



## Original Research

# The Controversy over the Hadith on Martyrs in the Context of COVID-19 Corpse Handling

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**Received:** 11/22/2023; **Accepted:** 01/28/2024; **Published:** 04/17/2024

**Abstract:** The interpretation of the hadith on martyrs due to death by plague had sparked controversy. According to the fatwā (legal advice) of Indonesian Council of Ulama (MUI), Muslims who had died of COVID-19 were considered martyrs. While major Islamic organizations such as the Muhammadiyah and Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) supported the fatwā, others argued that not all Muslim COVID-19 victims could be easily given the special status of martyrs. This different understanding of the hadith had complicated efforts to contain the spread of COVID-19 in Indonesia. This qualitative research aimed to delineate the debate between two opposing positions in society over how the hadith should be understood, as well as to elucidate the grounds behind the disagreement. The data in this article was derived from interviews, taking into account the respondents' characteristics, with the Muhammadiyah and NU with differing opinions on the hadith. This research found that a gap in understanding between religious groups and social classes in society has become a significant factor in determining how the hadith on martyrs was understood. Local religious leaders had a significant influence on people's refusal to handle corpses under COVID-19 protocols. In addition, textual interpretation of fiqh (Islamic laws) had created uncertainty when it came to managing the dead bodies of COVID-19 victims, particularly among traditionalist Muslims. This article suggests that a region-based comprehension of the hadith on martyrs was necessary in order to formulate effective policies in response to the COVID-19 pandemic.

**Keywords:** *Understanding of Hadith, Martyrdom, COVID-19, Corpse Handling, Religious Ideology*

## Introduction

Controversy over how the dead bodies of persons who had been confirmed or suspected with COVID-19 should be treated arose with a different interpretation of the hadith on martyrs. At least two groups in society were identified as having a relatively different understanding of the hadith, which had a powerful impact on their attitudes and actions. The first group unquestioningly and straightforwardly accepted the meaning of the hadith, being championed by modernist Muslims who were adaptive toward changes. The second group adopted a negotiated stance in which it understood the hadith in the same way as the first group but denied its application to the dead bodies alleged of being deliberately diagnosed

with COVID-19. It was reported that such a group snatched the corpse of a COVID-19 patient and refused to bury it under COVID-19 protocols. The earliest case of corpse snatching was conducted by the people of Rowogempol, Pasuruan, East Java, simultaneously followed by others in numerous regions, including Gresik, Brebes, Jenepono (Makassar), Malang, Sidoarjo, Probolinggo, and Maluku. As Sukanto and Panca Parulian (2021) said, misreading of the documents issued by the government and religious organizations had complicated all-out efforts to handle COVID-19.

Studies on texts had been so far leaning toward reconstructing meaning linkages based on facts (Mantzavinos 2014), cultures (Sulaiman 2018), and times (Narechania 2020). First, empirical heterogeneity of cultures resulted in the texts being interpreted differently by the people (Sulaiman 2018). By the time a text message reached its intended readers, the background of knowledge, culture, and times has shifted (Narechania 2020). Second, controversy over textual interpretation had an effect on legal provisions that were textually distinct from those based on *maqāṣid al-syarī'ah* (the objectives of Sharia) (Khoiruddin, Rohimin, and Athoillah 2019), justice and gender equality (Aguilar and Ahmad 2020), and even radicalism (Dowson 2021). Third, controversy in interpretation as a result of textual analysis methods had altered the subject of fiqh and contradicted the opinions of the majority of Muslim scholars. Fourth, polemical interpretation had been influenced by the interaction of culture, information flow, and knowledge, all of which could lead to divergent understandings (Murata 2007). This tendency suggested how variances in textual interpretation had an impact on the responses to the pandemic was an aspect that had not been well explored, let alone the texts provided as a legal source for fatwas during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Studies on martyrdom tended to focus on two main things. The first, they highlight the concept of martyrdom as understood by the Shi'ite sect, and second, they dwelt on the handling of corpses classified as martyrs. The Shi'ite sect maintained that martyrdom applied not only to those who were killed on the battlefield, but also to those who were died of external causes, such as drowning, building collapses, stomach ailments, or plague (*tā'un*). However, the difference was that the *Shi'ite* tradition puts emphasis on the martyrdom of righteous imams. According to the fatwas of MUI No. 18/2020 and Darul Ifta' of Egypt, as well as the decisions of NU Muslim scholars and Muhammadiyah (Jia 2020), the COVID-19 pandemic could be categorized as a plague, which was one of the causes of martyrdom. Muslims who had died of COVID-19 were classified as martyrs of the Afterlife. The classical Islamic book of *Ḥāsyiah l'ānah At-Ṭālibīn* states that martyrs of the Afterlife would receive the same reward as Muslims who were slain in war. The bodies of martyrs of the Afterlife were treated in the same manner as those of common Muslims. That was, the corpses should be washed up, veiled, prayed for, and buried.

