

Salient Points to Observe in Mass Ceremonies during the COVID-19 Pandemic

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Received August 05, 2020; Accepted August 14, 2020; Online Published August 20, 2020

Keywords: COVID-19, SARS-CoV-2, Mass gathering, Muharram, Ceremony.

Dear Editor

In many countries of the world, isolation and adherence to health protocols are the main strategy for containing the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic. A review of the practices of countries that have successfully controlled the COVID-19 crisis shows that, in the field of prevention and health, breaking the chain of human-to-human transmission is a key strategy and a factor for success. In this regard, one of the constant messages of health officials and the World Health Organization (WHO) is that large gatherings during the outbreak of COVID-19, should be prevented because SARS-CoV-2 is a highly contagious, airborne virus.^{1,2}

However, peaceful and non-peaceful human gatherings and ceremonies have taken place during the COVID-19 crisis around the world. The most important of these are the street rallies and protests in the United States held in recent months during the COVID-19 crisis. There have also been reports of popular protests against governments in countries such as Thailand, Hong Kong, Lebanon, etc., that are still struggling with the COVID-19 crisis. The Hajj 2020 (1441H) was held in Saudi Arabia during the crisis, with a limited number of domestic pilgrims, in line with strict public health measures and protocols. The prayers and celebrations of Eid al-Adha were held all over the world, especially in Muslim countries, including Turkey and the Arab countries.

These are all examples of human gatherings and ceremonies all over the world during COVID-19 pandemic.

In about ten days, the mourning and commemoration ceremony of Ashura, the tenth day of Muharram, will begin. Muharram, the first month of the Islamic lunar calendar, begins on August 20th this year. This religious ceremony is held by Muslims all over the world and especially by the Shiites (Figure-1) which are about 340 million of the world's 1.9 billion Muslim population.³

The Ashura ceremony is held every year by Muslims, especially Shiites around the world, and coincides with the COVID-19 crisis in 2020. Holding this ceremony every year requires the gathering and participation of millions of people in mosques and shrines. The COVID-19 pandemic prohibits conducting this ceremony as it has been previously held; therefore, arrangements must be made to execute this ceremony in a healthy fashion. Here are some recommendations to help Muslims communities decide how best to keep their communities safe and to prevent the spread of COVID-19:

- Provide standard personal protective equipment, including face masks and shields, etc. for all participants in the ceremony.
- Stay at least 6 feet, or about 2 arms' lengths, away from others and do not share or touch the same items.
- Provide physical guides, such as tape marks on floors and walkways; and signs on walls and streets, to ensure that participants maintain the proper distance from others.
- Provide ample seating and viewing areas.

- Gatherings that take place outside or in larger structures must have good airflow.
- Hold ceremonies outdoors.
- Eliminate mourning rallies.
- Take steps to limit the size of ceremonies and gatherings.
- Hold ceremonies at a time when the volume of vehicle and foot traffic in the city and other passages is less.
- Hold ceremonies for short durations (one hour a day).
- Stay home if you are sick or have had close contact with someone who is sick with COVID-19.
- Stay home if you are in a high-risk category - i.e. older populations and those with cardiac and respiratory diseases.
- Recommend a 14-day quarantine before returning to work for people suspected of having COVID-19 at the end of the ceremony.
- Provide adequate supplies to support healthy hygiene behaviors, including soap, clean water, hand sanitizer with at least 60% alcohol, tissues, and no-touch trash cans.
- Ensure safe and correct use and storage of disinfectants, including securely storing products away from children during ceremonies.
- Advise people to avoid eating, drinking and touching their eyes and nose during the ceremony
- Do not serve food at ceremonies or gatherings. Instead, hand out food in pre-packaged boxes with disposable utensils.
- Avoid sharing food, containers, and utensils.
- Provide equipment to measure fever and other symptoms before attending the ceremony
- Hold local ceremonies to reduce or eliminate travel to the ceremony (e.g. a travel ban on Ashura day)
- Raise the level of awareness and attitude of the people through education distributed in standard and social media, especially television, about restrictions on this ceremony and the symptoms of COVID-19.
- Hold ceremonies virtually (e.g., by communicating online, or by video conferencing or television).



Figure-1. Muharram (Ashura) ceremony in Iran, USA, UK in 2019.

In addition to the public who attend the ceremony, those responsible for maintaining security and public order, such as police personnel, are also at risk and must comply with health protocols.

Given the severity and the easy transmission of the disease there are at least two possible outcomes for those hosting the Ashura ceremony. On the one hand, observing all health protocols and mentioned recommendations will prevent an increase in COVID-19 in these countries, especially Iran. On the other hand, failure to observe these protocols and hold them in each year's protocols, will increase the prevalence of COVID-19.

It is also important to mention that according to the spiritual beliefs of Shiites in Iran and the world, holding such religious ceremonies strengthens their spiritual health. Improving a person's spiritual health has been shown to improve their physical health and increase the strength of

their immune system.^{4,5} However, as spiritual health, also requires physical health, this ceremony should be held in compliance with all health protocols during the pandemic.

Conflict of Interests

None.

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