



GLOBAL PANDEMIC: CORONAVIRUS AND GLOBAL DISORDER

Islamic Authority and Arab States in a Time of Pandemic

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As the new coronavirus and its economic and political consequences ripple cross the Arab world, Arab regimes are facing an extraordinary and possibly existential test. Their public health capacities may be strained but so too will their economic resources and coercive institutions. Moral suasion will grow increasingly important, even in the most repressive of states, to contain the outbreak and its economic and political fallout. In this effort, Arab governments are mobilizing official Islamic institutions—namely, ministries of Islamic affairs and *awqaf* (endowments)—as well as engaging local clerics and Islamists. The most pressing and critical goal is to limit the virus’s spread by shutting down sites of public contact and potential contagion including Islamic spaces, principally mosques but also religious schools, as well as events like pilgrimages and commemorations—especially as the holy month of Ramadan begins in April.

To ensure compliance with social distancing and other measures, many regimes are relying on national and especially local clerics who have gained citizens’ trust for their religious learning and social roles. In tandem,

Islamic charities connected to regimes are proving vital in alleviating the outbreak’s dire economic impact. Enlisting Islamic authority in some countries may prove crucial in compensating for the public’s low trust in the regime’s information outlets and officials, which could have dire public health consequences. As studies of past pandemics have shown, when **trust** and regime legitimacy is low, the public is more likely to engage in “**skeptical noncompliance**.” Conversely, Islamic venues of communication may prove vital in convincing the public that an eventual end to the pandemic was *because* of the regime’s efforts, whether through its own actions or by facilitating international help. Relatedly, Islamic authorities may in some instances accrue greater popularity by aligning themselves with robust government responses.

The pandemic arrived as several Arab regimes have been steadily consolidating their control over clerical establishments, often under the pretext of countering violent extremism. These supposed reforms have included purges, arrests, edicts and legislation, new oversight bodies, and other measures. These changes



may now reap dividends for some governments, and, just as they instrumentalized the specter of terrorism, they may exploit this outbreak to exert greater control and surveillance over Islamic authorities. Temporary emergency measures could become permanent, and ad hoc work-arounds by Muslim clerics, like conducting sermons or Quranic lessons virtually, could facilitate monitoring by the regime.

And yet Islamic institutions are hardly obsequious pawns of the rulers—they could also emerge from this pandemic with newfound privileges and social clout. As intermediaries with local society, they have long had a better negotiating position than is commonly recognized—a position that might be strengthened by this unprecedented crisis. Moreover, even in authoritarian and notionally stable states, like Egypt for example, clerics are not displaying a uniform response nor are religious institutions completely adhering to the government line. Personal and bureaucratic rivalries have come into play, as have [ideological fissures](#) among various Islamic movements. In war-torn and fragmented states, like Yemen and Libya, the rivalries are naturally starker. Various religious actors, aligned with warring political factions, see this outbreak as an opportunity to undermine opponents in ongoing contests for public support and control over Islamic institutions.

Though the long-term fallout from this crisis is difficult to predict, it may affect cleric-state relations. Especially in rentier states like the Gulf monarchies, lower oil prices and the [impending end of the rentier era itself](#) might eventually strain states' [financial patronage](#) and co-optation of Islamic institutions and actors. Though these states have reserves, they will likely face hard choices. As resources dwindle, they may permit or encourage clerical scapegoating, often on external sources to deflect from their own governance shortcomings. There has already been an [initial wave of such rhetoric](#), with some commentators framing the contagion as divine retribution for China's repression of Muslim Uighurs or as a "Shia virus." As they have done in the past,

some regimes may resort to a strategic deployment of sectarianism, including funneling oil revenues to favored communal groups or sects while neglecting or demonizing others.

For now, it is certain that the mobilization of Islamic institutions across the Arab region is varied and nuanced, reflecting different levels of state cohesion and societal polarization, regime legitimacy, religious diversity, coercive capacity, and economic resources. These Islamic actors therefore serve as important windows into state-society relations in the Arab world—and how the pandemic's effects may be reshaping those relations.

