

**THE TABLIGHI JAMAAT RESPONSE TO THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC:
A LIVING HADITH PERSPECTIVE**

Ahmad Asroni¹

ahmad.asroni@uii.ac.id

Abstract

This article examines the response of the Tablighi Jamaat to the COVID-19 pandemic through the lens of living hadith. This study adopts a qualitative research design to explore and analyze the response of the Tablighi Jamaat to the COVID-19 pandemic from a theological and practical perspective, grounded in the concept of living hadith. The data for this study is collected through some methods: interview, participant observation, and document analysis. There are several findings in this research. First, the Tablighi Jamaat is an Islamic movement that frequently draws on hadith as a foundational reference in its activities, seeking to implement these teachings in everyday life. The movement generally does not engage in discussions concerning the authenticity of hadith and actively avoids theological debates. Second, the diverse responses of Tablighi Jamaat members to the COVID-19 pandemic are deeply influenced by their theological beliefs. These beliefs are shaped by their interpretations and understandings of religious texts. Members interpret these texts in a literal/textual manner, particularly hadiths related to *tho'un* (plague or contagious diseases). Third, for some members of the Tablighi Jamaat, the hadiths concerning *tho'un* are perceived solely as warnings and trials from Allah, without reference to scientific perspectives, nor do they align with the implementation of public health protocols.

Keywords: COVID-19 pandemic, living hadith, theological perspectives, *tho'un*

¹ Dosen Universitas Islam Indonesia

A. INTRODUCTION

The international community is currently experiencing a profound wave of fear and anxiety due to the widespread threat of COVID-19, a pandemic that has affected nearly every corner of the globe and is estimated to have claimed hundreds of hundreds of thousands. Data from Worldometers, as of July 2020, indicates that the COVID-19 virus has spread to 213 countries, with the total number of confirmed cases reaching 12,846,931. Of these, 567,731 individuals have succumbed to the virus, while 7,483,093 have recovered.²

Given the rapid spread of the virus and the significant number of fatalities, it is not surprising that the World Health Organization (WHO), the United Nations agency responsible for global health, has classified the situation as a global pandemic. In response, many countries, including Indonesia, have implemented a variety of public health policies aimed at curbing the virus's transmission. These measures have included lockdowns (regional isolation/quarantine), Work from Home (WFH) policies, physical/social distancing, and public health campaigns promoting the use of masks, handwashing, and other preventive practices. Furthermore, numerous Islamic organizations have issued appeals and fatwas urging Muslim communities to adhere to government guidelines and health protocols related to COVID-19. For example, the Indonesian Ulema Council (MUI) issued Fatwa No. 18 of 2020 concerning the Guidelines for Handling Muslim COVID-19 Victims, Fatwa No. 14 of 2020 on Worship Practices during the COVID-19 Pandemic, Fatwa No. 28 of 2020 regarding the Guidelines for Takbir and Eid Prayers during COVID-19, and Fatwa No. 31 of 2020 on the Conduct of Friday Prayers and Congregational Prayers to Prevent COVID-19 Transmission.

However, these public health policies and religious directives have not been universally accepted by the public, including religious communities and Muslims. A significant portion of the population has demonstrated a lack of adherence to these guidelines. For instance, numerous individuals continued to hold wedding receptions during the pandemic, organized large religious

² <https://www.worldometers.info/coronavirus/#countries>. Accessed on 12 November 2022.

gatherings (such as Friday prayers and church services), failed to wear masks in public spaces, and persisted in traveling for the Eid holiday (*mudik*). Ironically, some individuals and groups have interpreted the government's recommendation to conduct worship at home as a deliberate attempt to distance Muslims from mosques. They contend that Muslims need not fear COVID-19, as life and death are preordained by Allah, and thus the virus would not affect them unless their time had come.