The purpose of this current research is to fill the gap in the previous studies that pay less attention to the dimensions of pandemic-related text comprehension. This article demonstrates, in particular, that the debate over the interpretation of the hadith on martyrs

in favor of public benefits during the pandemic is an essential feature that concerns various community groups. Accordingly, three questions will be addressed in this study: (a) what is the type of controversy surrounding the interpretation of the hadith on martyrs for the sake of public benefits during the pandemic; (b) what are the factors that underlie the controversy over the text among different community groups; and (c) how the controversy affects public literacy. The answers to these three questions help to make sense of the rationale for accepting or rejecting the policies concerning COVID-19 corpse handling during the pandemic.

This article explores the controversy surrounding the interpretation of the hadith on martyrs as contained in the guidance for handling corpses with COVID-19 protocols. It started from the argument that each group has a distinct ideological basis and religious tradition having an impact on their respective responses to the pandemic, most notably their attitudes toward the treatment of COVID-19 corpses. This disparity in responses results from varying social perceptions according to agency and figures that exert influence on them. It has also triggered numerous problems in regard to how COVID-19 corpses are handled.

## Text Interpretation

In a linguistic discourse, text interpretation refers to a process of deriving meanings and answers from the context (Jia 2020; Bailin and Grafstein 2016; Mohamad et al. 2015). Understanding a text entails not only a linguistic activity, but also a social process involving the community, such as the interpretation of the Qur'an and Hadith. Borrowing the theories of Peter Berger and Thomas Luckman (Malik 2020), the texts of the Qur'an and Hadith are interpreted to serve not only as a guidance and a bridge between God and human beings but also to go beyond the boundaries of their textual meanings through contextualization into the objective reality of life. As Bauer (2012) said, the verses of the Qur'an and Hadith can be understood both symbolically and literally according to the context but with easy-to-understand interpretation in order to avoid errors as much as possible. In light of this concept, interpretation is typically presented in words, declarations, or affirmations in understanding, explaining, and applying the outcomes of reading texts in such a way that the readers play a determinant role in reinterpreting or creating new meanings (Fateh 2010).

Interpreting religious texts often gives rise to different understandings. According to Mohamad et al. (2015), understanding the Qur'an and Hadith means reading universal texts that act as instructions for their readers. Similarly, Mustaqim (2018) asserted that the Qur'an is a blessing (*rahmah*) that teaches virtue in such a way that its comprehension becomes guidance for human life. As a result, the readers always seek to connect the interpretation of religious texts to modern and post-modern issues, for the purpose of which not a few of them delve into different interpretations (Zayed 2015). According to Açar (2013), it is critical to acknowledge that disagreements exist in understanding religious texts, not only in terms of concepts such as revelation, speech, and written texts, but also in the processes of reading,

comprehending, explaining, interpreting, and evaluating, each of which has its own logic and morals based on the reader's backgrounds (Hakim et al. 2018). Hakim et al. mentioned that there are five important classifications for reading religious texts: (1) *bil al-ma'sur*; (2) *bil al-riwāyah*; (3) *bil al-manqūl*; (4) *bil ra'yi/bil al-dirāyah/bil al ma'qūl*; and (5) *bil al-izdiwa*, while the methods are categorized into descriptive (*al-bayānī*), comparative (*al-maqārīn*), general (*al-ijmālī*), detailed (*al-iṭnabī*), analytical (*al-taḥlīlī*), and thematic (*al-mawḍū'ī*).

## Martyrdom in Islam

Martyrdom has become an integral part of the Islamic belief, which is referred to in several verses of the Qur'an as a sacrifice made by the believers for their faith. In Islam, martyrdom does not imply predestined death, but rather it is a means of defending Islamic ideals and ideology in a battle against infidels. Martyrs (*syahīd*) are doing this because of the belief that what has been accomplished for God will not be in vain. As Flanagan and Jupp (2014) observed, historically martyrs possessed some distinctive characteristics, such as being unequivocal, charismatic, penitent, and all those anointed as righteous persons exemplified role models and supervision. In this perspective, the term "martyr" is attributed not only to those fighting in the battlefield for the cause of Islam, but also to pious individuals who died in a cruel or even natural manner (Basharin 2021). Similarly, it is said that martyrdom is also used to refer to individuals who have rendered assistance to others such as in times of war or practicing what has been learned, implying that martyrs died not just for their country but also for Islam. Thus, martyrs occupy such a high position in the relationship between God and man that the Qur'an prohibits Muslims from calling martyrs dead, but rather alive with God's bounties in the Hereafter (Rolston 2020).