EGYPT

As the most populous Arab country and the seat of a prestigious center of Islamic learning and scholarship known as Al-Azhar, Egypt's public order has long been intertwined with perceptions of Islamic legitimacy. Responding to the coronavirus, President Abdel Fattah el-Sisi's regime has mobilized the country's Islamic institutions alongside more coercive tools like military deployments and media restrictions. Religious actors have largely swung in support of official policy on the coronavirus, although initial reactions revealed rivalries and ambiguities regarding the government's line. Part of the problem was that public health messages were disseminated unevenly and inconsistently by the government, shifting from reassurance to stern warnings. In this confused atmosphere, religious institutions devised varying responses, each jealous of its own turf, before finally swinging behind a [unified and strict message](#) against large public gatherings.

And it was those gatherings—weekly religious services, religious rites (such as funerals), and visits to shrines—that had been the subject of contestation. Al-Azhar, perhaps the most renowned state Islamic institution, moved to suspend Friday prayers. But it was pressed to step back and coordinate with the Ministry of Religious

Affairs, which had taken a less strict approach. The Coptic Church, too, worked to clarify that it was listening to state officials but making its own decisions

Thus, by mid-March, perhaps the most significant step had been to assure citizens that it would be perfectly permissible to modify their religious practices to conform to recommended behavior. Initially, Friday Islamic prayers and Sunday Coptic masses were not canceled but [absences were simply excused](#); other religious gatherings were curtailed and [practices modified](#). Some larger assemblies (such as wedding celebrations and funerals attached to mosques) were suspended. Pious Muslims were assured that using alcohol-based disinfectants is allowed. But more drastic actions were initially eschewed and coordination among actors was lacking.

On March 21, all three institutions swung behind a far more energetic and unified approach. Services were canceled; gatherings at religious sites were barred; and far more forceful instructions were delivered. Dar al-Ifta, a state body responsible for Islamic legal guidance, [tweeted on March 24](#) that “any call for citizen gatherings now in the streets or anywhere else, under any slogan and under any pretext, is malicious, religiously forbidden, and detestable to the face of God. Adherence to what the competent authorities decide in order to protect people from epidemics and diseases is a religious and national duty. Whoever violates these procedures under any pretext is a religious transgressor.” And on April 2, the [Ministry of Religious Affairs threatened](#) to punish those gathering in the streets or on rooftops for group prayers.

Yet even with this sudden unity, some subtle differences have emerged in the way institutions have responded. The Ministry of Religious Affairs, clearly part of the executive branch and headed by a figure loyal to the president, has slipped in some political messages—combining the fight against extremism with the fight against the virus; stressing the duty of obeying the *wali*

al-amr (a term that refers generally to the ruler and to legitimate political authorities more generally); and even on one occasion linking the [virus to the Muslim Brotherhood](#).

Meanwhile, Al-Azhar and Dar al-Ifta, two state Islamic institutions with a greater degree of autonomy than the ministry, have tended to avoid any explicit political messaging beyond directing Egyptians to follow the instructions from public health officials, a subtly different message that implicitly stresses expertise rather than political authority.

SAUDI ARABIA

As rulers of the wealthiest Arab state, members of the Al Saud dynasty have historically claimed moral legitimacy at home and abroad from their symbiotic relationship with the powerful clerical establishment and especially from their role as custodians of Islam’s two holiest sites, Mecca and Medina. As the destinations of millions of pilgrims a year performing the *hajj* and *umrah*, these two sites have [long figured as public health concerns](#), given the potential for disease transmission, and have spurred a government monitoring and response capability. The severity of the coronavirus threat, which has [reportedly infected members](#) of the royal family, has elicited a range of Saudi restrictions on public and religious spaces, which have relied on the mobilization of the Saudi religious establishment. Even before this pandemic, the Saudi regime had taken steps to consolidate its control over the clerical institutions, and this latest crisis could accelerate this process.