This negative reception to public health recommendations is particularly concerning when voiced by Islamic organizations that are tasked with educating their followers about the dangers posed by COVID-19. Among the groups that have downplayed the threat of the virus is the Tablighi Jamaat, which, for its part, insisted on holding the 2020 World Ulama Ijtima (Global Assembly of Islamic Scholars) from March 19-22, 2020, in Bontomarannu, Gowa, South Sulawesi. While the event was ultimately shortened (commencing and concluding on March 19), the gathering resulted in numerous COVID-19 cases, with one participant from Balikpapan, East Kalimantan, later dying from the virus. News reports from various regions that had sent delegates —particularly from Kalimantan and Java (Banyumas, Surakarta, Wonosobo)— documented the emerging health crisis.³

Additionally, one of the Tablighi Jamaat centers in Java, the Al-Fattah Islamic Boarding School in Temboro, Magetan, East Java, became a significant COVID-19 hotspot. The outbreak was traced back to 43 students from Malaysia who tested positive for the virus after returning from Temboro, prompting the East Java provincial government to send 1,000 rapid test kits to the facility.⁴

The high incidence of COVID-19 infections among Tablighi Jamaat members can be partly explained by their routine disregard for social/physical distancing measures. Their activities, including prayers, eating, and sleeping, are typically conducted in proximity without maintaining physical distance. The noncompliance of certain Tablighi Jamaat members with health protocols

³[https://regional.kompas.com/read/2020/04/20/06200001/sederet-fakta-penyebaran-corona-dari-kluster-Jamaah Tabligh-ulama-gowa](https://regional.kompas.com/read/2020/04/20/06200001/sederet-fakta-penyebaran-corona-dari-kluster-Jamaah%20Tabligh-ulama-gowa). Accessed on 12 November 2022.

⁴<https://news.detik.com/berita-jawa-timur/d-4984555/temboro-magetan-jadi-kluster-corona-pemprov-jatim-kirim-1000-rapid-test/>. Accessed on 12 November 2022.

designed to mitigate the spread of COVID-19 is believed to be influenced by their theological interpretations. Like other Muslim groups, their theological perspectives are rooted in their interpretation of religious texts, particularly the Qur'an and hadith.

Considering these circumstances, this article seeks to examine the reception and interpretation of the hadiths related to *tho'un* (the plague or contagious diseases) within the Tablighi Jamaat as a means of understanding their response to the COVID-19 pandemic. *Living hadith* refers to the study of social and religious practices, traditions, rituals, or behaviors that are informed by and rooted in the teachings of the Prophet Muhammad, as articulated in hadith literature.⁵ It can be defined as a socio-religious phenomenon in which the behaviors of a community are shaped by their understanding and application of prophetic hadith.⁶

B. RESEARCH METHOD

This study adopts a qualitative research design to explore and analyze the response of the Tablighi Jamaat to the COVID-19 pandemic from a theological and practical perspective, grounded in the concept of living hadith. The research focuses on the interpretation and application of Hadith within the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, specifically how Tablighi Jamaat members interpret and respond to the pandemic based on their religious teachings.

The data for this study is collected through the following methods: First, interview. Semi-structured interviews are conducted with members of the Tablighi Jamaat, including activists and leaders. The interviews focus on personal experiences, theological reasoning, and their application of hadith during the COVID-19 pandemic. Key informants may include scholars or senior leaders within the Tablighi Jamaat who are involved in the decision-making process regarding public health measures during the COVID-19 pandemic.

⁵ Syaefuddin Zuhri Qudsy "Living Hadis: Genealogi, Teori, dan Aplikasi", *Jurnal Living Hadis*, Volume 1, Nomor 1, Mei 2016, p. 182.

⁶ M. Alfatih Suryadilaga, *Metodologi Penelitian Living Qur'an dan Hadis*, (Yogyakarta: Teras, 2007).

Second, participant observation. The researcher observes Tablighi Jamaat gatherings to understand the practices and dynamics of how religious beliefs are enacted during the COVID-19 pandemic. Observations are documented regarding adherence to COVID-19 health protocols, such as social distancing, mask-wearing, and other preventive measures.

Third, document analysis. The researcher examines relevant documents such as religious publications, newsletters, or circulars released by the Tablighi Jamaat regarding the pandemic. This will also include analyzing religious texts and hadith related to disease, punishment, and divine trials, particularly those cited by the Tablighi Jamaat to justify or refute public health measures.