However, a new idea has currently developed among the Shi'ite sect that martyrdom can also be acquired by people who live a wise life, particularly showing patience in the face of disasters (Basharin 2021). In this regard, a hadith explains:

A plague is a punishment sent by Allah on whom He wants to punish. Allah made it a source of mercy for the believers; if one in the time of an epidemic plague stays in his country patiently hoping for Allah's reward and believing that nothing will befall him except what Allah has written for him, then he will get the reward of a martyr. (Rolston 2020)

People who were killed in a disaster and were innocent are also considered martyrs (the best in Allah's eyes) (Suyadi, Nuryana, and Fauzi 2020). Furthermore, another hadith mentions that martyrdom also goes to (1) someone who was killed in the way of Allah; (2) a martyr who was slain in the way of Allah; (3) someone who died of plague; (4) someone who died of cholera; and (5) someone who died of drowning. However, to achieve the high status of martyrs, a Muslim must exercise patience, purify sins, think good about Allah in good and

bad times, and pray for others (Irfan et al. 2020). Likewise, Riyadi (2013) said that the bodies of martyrs should be treated according to the standards of Islamic laws, which include bathing, shrouding, praying, and burying in accordance with Sharia, except for those who are martyred in war.

## COVID-19

The outbreak of Coronavirus Disease (COVID-19), which began in Wuhan, China in 2019, has evolved into a global health emergency bringing a variety of consequences to human life. In terms of health, the virus that transmits respiratory infections to human body through droplets produced by infected people has caused a significant number of deaths worldwide (Huang et al. 2020; Nabi, Siddique, and Khan 2020; Shereen et al. 2020). COVID-19 has also caused anxiety, trauma that has dramatically altered many aspects of people's daily lives (Shanshal 2020), and a massive increase in psychological and mental health disorders during the pandemic (Razavi-Shearer et al. 2018). The physical distancing policy imposed by the government has had an impact on the mental health of the community, including teenagers. Some mental disorders experienced by adolescents include feelings of loneliness, anxiety, stress, and psychiatric and emotional disorders (Alfarisi et al. 2022). As Sulaiman wrote (Forte et al. 2020), COVID-19 has been a traumatic event that evokes dread, restrictions, and lifestyle adjustments due to worries and uncertainties about the future, all of which has resulted in a number of misconceptions and misunderstandings in perceiving and dealing with the COVID-19 pandemic. The four variables that affected the psychosocial burden of society during the COVID-19 pandemic in Indonesia are age, gender, education, and occupation (Megatsari et al. 2020).

In the context of religion, the COVID-19 pandemic has been understood as a divine test and grace upon people to draw them closer and more self-reliant on God (Maulana 2020). As Sulaiman quoted (Sulaiman 2021), the Qur'an said, "So We sent upon the wrong-doers *rijz* (a punishment) from the Heaven because of their rebelling against Allah's obedience." In addition, a number of hadiths have provided information on the origins, transmission, and prevention of pandemics (Sulaiman 2021). In general, most Muslims respond to pandemics based on three Islamic principles. First, a pandemic is a heavenly blessing and a Muslim died of a plague is a martyr, whereas it is a punishment for non-Muslims. Second, Muslims should stay away from entering a pandemic area and should leave immediately the infected areas. Third, a pandemic is not contagious because all diseases come from God (Hilmy and Niam 2021; Dols 2019; Alexander 2020).

## Method

The controversy over the interpretation of the hadith on martyrs as contained in the Guidance for Handling COVID-19 Corpses was chosen as the topic of this research for three reasons.

First, the disagreement over the interpretation of the hadith on martyrs remains a critical issue that has gone unnoticed in the previous studies. The hadith on martyrs is one of the hadiths on which the Fatwā of MUI Number 18/2020 is based. This fatwā serves as a ground for the Indonesia's Ministry of Health to publish Guidelines for Emergent Handling and Burial of COVID-19 Victims in Societies 2020. The guidelines outline procedures for treating COVID-19 corpses, which are different from those in normal situations. These include washing up the dead bodies without having to take off their clothes. Where no staff of the same gender is available to bath the deceased, the staff in duty should wash up the dead person without unclothing him or her. Praying for the deceased in the graveyard is permissible before and after burial. The deceased is buried with the coffin, plastic, and shrouds remain sealed or unopened.

Several reasons underlie the importance of this research. First, Rowogempol, Lekok, Pasuruan, East Java was chosen as a research site because the area was one of the locations where dead bodies of COVID-19 patients were snatched. The incident went viral both online and on social media for it involved nearly hundreds of people attempting to take forcefully the body of the deceased. During our study observation in Rowogempol, the situation was about the same as before the pandemic: most people were not wearing masks; the mosques were packed with worshipers; prayer gatherings (*tahlilan* and *zikir*) were commonly held; congregational prayers were conducted without physical distancing; and children were doing their routines in the Qur'an Education Park (TPA).

Second, understanding the hadith on martyrs will reveal the causal relationship between people's interpretation of the hadith and a series of repercussions, such as refusal of handling corpses with COVID-19 protocols and corpse snatching of COVID-19 patients. It is necessary to map out these unwelcome consequences so that action steps can be well formulated. Third, the study on this topic will hopefully provide a comprehensive understanding and insight to deal with the recurring rejection of handling corpses with COVID-19 protocols and corpse snatching of COVID-19 patients that have been haunting Indonesia during the pandemic. The first incident of "body snatching" took place from July 16, 2020 (Arifin 2020) to August 8, 2021, in Probolinggo of East Java and was under the spotlight of online media channels like tvonenews.com.