On February 27, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs issued a [directive banning non-Saudis](#) from entry to perform the *umrah*. This was followed by an [order from the Ministry of Interior](#) on March 4 prohibiting Saudis and local residents from performing the *umrah* or visiting the Prophet Muhammad’s mosque, effectively emptying Islam’s holiest cities to combat the spread



of the virus. For its part, the [Ministry of Hajj and Umrah](#) played a subordinate role, dutifully endorsing these decisions in [follow-up communications](#) and coordinating the departure of pilgrims already in the kingdom. Meanwhile, Minister of Islamic Affairs, Dawah, and Guidance Abdullatif Al al-Sheikh [praised the state's decisions](#) in back-to-back tweets, indirectly acknowledging that these are non-ministry-related decisions. The ministry, instead, handled [bureaucratic matters](#) of lesser significance: aligning Friday sermons to discuss *sharia's* stance toward pandemics, closing ministry-sponsored *halaqas* (lessons) in mosques, and issuing an updated Friday prayer protocol that includes shortening the sermon to a maximum fifteen minutes and forbidding the provision of food and drinks.

Some [government-friendly media outlets](#) and social media accounts have labeled the coronavirus a “Shia virus” because it spread into the region from Iran, further pushing the sectarian envelope in an already tense environment. However, Saudi officials and state media outlets have not directly used such language. Its [verbal attack against Iran](#) was guided by public health concerns: Iran had allowed Saudis entrance without stamping their passports, thereby increasing the risk of not detecting returnees possibly contaminated with the virus. Such concerns led to the quarantine of a Shia-majority city in eastern Saudi Arabia, [Qatif](#), since March 8. Saudi press depicted the decision as eliciting support from [several Shia residents](#) there, who reportedly understood that regulating the flow of [travelers from Iran](#) merited this step. The prominent Saudi Shia cleric Sheikh Hassan al-Saffar did not denounce the government's decision on Qatif, instead urging people to follow “official directions from the [competent authorities](#).” That said, some Shia activists and outlets, including [state-owned Iranian platforms](#), tried to portray the closure as more evidence of the government's anti-Shia discrimination. On March 25, the lockdown orders expanded to cover the entire kingdom, with the government [decreeing](#) a halt of

movement between regions—the same measures that it introduced in Qatif, thereby weakening the argument that the state lockdown of Qatif was due to sectarian motives.

Saudi religious authority Grand [Mufti Abdulaziz Al al-Sheikh](#) played a critical role in the regime's mobilization, alongside the [Council of Senior Scholars](#), which he chairs. Specifically, he championed the government's policy of gradually closing mosques. On March 12, [Decision 246](#) forbade potentially infected citizens from joining congregational prayer only to be followed five days later with the decision to close all mosques except the two holy mosques of Mecca and Medina. This is a decision that another Saudi-funded religious organization, the Muslim World League, endorsed via its internationally recognized head, Mohammad al-Issa. Other well-known religious scholars followed suit, such as [Abdullah al-Mutlaq](#) and [Saleh al-Moghamsy](#). They all used religious tradition as a tool to contain the virus by either extrapolating historical incidents that reinforce current decisions or highlighting Islamic texts that both promote the sanctity of humankind and detail prophetic behavior toward plagues (ignoring, meanwhile, the existence of other traditions that go against their views).

Another religious institution, the [General Presidency of the Commission for the Promotion of Virtue and Prevention of Vice](#) (known colloquially as *hayaa*, or religious police), also used this tactic. The coronavirus pandemic has become an opportunity for the *hayaa* to show its new face. No longer the aggressive religious enforcer it once was, the *hayaa* has adjusted to a new, tamer role that delivers soothing messages to Muslims presumably under stress and searching for spiritual guidance. The “[You are better at home](#)” Campaign has been marketing various religious excerpts that reinforce the state's message of staying at home and exercising patience and caution just as the Prophet did during times of pandemic.

