the spirit of hope and optimism, highlighting the manifestations of facilitation, mercy and grants in times of calamity, tribulations and adversity”. Religious authorities were also recommended to adopt “the decisions of *fatwā*-bodies and collective diligence”. Muslim authorities and Islamic institutions were thus specifically appointed and accurately entitled to accompany and shepherd Muslim believers during the challenging pandemic times by providing guidance ranging from spiritual issues to practical matters.

6. “Regular” online sessions and released statements

At the end of the deliberations of the XXX Supplementary Session, the scholars agreed that the next Council session would have been held at the beginning of October 2020 “in one of the European countries”. In actual facts, the XXXI Session was convened via networking technology in December 2020.⁷⁵ This was entitled “The jurisprudence of the Islamic presence in Europe, between its legal aims and its jurisprudential principles”, and it resulted in ten legal opinions (*fatwā*-s), seven resolutions (*qarārāt*), and seven recommendations (*tawṣiyāt*).

Reference to the pandemic was reported only in the opening statements and in some recommendations. At the very beginning of the meeting, the Acting Chairman “called for lessons to be learned from the ordeal of the Coronavirus and the changes it has brought about in the world and the lives of people”. The Covid-19 global crisis was therefore to be understood also as a driver for change. *Shaykh* Suhaib Hassan also “praised the tremendous efforts made by researchers and scientists to reach an effective vaccine and drugs to save lives and prevent the spread of the epidemic, and the beginning of life returning to normal again”. Additionally, he “valued dearly” and paid tribute to “the presence of European Muslim scientists – men and women – at the forefront of discovering safe vaccines to prevent Coronavirus”; Muslim youths were encouraged “to emulate them in learning, research, and the benefit

⁷⁴ ECFR, XXX SS, *tawṣiyāt* 3, 4, and 8. Similarly, in March, the Council already recommended that “Muslim families in Europe organise and invest their time and take advantage of isolation in useful scientific, spiritual and recreational programs” (*tawṣiya* 9).

⁷⁵ More specifically, in the period 20-24 *Rabīʿ al-ākhir* 1442AH, corresponding to 5-9 December 2020.

of mankind with knowledge". The Acting Chairman of the Council concluded by mentioning the necessity of combining the introduction of prevention and protection against the virus, and "invoking *Allāh* Almighty in supplication to expedite the removal of the calamity and the epidemic on all of humanity". At the end of the XXXI Session, the Council renewed "its thanks and sincere prayer to the medical staff who took care of the patients in light of the ordeal of the Corona epidemic and their service",⁷⁶ whilst urging "research and scientific competition to find an anti-Coronavirus vaccine" and blessing "the success of a number of experiments in this regard, and the start of vaccination". In *Islām*, suffering is indeed understood as a concrete and sometimes unavoidable human experience, which should be efficiently handled by clinicians and medical scientists.

In addition, Muslim believers were encouraged to be perseverant in "strictly" adhering "to the preventive measures against the outbreak of the Corona epidemic, which are approved by the competent health and official authorities in each country".⁷⁷ Not only official health crisis-management provisions but also misperceptions and "fake news" were raised by the Council when discouraging Muslims from "believing or promoting rumours regarding the epidemic and vaccines against it". In effect, the ECFR recommended "respecting science and specialisation, and abiding by what is decided by institutions and specialised scientific references in this regard".⁷⁸ The issue of vaccines was thus added to the list of possible rumours Muslims were recommended not to disseminate.⁷⁹

The above-reported statements were the sole directly addressing the pandemic, *sharīah*-compliant anti-Covid-19 norms were indeed "normalised" and the European Council for Fatwa and Research resumed its ordinary activities by late 2020. As a result, a number of issues were touched upon during the XXXI Session. Three main topics can be identified among the subjects that were dealt with by the ECFR: Islamic finance and obligatory payments, Muslims in Europe, and biomedical matters. More precisely, the examined financial topics ranged from *zakāh*⁸⁰ to deceased's inheritance and estate division,⁸¹ from investment loans⁸² to bitcoins,⁸³ from hierarchical marketing⁸⁴ to 'promise to buy'⁸⁵ and companies' intermediaries.⁸⁶

The ECFR also investigated the so-called *fiqh* of minorities on European soil as well as the relevance of *fatwā-s* for European Muslims. Three resolutions were reported in the published final statements,⁸⁷ whereas the resolution addressing the "degrees of mandatory judgment and its impact on the jurisprudence of the Islamic presence in Europe" (*qarār* 5/31) was postponed. In February 2021, the ECFR published an additional statement entitled "On the methodology for dealing with Islamic affairs in

⁷⁶ ECFR, XXXI session, *tawṣiya* 2 also with reference to the next quotations in the paragraph.

⁷⁷ ECFR, XXXI session, *tawṣiya* 4.

⁷⁸ ECFR, XXXI session, *tawṣiya* 5 also with reference to the next quotations in the paragraph.

⁷⁹ See *supra* section No. 5

⁸⁰ *Qarār* 7/31; *fatwā* 1/31 and 2/31.

⁸¹ *Fatwā* 3/31.