This qualitative research relies on both primary and secondary data. The primary data was collected from field studies and direct observations in Rowogempol Village by way of mapping out the research aspects that include the forms of controversy over the in type factors, and implications. The type of controversy over the interpretation of the hadith on martyrs concerns modes of disagreement at the levels of knowledge, values, and social practices. Various actions that show differences were outlined in this research. Respondents' interpretation narratives are grouped based on Stuart Hall's classification regarding text reception. The first one is the dominant-hegemonic position over the interpretation of the hadith text. The second one is the negotiating position of those who accept but provide

certain conditions. The third one is the position of the opposition. The factors that underlie the controversy were drawn up according to the aspects of education, ideology/agency (social organizations), knowledge of fiqh, and empirical circumstances. Differences in understanding can also be triggered by practical reasons. The implications of the controversy were also mapped out, particularly in relation to the extent to which it gave rise to the corpse-snatching case.

The data for this research were gathered from three groups of respondents: (a) social elites, such as religious leaders or intellectuals; (b) middle-class professionals; and (c) common people, including laborers and traders. These three clusters of respondents were selected for the analysis on how socioeconomic classes have significance on the understanding of the hadith on martyrs and whether intellectual capacity has an effect on thoughts and attitudes being expressed. In addition, this study also involved some experts who have the capability of measuring the accuracy or validity of the research.

It took two months to complete the stages of the research process, starting from desk-review, field observations, interviews, to focus-group discussions. Respondents consisted of two groups. The first group was from the Muhammadiyah organization (five respondents). The second group was from the NU organization (five respondents). To draw up the controversy at the text level, numerous secondary materials were collected prior to the field research, including online news portraying the debate over the meanings of the hadith on martyrs. Different social class groups were observed to have direct perception of the controversy. To allow for comparison, interviews were conducted with respondents from three different socioeconomic classes, some in their respective homes, and some at the Annur Mosque of Rowogempol (which is also the location where the COVID-19 body snatching occurred). Upon receipt of the approvals, ten selected individuals were involved in FGD sessions aimed to confirm the preliminary findings on the understandings of the hadith on martyrs, the factors underlying the controversy as well as its implications.

Data analysis was done in two ways. First, the data obtained from observations and interviews was reduced and displayed in summaries and synopsis according to the themes generated from field notes, and then verified for conclusions. Second, the analysis employed a technique of understanding that begins with a restatement of the data gathered both from observations and interviews, followed by a description to figure out their patterns or trends, and concludes with an interpretation to disclose the meaning of the data.

## Discussion

The controversy over the understanding of the hadith on martyrs can be explained in the following three sub-themes: (1) the forms of understanding the hadith on martyrs; (2) the factors that contribute to the controversy over the hadith; and (3) the implication of the controversy over the hadith toward public literacy in the handling of COVID-19 dead bodies.

Types of Understanding of the Hadith on Martyrs

Table 1: Respondents' Opinions about the Hadith on Martyrs

<i>Respondent and Social Status</i>	<i>Opinion about the Hadith</i>	<i>Coding</i>
R1, Government's Civil Apparatus (ASN), Muhammadiyah Activist	Understood that Muslims who died of COVID-19 would receive the same reward as martyrs. Muslim COVID-19 corpses were martyrs	Dominant-hegemonic position
R2, Teacher, Member of Aisyiyah	Understood that Muslims who died of COVID-19 would receive the same reward as martyrs	Dominant-hegemonic position
R3, Teacher in Sports, Rowogempol Elementary School (SD)	Did not understand, doubtful that Muslims who died of COVID-19 would receive the same reward as martyrs	Negotiating position
R4, Former Teacher; Religious Leader; the head of Muhammadiyah of Lekok branch	Understood in the same way as the decision of <i>Tarjih</i> does. Muslim COVID-19 corpses were martyrs	Dominant-hegemonic position
R5, Housewife; Aisyiyah Activist	Understood in the same way as the decision of <i>Tarjih</i> does. Muslim COVID-19 corpses were martyrs	Dominant-hegemonic position
R6, Fatayat Activist of Nahdlatul Ulama organization	Yes, they were martyrs	Dominant-hegemonic position
R7, Santri (a student at Muslim traditional school of Nahdlatul Ulama organization )	Understood a little; never heard before. Muslim COVID-19 corpses were not martyrs	Opposition position
R8, Layperson of Nahdlatul Ulama organization)	Did not understand. Muslim COVID-19 corpses are not martyrs	Opposition position



R9, Religious Leader of Nahdlatul Ulama	Very knowledgeable about hadith. Muslim COVID-19 corpses are not martyrs if they were deliberately diagnosed with the virus, as if he had COVID-19/Indonesian people call it with the term “dikovidkan”	Negotiating position
R10 Committee Board of Annur Mosque of Rowogepol, Butcher, Layperson	Did not understand. Muslim COVID-19 corpses were not martyrs	Opposition position

Table 1 demonstrates three significant features of how the respondents understand the hadith on martyrs. First, there are differences in understanding the hadith on martyrs in regard to individuals who had died because of COVID-19. Some respondents explicitly claimed that those victims are martyrs; some are still undecided; and some others declared without hesitation that they are not martyrs. Second, it seems that group differences lead to different understandings of the hadith on martyrs. In other words, a group’s structural position corresponds to a different level of knowledge, exerting influence on how they perceive the hadith. Third, the perception of martyrdom is not just personal but also institutional. Individual perspectives are heavily influenced by decisions made by institutions such as MUI, Muhammadiyah, and NU.