Data Analysis is conducted through the following steps. First, thematic analysis. The collected data is analyzed using thematic analysis. This involves identifying key themes and patterns that emerge from the interviews, observations, and document analysis related to how the Tablighi Jamaat views and responds to the COVID-19 pandemic. Second, textual analysis. In interpreting the hadith and religious texts, a textual analysis approach is used to explore how specific hadiths are applied in the context of public health during the pandemic. Attention is given to interpretations of hadith that mention disease, illness, trials, and tests from Allah. Third, the analysis focuses on identifying different theological interpretations and how they shape the community's actions and attitudes towards COVID-19.

C. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

1. Profile of Tablighi Jamaat

The Tablighi Jamaat is one of the transnational Islamic movements with many members scattered across various parts of the world. The Tablighi Jamaat is a missionary movement aimed at returning to the pure teachings of Islam. The activities of this group are not limited to their own community. The primary goal of this movement is to awaken the spiritual soul within each individual Muslim, both on an individual level and in their social life.

This movement was founded by Sheikh Maulana Muhammad Ilyas Kandhlawi, a follower of the Hanafi school, in Mewat, India, in 1926. His full

name was Muhammad Ilyas bin Muhammad Ismail Al-Hanafi Ad-Diyubandi Al-Jisyti Al-Kandahlawi, later Ad-Dihlawi. Al-Kandahlawi refers to Kandahla, a village in the Sahranpur region, while Ad-Dihlawi is linked to Delhi (New Delhi), the capital of India. This is where the Tablighi Jamaat movement's headquarters is located. Ad-Diyubandi refers to the Darul Uloom Deoband, the largest madrasa for Hanafi followers in the Indian subcontinent. Al-Jisyti is associated with the Al-Jisytiyah Sufi order, founded by Mu'inuddin Al-Jisyti. Muhammad Ilyas was born in 1303 AH under the name Akhtar Ilyas and passed away on 11 Rajab 1363 AH.

Sheikh Maulana Muhammad Ilyas came from a family that deeply valued knowledge and was highly religious. His father, Muhammad Ismail, was a devoted and ascetic Sufi practitioner, who dedicated his entire life to worshipping Allah. This devotion extended to his brothers and even to Muhammad Ilyas himself. Muhammad Ilyas memorized the Quran at a very young age. He studied under his older brother, Muhammad Yahya, and attended the Madrasa Madhahirul Ulum in Saharanpur. In 1326 AH, Muhammad Ilyas went to Deoband to study the hadith books *Jami' al-Sahih al-Turmudzi* and *Sahih al-Bukhari* with a scholar named Mahmud Hasan. He then continued his studies of the *Kutub al-Sittah* with his brother Muhammad Yahya. After completing his education in Deoband in 1328 AH, Muhammad Ilyas was assigned to teach at Madrasa Madhahirul Ulum.⁷

Linguistically, Tablighi Jamaat means "Group of Preachers" (in Urdu: بلّیغی جماعت, and in Arabic: جماعة التبلیغ). The name Tablighi Jamaat was given by the public due to the group's missionary activities. The movement itself did not have a specific name. In fact, its founder, Sheikh Maulana Muhammad Ilyas, stated: "If I were to name this movement, I would call it the 'Movement of Faith'." His life was dedicated to Islamic propagation when Maulana Ilyas performed his second pilgrimage in 1926. Officially, Tablighi is not an organization, but a Muslim movement aimed at encouraging Muslims to practice their religion.⁸

⁷Uswatun Hasanah, "Jama'ah Tabligh I (Sejarah Dan Perkembangan)", *Jurnal El-Afkar*, Vol. 6 Nomor 1, Januari- Juni 2017, p. 2-3.

⁸Hardi Putra Wirman, "Fenomena Jamaah Tabligh", *Al-Hurriyah*, Vol. 13, No. 2, Juli-Desember 2012, p. 35.