⁸² *Qarār* 4/31.

⁸³ *Qarār* 6/31.

⁸⁴ *Fatwā* 8/31.

⁸⁵ *Fatwā* 9/31.

⁸⁶ *Fatwā* 10/31.

⁸⁷ Namely, *qarārāt* 1/31, 2/31 and 3/31.

Europe” by issuing six extra recommendations (*tawṣiyāt*).⁸⁸ With regard to Islamic (bio)medical ethics and clinical practice, four legal opinions were published. These ranged from embryo freezing⁸⁹ to the estimation of “blood-money” in case of manslaughter;⁹⁰ from bon-cultivation in gum extracted from bovine⁹¹ to hemp usage for medical conditions.⁹²

Whilst the Council resumed its usual – although online – activities, the second *Ramaḍān* in pandemic times was approaching. In this occasion, only a statement of the ECFR General Secretariat was released and this was aimed at “determining the beginning of the months of *Ramaḍān* and *Shawwāl* for the year 1442AH-2021AD.” Accordingly, it was announced that *Ramaḍān* would have begun on 13 April and ended on 13 May 2021. Muslims were also called upon “to take precautions and all preventive measures, and to listen to the instructions of officials, at all levels – including health officials, activities, gatherings, centres and bodies in every country – for their safety, and to achieve the great legitimate purpose of self-preservation”. The scholars then added that they also advise Muslims “to act according to what the Council jurisprudence and its scholars have adopted in these circumstances”. Reference was thus broadly made to the previously-issued guidance and *fatwā*-s concerning the Coronavirus and related health-crisis management matters.

In October 2021, a fresh statement was released by the General Secretariat of the ERC immediately after the “World Conference on Timings”.⁹³ In the officially published announcements,⁹⁴ reference to the Coronavirus was made only in relation to the hybrid format of the event held in Istanbul (Turkey). As reported in the final statement of the World Conference, “[d]ue to the circumstances of the Corona pandemic, a number of *imām*-s, preachers, and those concerned with the timings issues in the West participated through networking techniques”. This occasion represented an opportunity for the ECFR to stress the importance of collaboration and unity among Muslims living in minority contexts, particularly with regard to timings concerning prayer and fasting. More specifically, the General Secretariat congratulated “those in charge of it as well as the Muslims in Europe for the emergence of a project that brings together the timings in Europe, calls upon the *imām*-s, the directors of Islamic centres and institutions, and the general Muslims in the West to work on it and gather on it”. In fact, this project, which began in 2003,⁹⁵ “contributes to reduce raising disagreements” and therefore fosters collaborations and coordination among Muslims living on European soil.

⁸⁸ More precisely, on *Ġumādā al-ākhira* 1442AH corresponding to 2 February 2021.

⁸⁹ *Fatwā* 5/31.

⁹⁰ *Fatwā* 4/31.

⁹¹ *Fatwā* 7/31.

⁹² *Fatwā* 6/31.

⁹³ The World Conference on Timings was held in Istanbul from 19-20 *Ṣafar* 1443AH corresponding to 26-27 September 2021; the Chairman, Vice-President, Secretary-General and a number of members of the European Council for Fatwa and Research attended and contributed to the event.

⁹⁴ Namely, the “Final statement of the World Conference on Timings” and the “Statement of the General Secretariat of the Council on the World Conference on Timing”. The second one is dated 3 *Rabīʿ al-Awwal* 1443AH corresponding to 9 October 2021.

⁹⁵ See ECFR, XI session, Stockholm (Sweden).

7. Conclusions

It has been highlighted that information and communication technologies have introduced substantial innovation in both the production and consumption of Islamic knowledge.⁹⁶ Similarly, Internet, and in particular the World-Wide-Web, profoundly impacts on the manners in which Muslims perceive *Islām* as well as the evolution of Muslim societies and Islamic networks.⁹⁷ The large majority of religious groups and faith-oriented organisations reoccur to global computer networking; nonetheless, it has been stressed that specificities appear to be more difficult to identify with respect to Muslim believers.⁹⁸ In real terms, a sort of hierarchy exists in the cyberspace and, despite the spreading of the so-called “wiki-oriented” *Islām*, some bodies are regarded in highly esteem by Muslims and referred to by religious worship centres in the West.⁹⁹

When specifically investigating the European scenario, the European Council for Fatwa and Research (ECFR) comes into view as an institution that is active in providing guidance for Muslims settled in minority contexts. Since the outburst of the Covid-19 pandemic, in particular, the scholars of the Council promptly provided legal opinions and recommendations specifically addressed to the European Muslim population. Carefully investigating the statements released by the ECFR, the paper shed light upon the matters tackled by the Islamic scholars during the pandemic years 2020 and 2021 by also referring to the guidance issued by the same Islamic institution at the time of the Swine-flu influenza emergency.

The proposed analysis unveiled that specific attention was firstly paid to explaining the meaning and purposes of calamities and pandemics, and to present the occurring dramatic events as the opportunity for a world-wide ethical and moral resurgence. Analogously to other religious actors and faith-based organisations, thus the Council advanced a global pledge for social cohesion and cooperative actions to confront the persistently spreading disease and its implications. In particular, Muslims were urged to take action on spiritual and pragmatical aspects, simultaneously, as prescribed by Islamic provisions.