Two religious organizations have shaped these individual points of view, thanks to their methods of legal interpretation. The first is a modernist Islamic group (i.e., Muhammadiyah), which adopts a contextual reading of the hadith in light of the pandemic. This understanding is built upon their techniques of legal reasoning (*ijtihād*), including the objectives of Sharia (*maqāṣid as-syarīah*), general meaning of a given text (*dilālāh al-ām*), graduation (*at-tadrij*), easiness (*at-taysir*), and removal of hardship (*‘adam al-kharaj*). All these legal principles are exemplified in the arguments that reinforce the implementation of safety procedures for managing deceased persons as outlined in a circular letter concerning Guidance for Worship in COVID-19 Emergency Conditions Number 02/Edr/I.0/E/2020. The second is a traditionalist Islamic group, which relies on *fiqh* in interpreting the hadith. This understanding hinges on a number of methods such as an opinion-based technique (*qawli*), which is a legal inference (*istinbāt*) used in the NU’s Discussion Forums (BMNU) with reference to the *fiqh* books of four schools of thought, a comparative method (*ilhaqi*), and by methodology (*manhajī*). Although the Central Board of Nahdlatul Ulama (PBNU) shares the same decision as the MUI, disparities in understanding exist among the lower middle class in society due to empirical experiences, as seen from the following interviews with two respondents:

Those who die from COVID-19 are martyrs. In accordance with the directives of PP Muhammadiyah, Haedar Nashir, the hadiths on martyrs that became the basis for Muhammadiyah have been socialized. There are a quite few people of Muhammadiyah Branch here. So, information on these hadiths did not reach the general public. (Interview with Respondent 4, Annur Mosque of Rowogempol, June 27, 2021)

To die a martyr's death is a great honor. There are two types of martyrs. The first is martyrs of this world and the Hereafter; one such example is fighting in the way of Allah. The second is martyrs of this world who will have the same reward as those fighting in Allah's path, i.e., anyone who dies defending their wealth, life, and family, and anyone dies of a pandemic/plague. Thus, whoever dies not because of COVID-19 but being intentionally diagnosed with it, as if he had COVID-19/Indonesian people call it with the term *dikovidkan*, is not martyred (*mati syahid*) but scorched (*mati sangid*). (Interview with Respondent 9, Annur Mosque of Rowogempol, June 27, 2021)

R9's statement above reflects careful forethought in understanding the hadith on martyrs. This understanding is molded from empirical experience that people had when the incident of the COVID-19 corpse snatching happened (iNews 2020; tvOnenews 2021). At that time, it was not yet clearly confirmed whether COVID-19 is the cause of death for a young man who was initially hospitalized for depression due to economic reasons. Unfortunately, the same attitude in understanding the hadith on martyrs did not extend to lower-class people. R10, a committee board of the Annur Mosque, does not quite understand about the hadith since he never heard of religious leaders talking about the issue during their routine Islamic sermons or discussions. According to R10, people who die of COVID-19 are not martyrs because the coronavirus is a government's fraud.

This study found two different modes of thinking between different groups in understanding the hadith on martyrs. The first belongs to a hegemonic-dominant group that fully embraces the meanings of the hadith without disagreement. The group's opinions are backed up by a modernist Islamic school showing adaptability to changes. The second is attributed to a group of negotiated positions. This group understands the hadith in the same manner as the former group but refuses to apply the hadith on martyrs to the deceased persons deliberately or falsely diagnosed with COVID-19.

### Factors Underlying the Controversy over the Understanding of the Hadith

The disagreement over how the hadith on martyrs should be understood is caused by a number of factors, including education, regional and economic conditions, agency, knowledge of fiqh, and a lack of socialization of the hadith on martyrs by plague.

### *Education*

Rowogempol is located approximately 20 km east of Pasuruan. According to R6, Rowogempol and its surroundings are less-developed hamlets in terms of education and economy. Local residents with diplomas and bachelor's degrees account for less than 20 percent of the population. The adults typically graduated from junior high or high schools. Data from the Central Statistics Agency supported this fact, saying that Pasuruan's school expectation rate remains significantly lower than the national average. In Pasuruan, the school expectation rate was 12.31 percent in 2019 and increased to 12.41 percent in 2020. These numbers are substantially below the national average for all Indonesian cities, which was 12.95 percent in 2019 and grew to 12.98 percent in 2019.

