

Response from the Office of His Eminence al-Sayyid Ali Husayni al-Sistani to Some More Questions on COVID-19

9th April 2020

Respectfully, the Great Marja' of the Shi'i World,
His Eminence Grand Ayatollah Sistani (may his life be prolonged),

Salamun alaykum.

We humbly offer our congratulations to Your Excellency on the birthday of the Imam of the Time (aj), and we pray for your long life with the best of health and well-being. Please could you guide us on the following matters:

Question:

What is the duty of the believers if there is a difference of opinion between specialists in the medical profession regarding the risk of harm posed by giving ghusl or tayammum or not having any contact with a dead body that has been infected with coronavirus?

[To place this question in context:] Some specialists in the medical profession cautiously advise adopting the method that entails the minimum level of contact because of the many unknown factors about the way coronavirus could spread via a dead body. Other specialists, however, allow the maximum level of contact in order to give ghusl, on condition that the washers of the dead body wear personal protective equipment (PPE); this is because, in their opinion, it has not been established that the virus is spread in that way. Bearing in mind such differences of opinion, do the believers have a choice in the method of preparing the dead body, or is it better / obligatory that they act according to the most cautious opinion Or is there another way?

In His Name, the Exalted

Answer:

If someone [after having considered the medical advice of experts] is not fearful of being harmed and is ready to give ghusl, then that person must be allowed to give ghusl. But, if no one is available, then tayammum must be given. And if nobody is ready to do even that, then the dead body must be buried without ghusl or tayammum.

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Question:

Does the decision and choice of method of preparing the body (in terms of giving it ghusl, tayammum, or neither) rest upon the shoulders of the Jamaat, or the deceased's guardian (wali), or the washers of the dead body?

Answer:

If the wali can give the ghusl (directly or by delegating it to someone else [like the Jamaat]), then he must be allowed to do this obligatory act. If he cannot but somebody else can, then the latter must perform it. As long as there is someone who is not fearful and is ready to give ghusl, tayammum is not valid.

Question:

In the Third World more than other places, as poor workers can silently transmit coronavirus to the elderly, doctors have advised that no ghusl or tayammum be given to a dead body infected with coronavirus. As there is a shortage of test kits, disinfectants, places where ghusl can be given, and PPE for the washers of the dead body, is it allowed, in these circumstances, to bury coronavirus cases (confirmed and suspected) without ghusl or tayammum to avoid even a 1% risk of transmission?

Answer:

Giving ghusl – or tayammum in case ghusl is not possible – to a Muslim dead body is the duty of the wali in the first instance. If the wali is unavailable or unable to perform it, then it becomes the duty of others as a collective obligation (wajib kifa'i). If the advice of doctors causes the wali to be fearful of being harmed, then there is no obligation on him. If others are also fearful, then the obligation is removed from them as well. However, if there is someone who is not fearful, then that person must perform this divine duty.

Question:

If the Ghusl-Kafan Committee adopts a path of caution and only allows tayammum to be given to a dead body infected with coronavirus, or if it does not even allow tayammum, what is the duty of the believer who is confident that there is no rational harm in giving ghusl or tayammum while wearing PPE?

Answer:

If he can give ghusl to the dead body elsewhere, or if not ghusl then at least tayammum, then his duty is not removed [and he must give the dead body ghusl / tayammum elsewhere].

Question:

If the health authorities do not allow ghusl or tayammum to be given to a coronavirus infected body except over a body bag, would giving ghusl or tayammum over the body bag be valid, or is the duty to perform ghusl / tayammum removed?

Answer:

The duty to perform ghusl is removed, but if it is possible to perform tayammum on the face and both hands of the dead body, albeit over the body bag,¹ then it must be performed.

Question:

If due to health precautions it is not possible to apply camphor to all seven areas of a coronavirus infected body placed inside a body bag, is it allowed to apply camphor to only the tayammum areas (i.e. the forehead and the palms of both hands), leaving out the two knees and two big toes?

Answer:

Yes [it is allowed].

Question:

In congregational prayers for a dead body, if based on health advice there is a gap of two meters between the dead body and the imam and the followers in the prayer, does this gap invalidate the congregational prayer?

Answer:

There is no problem.

Question:

With regard to the prayer for a dead body (salat al-mayyit), a gap may be created between some of those performing the prayer. How far from the dead body can the people stand before they have to make the intention of performing the prayer on their own (furada)?

Answer:

The people performing furada prayers must not stand so far away from the dead body that it cannot be called 'standing near' it.²

Question:

With government restrictions imposed on frequenting public places, people purchase and stockpile basic goods. How much of which goods and for what period of time is it allowed to purchase and store such goods, and when would one be considered culpable of unlawful hoarding?

¹ Based on the latest response from His Eminence's Najaf Office, if a person who while wearing gloves gives tayammum to a dead body that is covered with thin plastic, the tayammum is valid. However, a thick body bag which prevents one from identifying the tayammum parts of the dead body invalidates the tayammum.

² The following are some additional rulings regarding salat al-mayyit as stated by His Eminence in *Islamic Laws*:

- Salat al-mayyit must be performed after kafan has been completed and before burial.
- If for whatever reason salat al-mayyit is not performed before burial, then it can be performed after burial at the grave-side with the intention of raja' (i.e. in the hope that it is desired by Allah) before the body decomposes. In such a situation, the necessary conditions for this prayer, such as facing qibla, must be observed.

Answer:

What is mentioned above is not considered unlawful hoarding.

Question:

Some scholars prescribe certain types of treatment based on traditions from the Infallibles (as) on staying safe from affliction by coronavirus and recovering from it if one is afflicted. What is the duty of believers in this regard?

Answer:

The duty of believers is to follow health guidelines based on recommendations by medical experts and to refer to them for treatment. Furthermore, believers should not forget to recite duas and to do tawassul to God Almighty by the right of His Pure Awliya for averting this affliction and for the recovery of those afflicted.

Was salamu alaykum wa rahmatul lahi wa barakatuh.

[Stamped with the Seal of His Eminence's Najaf Office]

20 Sha'ban 1441 [14 April 2020]