One key unknown is how the pandemic's effect on the global economy, combined with dramatically lower oil prices, will hamper Saudi Arabia's ability to fund religious institutions at home. Though the state still has vast reserves, if the global downturn diminishes these resources, it would likely first curtail spending on Islamic institutions abroad and preserve its patronage for domestic Islamic institutions.

MOROCCO

Like Saudi Arabia, Morocco is ruled by a monarchy that derives its legitimacy, in part, from its relationship to Islam. And, as in Saudi Arabia, the Moroccan king has taken steps in recent years to consolidate state control over the clerical establishment while co-opting potentially troublesome Islamists. Unsurprisingly, then, in the current crisis, a wide spectrum of Moroccan Islamic actors support the government's efforts to control the spread of the coronavirus. Official religious institutions—which are not only subordinate to the king but draw their legitimacy from his religious authority as commander of the faithful—have a long tradition of functioning as one with the state. This crisis is no exception. Official and nonofficial religious actors are deployed as any other government tool to ensure compliance with and buy-in from state policies.

By order of Moroccan King Mohammed VI, the country's Supreme Ulema Council issued a fatwa mandating [the closure of mosques](#) effective March 16. While mosques are closed, calls for prayer continue to blast out of the shuttered buildings. The council also canceled all religious festivals and gatherings, and religious institutions moved courses to online platforms. This nationwide closure is a first in Morocco. Yet, the country's religious leaders were unanimous in their support of the government's approach. Moroccans displayed little popular resistance to these measures, and leading religious figures—official and nonofficial, Salafi

and Sufi alike—have amplified state instructions and given them religious credence. The nationally broadcast sermon on March 20 focused on the pandemic, discussing the virus, its symptoms, how it spreads, and how to protect against it. Channel 6, a religious education network, has been broadcasting awareness-raising programming under the hashtag “stayinghome,” stressing the importance of confinement. Still, a few lone voices [opposed closure of mosques](#). They not only failed to gain traction but were condemned for endangering public health.

In terms of political actors, the Islamist party currently heading the government coalition, the Party for Justice and Development (PJD), has been quietly and obediently [implementing the official response](#) driven by the king. Outside of the official religious establishment, sanctioned religious groups have employed a similar approach. The PJD's ideological and outreach wing, the Movement for Unity and Reform (MUR), put out a series of releases reinforcing government efforts. The group shared videos of religious scholars explaining the Islamic principle of self-preservation and the importance of following orders to socially isolate. Within Salafi networks, the message has been the same. Various Salafi social media groups are [circulating articles](#) by and videos of Salafi preachers urging compliance with official orders.

The banned religious group al-Adl Wal-Ihsan (AWI) has also urged [supporters to stay home](#). However, its message has been more political, urging better governance, condemning corruption, and calling for greater support for the economically vulnerable. Many of al-Adl Wal-Ihsan's supporters are from the urban working class and are most likely to struggle with the financial impact of confinement.

As al-Adl Wal-Ihsan, the MUR, and even Salafi actors continue to support the state's policy, an immediate concern is losing touch with their grassroots networks.



These groups have been searching for new ways to stay connected with their bases. Salafi groups are conducting *durus* (religious lessons) through videoconferencing platforms. Some members of al-Adl Wal-Ihsan are holding their *jalasat* (educational meetings) virtually as well and urging groups to stay in touch through weekly check-ins. These actors are also rethinking ways to provide social and charitable support. The MUR and its affiliated civil society groups are looking for ways to channel their support through the state and support its efforts in this regard. For the AWI, which operates on the margins and outside of state approval, Abd Alwahed Motawakil, a senior member of the group, shared its challenge: “Any plan to reach out to vulnerable groups would be explained as an attempt to take advantage of these difficult times for one’s own political ends, or as an attempt to defy the state of emergency imposed by the government to limit the spread of the virus.”¹ The need for social work is likely to increase as Moroccan citizens grapple with the pandemic’s unprecedented economic impact.