In less than two decades, Tablighi Jamaat successfully spread across South Asia. Under the leadership of Maulana Yusuf, the second Amir and son of Sheikh Maulana Muhammad Ilyas, the movement expanded its activities in 1946. Within 20 years, its reach extended to Southwest Asia, Southeast Asia, Africa, Europe, and North America. Once established in a country, the Tablighi Jamaat would integrate with the local community. Though the first Western country to be reached by the movement was the United States, their focus was the United Kingdom, where there was a large population of South Asians arriving in the 1960s and 1970s.⁹

The background of the establishment of Tablighi Jamaat cannot be separated from the social, political, and religious conditions in India at that time. Muslims in India were experiencing a degradation of faith and morals, living far from the Islamic law. There was widespread injustice and *bid'ah* (heresy), and missionaries from England, the colonial rulers, were actively engaged in proselytizing and conversion efforts. These missionaries were supported by the British government with significant funding and often criticized and vilified the Prophet Muhammad. The Muslim community in India was also very poor. Concerned about the situation, Sheikh Maulana Muhammad Ilyas was inspired to form a missionary delegation¹⁰ and instruct it to villages for outreach (*jawlah*), visiting house to house.¹¹

When Sheikh Maulana Muhammad Ilyas traveled to the Hijaz and Saudi Arabia for Hajj, he took the opportunity to meet with various scholars to discuss the best way to carry out Islamic preaching in India. Even while in Medina, he spent three consecutive nights in the Prophet's Mosque, fasting, praying, and seeking Allah's guidance for the best path to establish Islamic law.

Sheikh Maulana Muhammad Ilyas concluded that the existence and spread of a missionary movement can only succeed if the people involved are truly

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 36.

¹⁰ Khusniati Rofiah, *Dakwah Jamaah Tabligh dan Eksistensinya di Mata Masyarakat*, (Ponorogo: STAIN Ponorogo Press), p. 48-49.

¹¹ Sayyid Abul Hasan al-Nadwi, *Riwayat Hidup dan Usaha Dakwah Maulana Muhammad Ilyas*, p. 40.

willing and sincere, sacrificing for the cause of propagation, seeking Allah's pleasure alone, and not relying on any other party. As mentioned earlier, Sheikh Maulana Ilyas called out a slogan, "*Aye Musalmano! Musalman bano*" in Urdu, meaning "O Muslims! Be complete in your faith." This call for preaching initiated a movement known as Tablighi Jamaat.¹²

Starting from his birthplace, Mewat, the missionary efforts gradually spread to other regions in India and the Middle East. In port cities, many members were sent out to stay and continue their work in targeted locations. After the movement took shape, members of Tablighi Jamaat expanded their missionary networks to several countries, including Indonesia.¹³

2. Khuruj as a Phenomenon of Living Hadith

One of the primary doctrines and activities of Tablighi Jamaat is *khuruj fi sabilillah*. *Khuruj fi sabilillah* refers to the concept within Tablighi Jamaat aimed at encouraging Muslims to dedicate specific periods of time to engage in *khuruj* (going out) for the purpose of propagating the message of Allah. At least three days, seven days, and forty days per year are intentionally set aside for this purpose. When compared to time spent at home and earning a living, the time dedicated to *khuruj* is relatively greater, although members are aware that family and livelihood remain paramount. Hence, when a husband embarks on *khuruj*, his wife and children generally accept and understand his commitment.¹⁴

Khuruj is conducted collectively, where a leader, or *amir*, is appointed to guide the group. Additionally, there are other key roles in the group, such as *mutakallim* (the speaker), *aalil* (guide or host), and *makmūr* (the preacher). The decisions regarding the structure of the groups, the people assigned to roles, and the target regions are made during discussions.¹⁵ Participants in *khuruj* are

¹² Kholid, S, "Mengenal Jamaah Tabligh", *Majalah As-Sunnah*, 2003, Edisi 01/VII.

¹³ Abdul Hakim Wahid dan Ahmad Muhaimin, "Pemahaman Jamaah Tabligh terhadap Ayat-ayat Dakwah dan Implikasinya terhadap Konsep *Khuruj* dan *Jawlah*", *Ilmu Ushuluddin*, Volume 7, Nomor 1, Januari 2020, p. 4.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 131.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 5.

prohibited from leaving the mosque or *musholla* (prayer places) without the permission of the *amir* (leader).¹⁶

Khuruj is a mandatory activity for Tablighi Jamaat members. It is considered essential for them to regularly go out and invite others to goodness and to remind them of Allah's punishment. For those active in da'wah, time must be dedicated optimally to the propagation of the faith. *Khuruj* is not merely about leaving one's home, but it is specifically *khuruj fi sabilillah*—in the way of Allah. This is why Tablighi Jamaat members are frequently seen traveling from one house to another, one village to another, and even from one country to another.