### *Geography and Economics*

Rowogempol is located east of Pasuruan geographically. Since the last three years, from 2018 to 2020, the poverty line in Pasuruan has continued to rise. This is consistent with the statistics provided by the Pasuruan BPS. In 2018, 268,592 individuals lived below the poverty level. In 2019, the number of people living below the poverty line climbed to 283,321 persons, and continued to rise in 2020, reaching a record of 296,271 people. Economically, the majority of the surrounding areas rely on seasonal jobs, such as fishing, building, and milking cows.

### *Agency (Obedience to the Teachings of the Kiais and the Book of Fiqh)*

Pasuruan is a horseshoe-shaped area populated primarily by members of the NU. The degree to which the public submits to the ulamas or kiais is a defining feature of this organization. R6 said:

The local peoples of Rowogempol and its neighbouring areas are having a sense of very strong solidarity (ta'aşub) to their kiais. They listen to their sermons and their readings of the classical books (kitāb), such as those on faith, fiqh, and morals; nevertheless, the kiais never discussed those books in light of the current pandemic.

In response to the incident of the COVID-19 body snatching, the kiai (R9) and the board member of the Annur Mosque (R10) believed that the deceased was indeed deliberately diagnosed with COVID-19 (dikovidkan). They said:

The hadith on martyrs must not be applied arbitrarily. The young man was dead not because of COVID-19 and, therefore, could not be called martyrs; this is against the Sharia. Thus, the corpse deliberately diagnosed with COVID-19 is scorched (mati sangid), not martyred. (R9)

A patient who was deliberately diagnosed with COVID-19 is not classified as a martyr. (R10)

The PBNU (The Central Board of Nahdlatul Ulama) has released a fatwā on how to handle COVID-19, advising its members to be psychologically well-prepared (*batiniyyah*). This is shown, for example, in the result of PWNU's *Bahtsul Masail* in response to COVID-19 that a Muslim should remain calm, not worry excessively, stay positive, and move on with more faith and devotion to God. The NU's people are asked to keep doing congregational prayers on Fridays in areas deemed safe. The people of Rowogempol continued to pray in congregation at the local mosque without distancing, to perform *tahlilan* with an average attendance of 500 persons, and to maintain activities in the TPA (Qur'an Education Park). As R1 explained:

Usually, Muslims are chanting *zikr* (remembrance of Allah) for protection against COVID-19 after dawn prayer and reading the whole Qur'an to enrich spirituality. Regardless of whether the corpse died of COVID-19 or not, Islamic procedures for handling the corpse are obligatory because it is mandated by the Sharia. It is also about a tradition of paying last respects in the world. (R10)

R10 does not seem to understand the meaning of the hadith on martyrs but he does comprehend the *fiqh* on cleansing a dead body, which eventually became his opinion. The lack of knowledge of the hadith is a result of religious leaders' failure to socialize it. R3 and R10 said:

The hadith on martyrs by plague and the procedures on safe handling of COVID-19 deceased persons is rarely discussed during Friday or weekly sermons. Typically, the Friday sermon is delivered in Arabic. The subject of piety to Allah and forbearance in the face of the pandemic is frequently addressed. *Zikr* (remembrance of Allah) for protection against COVID-19 is usually chanted after dawn prayers. (R3)  
I do not know about the hadith on martyrs as this topic has been never discussed by religious leaders during their regular religious sessions. (R10)

While the presence of *fiqh* appears to provide practical and detailed guidelines on a particular topic, it also precludes the existence of the hadith as the initial source of the formulation of a legal product.

The controversy over the interpretation of the hadith on martyrs can be divided into three categories. The first is related to differences in a group's understanding or ideology. The modernist Islamic group interprets the hadith in light of the COVID-19 epidemic. Borrowing Stuart Hall's classification of receptions, this group is referred to as the dominant-hegemonic group in terms of interpreting the text of the hadith. Full acceptance of the literal meanings

of the hadith is demonstrated in the circular letter providing instruction on worship in the COVID-19 emergency. Meanwhile, the second group, whom Hall calls it as a group of negotiated potion, accepts the text of the hadith but under certain conditions. This group is a traditionalist one that receives the literal meanings of the hadith while adapting it to the existing situations and conditions.

Second, these dominant-hegemonic and negotiated readings emerge from the controversy due to disparity in literacy/knowledge. On the one hand, the modernist Islamic group released a detailed circular letter and instituted a COVID-19 mitigation agency, all of which employ language styles reaching out to virtual religious sessions and social media. On the other hand, the traditionalist Islamic group understands the hadith on martyrs with reference to the opinions of religious leaders but without adequate socialization among the lower-class people. The emphasis of socialization tends to be on spiritual enhancement (Romza 2021), as evidenced by chanting *zikr* for safety from COVID-19, prayers for the Prophet to reject calamities (*ṣalawāt li daf' il balā'*), and reading the whole chapters of the Qur'an (*khataman*). Third, the controversy in understanding is a result of the cultural shock associated with the tradition of death. The funeral practices that are structured and based on Islamic laws: bathing, shrouding, praying, and burying fully equipped with a set of funeral ceremonies, have devolved into a relatively brief funeral based on the COVID-19 health protocol.