TUNISIA

Alone among Arab states as a functioning, albeit nascent, democracy, the Tunisian state’s relationship to Islamic institutions is shaped by popular participation in governance and, especially, the political inclusion of the powerful Islamist party Ennahda. As the Tunisian government takes extraordinary measures to deal with the coronavirus, the pandemic is creating new risks and aggravating old stresses on the country’s fragile democratic system. Already the crisis has set off intense constitutional power struggles between Tunisian President Kais Saied, Prime Minister Elyes Fakhfakh, and Ennahda co-founder and current Parliament Speaker Rached Ghannouchi. The latter has resisted giving Fakhfakh special powers to tackle the coronavirus crisis. Several members of Ennahda fear that allowing Fakhfakh’s government to [bypass parliament and issue decrees](#) might set a dangerous precedent.

As the three branches of Tunisia’s government grapple with these constitutional issues, they must also negotiate and temper long-standing distrust between religious and secular authorities. In a country where religion is politically polarized and the freedom to worship is a rallying cry for conservative Islamic institutions and figures, the curtailment of public religious practices as part of a public health campaign could ignite an outcry among religious actors.

So far, however, that outcry has not materialized to the extent feared. On the contrary, state religious institutions have mobilized to persuade citizens to drastically alter religious practices and services to stem the viral contagion. Multiple actors have been involved, including Minister of Religious Affairs Ahmed Adhoum, Tunisian Grand Mufti Othman Battikh, and Hichem Grissa, the president of Zitouna University, an Islamic higher education institution. These voices uniformly [endorsed the mandatory decree](#) by the government to stop the virus from spreading. Islamist parties have also backed government decisions that scrapped Friday prayers, closed mosques, and prohibited Islamic funeral rites, like the washing of the deceased and performance of *salat al-janazah* (the funeral prayer). The [Islamist Minister of Public Health Abdellatif Mekki](#) also played an important role in enunciating many of the measures that have changed some traditions.

Importantly, devout Tunisians and the general public have largely acquiesced to the government’s decrees and religious leaders’ calls for strictly adhering to measures to shutter some anchors of religious practice. To be sure, there were a few cases where some believers—which some observers suspect of being Salafists—[ran afoul of bans on large gatherings](#) and curfews by staging nightly renditions of the *takbir*, where the faithful pronounce “*Allahu akbar*” (God is great) and appeal to divine intervention against the coronavirus. But generally, devout Tunisians have followed official guidelines, connecting online and supporting one another. Some [muezzins supplemented](#) the five daily

calls to prayer with recitations of *dhikr*, remembrance of God by the frequent repetition of his names.

The acceptance of the government's restrictive actions on religious practices and services is mostly due to religious precedents. All state religious institutions and Islamist actors have stressed that the basic precautionary measures the state has decreed to contain the coronavirus can be supported by several Quranic verses and *hadiths* (record of the traditions or sayings of the Prophet Muhammad). Muhammad famously said: "If you hear about an outbreak of plague in a land, do not go to it; but if plague breaks out in a country where you are staying, do not run away from it." He also said: "Those with contagious diseases should be kept away from those who are healthy." Religious actors cite many other examples of the most effective tools that Muhammad's companions practiced during plagues (like quarantining) and foul weather (like closing mosques). After all, as Adhoum often reminds the faithful, the Quran commands people not to "throw [yourselves] with your [own] hands into destruction."

Despite this general consensus, some Islamists are using the pandemic to score political points against the government. The Hizb ut-Tahrir movement, for example, has blasted the Tunisian government for not acting quickly to impose travel restrictions and close the country off, especially from Italy and France. For Hizb ut-Tahrir, the coronavirus is as much about ideology as it is about effective political action. As two of the movement's leaders stated in a [social media recording](#), the virus's devastation has laid bare the weaknesses of the Tunisian political, economic, and social system as well as the bankruptcy of the international neoliberal model of capitalism. In other instances, Islamic charitable organizations are mobilizing to fill the many gaps not addressed by the government. [Tounes Al-Khayria](#) (Tunisia Charity), for example, has been active in providing food to families in need and helping with medical efforts by delivering masks to hospitals.