Khuruj is a form of preaching that involves significant time investment, often lasting for days or even months. For Tablighi Jamaat activists, time spent inviting oneself, family, and others to the path of Allah is considered more valuable than time spent on worldly affairs and leisure. As a result, they often embark on *khuruj*, leaving behind their families and personal affairs.¹⁷ During *khuruj*, even family matters should not interrupt the mission. As stated by K.H. Uzairon, the head of Al-Fattah Islamic Boarding School in Temboro, Magetan, during one of his sermons, seventy-five angels are said to protect the family during the *khuruj*.¹⁸

The theological basis for *khuruj* is derived from several verses of the Qur'an¹⁹ and hadith. For instance, in Surah Āli 'Imrān [3]: 110, it is mentioned: "You are the best of peoples ever raised up for mankind; you enjoin what is right, forbid what is wrong, and believe in Allah..."

Sheikh Maulana Muhammad Ilyas interprets the word *ukhrijat* in this verse as a directive to engage in meaningful efforts, such as organizing *khuruj*.

¹⁶ Syafi'i Mufid, *Perkembangan Paham Keagamaan Transnasional Indonesia* (Jakarta: Puslitbang Kehidupan Keagamaan, Balitbang Diklat Kementerian Agama, 2011), p. 164-165.

¹⁷ Umdatul Hasanah, "Keberadaan Kelompok Jamaah Tabligh dan Reaksi Masyarakat (Perspektif Teori Penyebaran Informasi dan Pengaruh)", *Indo-Islamika*, Volume 4, Nomor 1, Januari-Juni, 2014, p. 28-29.

¹⁸ Nurul Hasanah, "*Khuruj fi Sabilillah* oleh Jamaah Tabligh dan Implikasinya terhadap Keharmonisan Rumah Tangga Perspektif Teori Konstruksi Sosial" (Studi terhadap Pandangan Istri Jamaah Tabligh di Kabupaten Hulu Sungai Utara Kalimantan Selatan), *Thesis*, (Malang: UIN Maulana Malik Ibrahim, 2018), p. 41.

¹⁹ Abdul Hakim Wahid dan Ahmad Muhaimin, "Pemahaman Jamaah Tabligh terhadap Ayat-ayat Dakwah dan Implikasinya terhadap Konsep *Khuruj* dan *Jawlah*", p. 2-3.

The task of Muslims, according to Ilyas, is to promote what is good and forbid what is evil, and through such efforts, faith will grow stronger. Without such engagement, faith will remain stagnant. Therefore, it is essential that we have the intention to derive meaningful benefits from it.²⁰

In addition to the Qur'an, *khuruj* is also rooted in the hadith. One of the hadiths of Bukhari says: "Convey from me, even if it is only one verse." Another hadith, found in Sahih Muslim, further supports this concept: "Whoever among you sees an evil, let him change it with his hand; if he is unable, then with his tongue; and if he is unable, then with his heart, and that is the weakest of faith." (Muslim).

3. The COVID-19 Pandemic and Tablighi Jamaat's Interpretation of the Hadith on *Tho'un* (Contagious Plague)

It is undeniable that many members of Tablighi Jamaat are scientists and come from educated backgrounds, including professors, doctors, nurses, police, and military personnel. However, the presence of academics within Tablighi Jamaat does not necessarily make the movement more scientific. This is because the knowledge paradigm within Tablighi Jamaat primarily emphasizes religious knowledge and the virtues of good deeds, rather than a scientific approach. Therefore, it is common to see disparities or inconsistency in the response within Tablighi Jamaat itself. Some members, particularly those in scientific fields, strictly adhere to health protocols, while others may show indifference or neglect to them.