On the spiritual side, congregational worship practices and group prayers were restricted, and pilgrimages were postponed in order to prevent the spreading of the infection, in line with the worldwide enforced guidelines. Muslim believers were however remembered to foster devotional aspects by spending time in supplications and invocations aimed at facilitating the removal of the calamity, and at supporting sick people and healthcare providers, particularly during *Ramaḍān*. Furthermore, a

⁹⁶ As a result, new public spheres have been created where different concepts of Muslim identity are negotiated. See i.a. V. SISLER, *Cyber counsellors, online fatwas, arbitration tribunals, and the construction of Muslim identity in the UK*, in *Information, Communication & Society*, 14, 8, *Religion and the Internet: Considering the online-offline connection*, 2011, 1136-1159.

⁹⁷ G.R. BUNT, *iMuslims: Rewiring the house of Islam*, Chapel Hill, 2009.

⁹⁸ P.A. SOUKUP, *L'insegnamento Islamico in Internet*, in *La Civiltà Cattolica*, 163, 2, 2012, 451- 462; in English in *Communication Research Trends*, 31, 1, 2012, 24-30. On Italy, see F. MORELLONI, *L'Islam in rete*, in *Contemporanea*, 3, 2006, 567-680.

⁹⁹ It should however be mentioned that among Islamic scholars and Muslims intellectuals a number of opponents of the concept of “minority *fiqh*” do exists. For further discussion, see i.a. S. ALBRECHT, *Dār al-Islām revisited: Territoriality in contemporary Islamic legal discourse on Muslims in the West*, Leiden, 2018, 125-164.

religious act such as ritual fasting was described as being helpful in combating the Coronavirus on spiritual level as well as in strengthening the body's immune system.

More pragmatically, Muslims were strongly encouraged to cater for the financial necessities and physical needs of people, depending upon their personal capabilities. By way of illustration, Muslims were invited to support the elderly and to step forward as volunteers. From a financial perspective, it was ruled that the *zakāh* for European mosques and Islamic centres could have been accelerated, and Muslims were to avoid any unnecessary expenses in order for them to support those in needs in addition to hospital facilities.

This pledge for action addressed to all Muslims was also in line with one of the main objective of the ECFR – namely, “Issuing collective *fatwā*-s that meet the needs of Muslims in Europe, solve their problems, and organise their interaction with the European societies, in light of the provisions and purposes of *sharī'ah*”.¹⁰⁰ In particular, European Muslims were recommended to interact and cooperate with various institutions and associations, while manifesting altruism and solidarity. Furthermore, Muslim believers were urged to repeatedly adhere by and attentively conform to the official instructions issued by health authorities and State bodies. Local Islamic authorities were then recommended to accompany and guide Muslims in enacting preventive measures and in seizing the community's spiritual and cultural advancement.

Specific attention was also paid to the so-called “fake news” since Muslims were recommended not to foster rumours and hearsay regarding the Coronavirus and the vaccines. In addition, gratitude and appreciation towards healthcare professionals, clinicians, nurses, caregivers and biomedical researchers was voiced by the ECFR, whilst praising the role globally played by Muslim scientists in battling against the virus and in identifying effective medical treatments and the vaccines.

When examining the activities of the ECFR during the years 2020 and 2021, it becomes evident that the approach followed by the Council resonates the four concepts that have been identified as the crisis and disaster management theory compliant to Islamic principles.¹⁰¹ More specifically, the Council scholars appear to have followed the recommended scientific method in dealing with the Covid-19 emergency. First of all, the crisis was not presented as evil, rather a positive outlook was embraced by describing the threats as drivers of change and opportunities for the collective humankind. The Council showed effective communication skills in providing guidance and in stressing precautionary actions aimed at protecting people from pathogens. Lastly, the ECFR fostered both cooperation and altruism. Presently, the effects and impacts of the Coronavirus on European Muslims have been managed by the Islamic scholars and the negative consequences have been contained to the extent possible. The next stages of this pandemic and its potential contingencies are still unknown, however, since late 2020, the Council resumed its *quasi* ordinary activities by issuing *fatwā*-s and recommendations on broader topics (such as financial and biotechnology-related issues), as it used to do during non-health-emergency times. This indicates that the once new anti-pandemic norms have been in some way

¹⁰⁰ ECFR Object No. 2, see *supra* footnote 10.

¹⁰¹ The four concepts are the crisis management strategies and stages, as well as the characteristics and the role of a leader during the crisis management process. The methodology consists in applying the grounded theory approach and studying the data on crisis management in *Islām*. See N.A. AL EID, A.A. BOSHRA, *Crisis and disaster management in the light of the Islamic approach: Covid-19 pandemic crisis as a model*, in *Journal of Public Affairs*, 20, 4, 2020, 1-14.

“normalised” by European Muslims. Only time will tell whether additional adjustments will be needed in the near future, in light of the *sharīah*-compliant methods of global health-crisis management.