YEMEN

As the poorest Arab state and the site of the world's [largest humanitarian disaster](#), Yemen stands at the opposite end of the spectrum from the aforementioned cases. Wracked by years of civil war, a Saudi and Emirati blockade, cholera outbreaks, famine, a decimated health sector, and, most recently, a locust plague, Yemen is uniquely vulnerable. As of April 10, it has [reported](#) one confirmed case of infection and the numbers are expected to quickly grow. In a modestly hopeful move, Saudi and Emirati forces [announced a two-week unilateral ceasefire](#), though previous efforts at a humanitarian-based halt to hostilities were quickly undone by military clashes in Marib and a worsening military escalation between Houthi fighters and Saudi forces.

Faced with the looming threat of contagion, Muslim clerics and Islamic institutions across political and ideological divides have mobilized to restrict their constituents' public contact and exposure by forbidding group prayers, enjoining people to remain at home, and stopping all religious ceremonies. Yet this mobilization is hampered by factional and religious rivalries and, more importantly, by the fractured Yemeni state and the inability of its competing power centers to enforce public health measures.

Among the first Islamic scholars who responded to the crisis was the former mufti Muhammed Ismail al-Amrani, a Zaydi scholar influenced by Sunni Islam and affiliated with al-Shawkani School, which became the official religious school after the 1962 republican revolution in the north. On March 19, al-Amrani issued a fatwa that allowed people to pray at [home](#). In addition, the Ministry of Endowments, part of the internationally recognized government in the southern port city of Aden, [banned](#) communal prayers on March 22. Yet this government's tenuous administrative control over southern territories and



parts of the north meant that very few mosques adhered to this decision, and these were mostly concentrated in Aden and in the southeast governorate of Hadramawt. In Aden, the decision [was forced](#) on some mosques by the Southern Transitional Council, a secessionist body that is heavily influenced by Salafis affiliated with the United Arab Emirates. In Hadramawt, many mosques adhered to the government's decision, except those in some communities and institutions affiliated with Sufism. Some Sufi Muslims [rejected the ban](#) on gatherings on March 24 to celebrate Isra and Miraj, the commemoration of the [Prophet Muhammad's night journey](#) and ascent to heaven, purportedly around the year 621. They cited a [Quranic verse](#): "Never will we be struck except by what Allah has decreed for us; he is our protector. And upon Allah let the believers rely." In another instance, however, a large Sufi gathering in Hadramawt was [canceled](#) on March 27.

This impulse toward prayer and intensified piety, in lieu of sanitation and health measures, is evident in other Yemeni Islamic movements and sects. For instance, a major Salafi organization, the Association of Yemeni Clerics, adopted a similar stance. Its leader, Abdulmajeed al-Zindani, issued a [statement](#) that people should continue going normally to mosques as there have been no cases of the coronavirus reported in Yemen yet. Al-Zindani is famous for his theories about the Quran and science, claiming that the Quran precedes modern scientific discoveries. His son Muhammed, also a religious scholar, claimed that he could [discover a cure for the coronavirus](#) within seventy-two hours, which triggered a wave of sarcasm.

The Houthi movement, which follows the Zaydi school of Shia Islam and which controls most of the northern territories where most Yemenis live, aligned with the Salafis in their rejection of any coronavirus precautions. Houthis controlled their areas tightly, so they avoided the fragmentation of religious-based responses that occurred in other areas. As of April 10, only schools and [territorial borders had been shut down](#), not religious

gatherings. Meanwhile, Houthi statements continued to deflect blame for the pandemic on external states: the Houthi leader, Abdul Malik al-Houthi, stated in a March 21 [speech](#) that the contagion might come to Yemen as part of an attack by the United States through its Saudi and UAE allies, and that the Houthis would counter it as they would any other aggressive action. This follows a previous pattern by the Houthis of politicizing disease outbreaks; in 2019, for example, they accused the [United States and Saudi Arabia of spreading cholera](#) as part of a biological war against Yemen.