Within the Tablighi Jamaat community, there is a prevailing narrative that downplays the severity of COVID-19. For instance, one doctor among the members described that, out of many patients suspected of having COVID-19, only one was confirmed positive, suggesting that COVID-19 is not as dangerous as reported.²¹ One member of Tablighi Jamaat, a health professional who had previously tested positive for COVID-19, likened the virus to a "common flu" rather than a "plague" like those that afflicted people during the time of Prophet

²⁰ Maulana Muhammad Mansyur dan Mufti Rusyn Syah Qasimi, *Mutiara Nasihat Maulana Ilyas dan Maulana Yusuf*, (Bandung: Pustaka Ramadhan, 2004), p.1.

²¹ Interview with Prof. Sumardi, board of Surakarta Tablighi Jamaat.

Muhammad. Covid-19 does not erode the physical body in the same way as seen in the leprosy epidemic.²²

Furthermore, some members have propagated conspiracy theories, claiming that COVID-19 was deliberately created for global business interests, potentially linked to trade wars or the sale of vaccines. As a result, there has been a dialectical tension between following scientific protocols, such as those issued by the government, and adopting a more liberated stance because COVID-19 is still viewed as a complex phenomenon that is not entirely understood. This has led to divergent attitudes among Tablighi Jamaat members, with some still in denial about the existence and threat of the virus.

The adherence of Tablighi Jamaat members to health protocols is more motivated by religious obedience to *ulil amri* (government) than by scientific awareness. The cancellation of World Ulama Ijtima (Global Assembly of Islamic Scholars) in Gowa, South Sulawesi, following health screening procedures, and the implementation of health protocols by Tablighi Jamaat, are seen as acts of compliance with government regulations rather than a response to the perceived threat of the pandemic. When in public spaces, Tablighi Jamaat members align with societal expectations for health protocols. However, within their internal gatherings, health protocols are sometimes loosened. This dual standard reflects an inconsistency in Tablighi Jamaat's approach to the pandemic.

The diverse responses among Tablighi Jamaat members to the COVID-19 pandemic are influenced by their theological beliefs. These beliefs are based on their interpretations of religious texts. Members tend to interpret the religious texts literally, avoiding critical discussions of these texts. For example, the hadith stating that "there is no contagion..." (Sahih Bukhari 5278) is understood by Tablighi Jamaat as indicating that infectious diseases only spread by the will of Allah.

For some members of Tablighi Jamaat, hadiths about *tho'un* (plague) are merely seen as warnings and tests from Allah, without linking them to scientific perspectives or integrating health protocols in their response. This literal

²² Interview with Ustad Da'im, board of Yogyakarta Tablighi Jamaat.

interpretation is evident in a hadith of Bukhari-Muslim: “The plague (*tho'un*) is a form of punishment from Allah. If you hear of it in a land, do not enter it; and if it befalls a land where you are, do not flee from it”.

In the perspective of Ustaz Yasir, a senior Tablighi Jamaat activist, COVID-19 is viewed as a test of faith. According to him: "COVID-19, or whatever its name, Muslims must believe in it because it is created by Allah. Everything that Allah sends down, including the coronavirus, is a test of faith. This virus, like any other test, is meant to strengthen our faith. We must remain steadfast and obedient to Allah, continuing to perform good deeds such as congregational prayer, dhikr, and reading the Qur'an."²³ Tablighi Jamaat interprets the hadith on *tho'un* literally. Even if they follow health protocols, it is not due to the government's policies or medical advice, but because the hadiths explicitly encourage such behavior.

D. CONCLUSION

Based on the above discussion, this study concludes that: First, Tablighi Jamaat is an Islamic movement that frequently bases its activities on hadiths, implementing them in everyday life. They generally avoid engaging in debates about the quality of hadiths. Second, the diverse responses of Tablighi Jamaat members to the COVID-19 pandemic are greatly influenced by their theological beliefs, which are grounded in their interpretations of religious texts. They tend to interpret these texts literally, including hadiths about *tho'un* (contagious diseases). Third, for some Tablighi Jamaat members, the hadiths on *tho'un* are seen primarily as warnings and tests from Allah, without linking them to scientific perspectives or implementing health protocols.

²³ Interview with Ustad Yasir, a senior activist of Yogyakarta Tablighi Jamaat.

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