According to the description above, the village of Rowogempol belongs to traditionalist Islam being heavily influenced by Javanese cultural elements (Kejawen). When a family member dies in this village, the first thing to do is to contact the *modin* (the local Islamic official) who will then spread the news of death. The neighbors will abandon their work to visit the grieving family's house. As a rural community, Pasuruan's people have a very strong sense of solidarity with others (Tim Warta Bromo 2020). As Andrew Betty showed, Kejawen culture includes a robust ceremonial cycle that is a sort of syncretism between Islamic and Hindu concepts strongly rooted in Javanese beliefs. Thus, the ritual continues, whether or not there is a pandemic (Appel et al. 2020).

### The Controversy over the Hadith on Martyrs: Implications

Different interpretations of the hadith on martyrs have resulted in at least three consequences. The first is the rise of public misconceptions or misunderstandings about COVID-19 and health protocols for corpse treatment. R10 confirmed this by saying "People believe that COVID-19 does exist, but not here; maybe somewhere else."

The public's denial that COVID-19 exists around them was sparked by the incident of COVID-19 corpse snatching. R10 affirmed that the deceased's family and people urged to open the coffin and take out the corpse to be buried by themselves without health protocols. They recklessly opened the coffin and released their emotions by banging it, as it was ready to be put into a grave. The corpse was forcefully taken and brought to the Annur Mosque for

prayer. It turned out that none of the body snatchers, who opened up the coffin and made contact with the corpse, tested positive for COVID-19. This body-snatching incident was reported on SINDOnews written by Jaka Samudra (2020) as shown in the following picture.



Figure 1: COVID-19 Patient's Coffin Is Forcibly Dismantled



Figure 2: COVID-19 Patient Is Taken to a Local Mosque for a Final Prayer

Source: <https://daerah.sindonews.com/read/103756/704/ratusan-warga-pasuruan-nekat-rebut-dan-buka-paksa-peti-jenazah-covid-19-1594933631>

As a result, suspicions grew that COVID-19 in the neighborhood was fake (R10). The second is that the debate over the interpretation of the hadith on martyrs has an effect on the values prevailing in the community. Different interpretations of the hadith have resulted in a half-hearted adoption of the health protocols for corpse burial, as seen from the following data:

At the moment, we agreed to handle corpse with health protocols, but not entirely. We believe that the current situation is safe; the prayer rows are close to each other with no space; as usual, *tahlilan* is attended by 500 people. (R10)

Despite being forced, we have no choice but accepting the protocols of handling COVID-19 dead bodies; the government's decision is final; what else can we do; if convicted, we could be imprisoned. The police, the task force, and the sub-district military command (*Koramil*) are all closely monitoring the burial of the dead. (R8)

This discrepancy in understanding contributes to a lack of knowledge and sensitivity to the perils of COVID-19. Physical distancing is ignored, and death-related rituals are performed as usual without health procedures.

The third implication of the controversy over the hadith on martyrs occurs in the sphere of problem-solving measures. The ignorance about COVID-19 health protocols are also followed by the circulation of oblique news or hoaxes about health institutions being accused of profiting from COVID-19. As a result, patients fear that if they die, they will be deliberately diagnosed with COVID-19 and their organs will be removed, as shown from the respondent's statement below:

People are now worried and fear of going to the hospital if they are exposed to COVID-19; they are afraid of being deliberately diagnosed with COVID-19 (*dikovidkan*) and having their organs removed. It is better to die at home than in a hospital. (R4)

In the adjacent village, someone died of COVID-19; after the body was interred, a family member met the deceased in a dream; feeling unease, they eventually decided to open the tomb. The corpse, which was diagnosed with COVID-19, was scarred with stitches and some of the organs were gone. The family felt at ease after the corpse was reburied according to Sharia. (R10)

This skewed perspective reinforces the belief that COVID-19 is a produced and sustained sort of fabrication.

Social media platforms are considered easy and accessible for every individual to share, post, and react to any medical information related to the pandemic (Yezli and Khan 2020), (Mahfud et al. 2021; Rahmawati et al. 2018; Chanifah et al. 2021). Health information is widely searched on social media, whereas there is a lot of hoax news spread on social media, especially Facebook (Harisanty et al. 2021; Muyasaroh et al. 2020). Behind all that, some are taking advantage of others' misery or anguish amid the pandemic.

This article finds that disagreements over the interpretation of the hadith on martyrs have resulted in divergent perceptions regarding the handling of COVID-19 corpses. The different understandings are rooted in two mainstream lines of thought as represented by two major Islamic groups, Muhammadiyah and NU (Yani et al. 2022; Mahfud 2020; Ma`arif et al. 2023). Muhammadiyah, also known as the modernist Islamic school, has a tendency to accept the texts of the hadith on its fullest meaning without disagreement (Mahfud et al. 2023). On the other hand, NU negotiates the hadith by accepting the text of the hadith on martyrs but refuses to apply it to corpses deliberately diagnosed with COVID-19 (*dikovidkan*). This variation in interpretation of the hadith has much more serious implication for Rowogempol's people in terms of their half-hearted adherence; despite their belief in COVID-19, they are frequently careless in implementing health protocols and continue to perform their religious rites without physical distancing.