LIBYA

Like Yemen, Libya has been wracked by civil war, extreme political fragmentation, collapsing infrastructure, and international intervention. Relatively few cases of infection have been detected so far, but like Yemen, this is because of a lack of testing—and the consequences of a contagion could be severe. Thousands of displaced Libyans and detained migrants are uniquely exposed to devastation by the coronavirus. An ongoing assault on the capital by militia forces aligned with Libyan Arab Armed Forces commander Khalifa Haftar has escalated to include attacks on hospitals and shelling of civilian areas. On top of this, public health responses are obstructed by a worsening fiscal crisis and competing nodes of political and religious authority.

Within Libya's opposing political camps—a Haftar-aligned administration in eastern Libya and the Government of National Accord (GNA) in the capital of Tripoli—there are opposing ministries of Islamic affairs and *awqaf* and mosque networks, each one influenced to varying degrees by [a current of Salafism known as "Madkhalism"](#) named for the Medina-based cleric Rabi bin Hadi al-Madkhali. Both sides have [tried to enlist the Saudi cleric's authority](#) for their respective causes, and each has issued public health notices regarding the current crisis. Citing a [speech](#) by GNA Prime Minister Fayez al-Saraj as well as writings by Salafi scholars, the

Tripoli-based Ministry for Islamic Affairs and Awqaf on March 16 urged people to stay in their homes and to stop daily and Friday prayers in mosques. Meanwhile, in the east, the General Authority for Awqaf and Islamic Affairs issued a [similar appeal](#) on March 17.

The appeals were moreover complicated by challenges to the ministry's authority, especially in the west. In one notable case, Tariq Durman, an influential Madkhali cleric hailing from the town of Zintan to the southwest of Tripoli, [rejected the ministry's order](#) to cease mosque prayers—part of a long-running dispute between Durman and the ministry's head, Muhammad al-Abbani. Other splits include local *awqaf* offices that reject the Madkhali orientation of the Tripoli-based ministry. Most significantly, this happened in Misrata (though the city does include an influential Madkhali current) and areas in western and eastern Libya where local Madkhali Salafi clerics follow a rival Saudi cleric, Muhammad al-Madkhali, who hails from the same tribe as Rabi bin Hadi al-Madkhali and who [recently issued a statement](#) on the virus. In addition, adherents of Sufism have fiercely rejected the Madkhali Salafis' efforts at dominance.

But perhaps the biggest religious-political rivalry that has affected public health pronouncements in western Libya is the rejection of the ministry's mosque closure by Libyan Grand Mufti Sadeq al-Ghariani. He leads Libya's Dar al-Ifta (the state body responsible for Islamic legal guidance) and has long battled the Madkhalis for influence over mosques and the public space—a struggle that has been waged in the media and in sermons, but also through violence. Commanding support from an array of revolutionary factions, Islamists, and some jihadists, al-Ghariani and his Dar al-Ifta [lambasted the order to shut the mosques](#), arguing that there “is no proof in history of Muslim mosques being closed in an entire country,” while clarifying that people who fear viral transmission are permitted to stay at home. He [later argued](#) that the virus and calls for a humanitarian ceasefire were a distraction from “the real epidemic”

of Haftar's “project.” These themes were echoed in [social media accounts](#) affiliated with partisans of al-Ghariani and Libyan armed groups who have aligned with his movement, like supporters of the Benghazi Revolutionaries Shura Council.

But beyond such ideological disputes, there is another danger: that the various armed groups upon whom the authorities in both the east and west rely on to enforce order, as de-facto police, could use this public crisis to further entrench their power and social control. This is especially pertinent in the case of the [Madkhalis' well-armed militias](#), who've already acted as morality police over public spaces in both regions, for example by shutting down mixed-gender gatherings and artistic events.

It seems likely, then, that no matter the pandemic's course in Libya, the public health response will be hampered by not only severe limitations in medical and governance capacity, mounting economic problems, and political fissures, but instrumentalization by rival religious authorities and their affiliated armed groups.

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NOTES

- 1 Interview by Intissar Fakir via WhatsApp and email, March 28.

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