Previous researches tended to view religious traditions as impediments to dealing with COVID-19, necessitating the restriction of religious activities and even their delays and cancellation (Yezli and Khan 2020; Hassan et al. 2021). Furthermore, religion is perceived as a source of the spread of the virus through gatherings or sermons, leading to negative portrayals of Muslims (Bakry et al. 2020; Hilmy and Niam 2021). In contrast to prior studies, this article demonstrates how a reader interprets hadith texts varies depending on his or her scope of knowledge and the religious institutions/organizations to which he or she belongs (Astari et al. 2023). The debate over the interpretation of the hadith has resulted in different understandings

at the practical level when it comes to dealing with the handling of corpses. The disparate corpse treatments have fostered public distrust, ranging from a denial of the existence of COVID-19 to the suspicions about the government agencies, particularly health workers.

Based on the research findings on numerous types of controversies over the hadith on martyrs that resulted in various kinds of refusals to health protocols for handling corpses, this article recommends the following to avoid such situations or events in the future. First, there is a need for public education on the hadith contained in the Guidance for COVID-19 Corpse Handling since public knowledge has a significant impact on attitudes and actions toward the pandemic. Second, maintaining control over media information—particularly those concerning the snatching of the COVID-19 corpse and the rejection of the corpse management with health protocols—is necessary to avoid misunderstandings that result in the formation of erroneous attitudes and actions toward COVID-19 corpse handling. Third, various civic organizations and institutions, such as mass organizations, religious leaders, and the community, need to be actively involved in elucidating the meanings of the hadith on martyrs, in which respect for COVID-19 martyrs is contextualized into the handling of COVID-19 dead bodies. In Arab countries, the term *syuhadā bi kurana* (the martyrs of coronavirus) is frequently discussed by Arab Muslim scholars and is used in reports on COVID-19 victims; this eventually has an effect on the attitudes of Arabs in honoring the dead bodies of COVID-19, as shown in the very low cases of resistance to corpse handling with health protocols.

With these three recommendations, it is hoped that religious traditions will cease to be a source of COVID-19 transmission and will instead serve as a remedy and a source of strength for nations during a pandemic. These three approaches will pave the way for a better understanding, thereby minimizing disagreements over the interpretation of the hadith resulting in the snatching of COVID-19 dead bodies and the refusal to corpse handling with health protocols.

## Conclusion

The controversy over the understanding of the hadith on martyrs in relation to the dead bodies of COVID-19 patients is more driven by ill-advised decisions regarding the handling of COVID-19 corpses. Different understandings of the hadith and expertise in classical fiqh or orthodox Islamic jurisprudence have created doubt around handling corpses with COVID-19 health protocols, particularly among the members of the traditionalist Islamic group. This is coupled with news reports on the refusal to corpse handling with health protocols and the incidents of COVID-19 body snatching, both of which imply violations of Islamic laws. The controversy over the hadith on martyrs proved to be the result of a knowledge gap in society.

Two significant points emerge from the analysis of the controversy over the hadith on martyrs. First, understanding the hadith through a *cultural lens* (i.e., tailored to religion and



local customs) demonstrates that varying levels of knowledge and social settings have allowed for different understandings. Second, this study also presents a new angle on discussions of the COVID-19 pandemic in relation to human security, which has been so far viewed from a mere objective perspective. A religious understanding of COVID-19 offered a new and different outlook as religious narratives could pose a threat to human security, as it is the case with the COVID-19 body snatching.

This study limits itself to an analysis of one single area and respondent's perspectives. Therefore, the findings of this research cannot be generalized to a large-scale account of discrepancies in interpretations of the hadith on martyrs or the arguments used by the MUI to mitigate the COVID-19 pandemic. Similarly, the respondents' answers, based on which the understandings of the hadith were inferred, does not provide a thorough picture of the controversy. Because of these research constraints, there is a need for further studies covering a comparative analysis of regional features based on more varied data. By doing so, policies for dealing with pandemics like COVID-19 could be better formulated.

## **Acknowledgments**

Financial support for this research project was provided by Ahmad Dahlan University of Yogyakarta, Indonesia. The authors would like to express their deepest gratitude to colleagues at the Muhammadiyah Branch Manager (PCM) of Lekok Pasuruan, East Java, as well as religious leaders and the Committee Board of An-Nur Rowogempol Mosque in Pasuruan for their assistance during the interviewing process.

## **AI Acknowledgment**

Generative AI or AI-assisted technologies were not used in any way to prepare, write, or complete essential authoring tasks in this manuscript.

## **Informed Consent**

The authors have obtained informed consent from all participants.

## **Conflict of Interest**

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this article.

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