

**A PRECEDENT FOR THE UNPRECEDENTED:  
HISTORICAL REFLECTIONS ON PLAGUE, QUARANTINE, AND  
ISLAMIC LAW IN MOROCCO**

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By now, the effects of the COVID-19 virus have touched all domains of public life across the world. Public alarm and government interventions abruptly upended life to the extent that economic, political, and social norms are wholly unrecognizable for billions of people. One domain that has received less attention is that of religion, especially the impact of quarantines and curfews for congregational activities. In a country like Morocco, where the state claims authority over the domain of religion, such policies take on even greater significance. Beyond its military-imposed 6 AM to 6 PM curfew, the Moroccan Supreme Council of ‘Ulama—a state religious body within the Ministry of Islamic Affairs—ordered the temporary closure of all mosques and implored worshippers to perform prayers from home. The policy’s religious implications sparked pockets of backlash: protesters in Fez and Tangier thronged to demand the reopening of mosques, and state security officials arrested the Salafi preacher Abu Naeem for a YouTube *fatwā* rejecting the state’s religious justification for the closures.

On one level, none of this is unique to the Moroccan or Muslim context: religious organizations across the world have differed in their approaches to religious gatherings, from complete disregard to innovative solutions. In the Moroccan context, the tensions between political, scientific, and religious considerations for policy-making likewise is not a new phenomenon. Beyond its close regulation of religious law and political expression, the Moroccan government routinely works to balance a strong commitment to upholding Islamic institutions while projecting a distinctly “moderate” and “tolerant” version of Islam. The recent decision to close mosques, far be it from a widespread controversy, nonetheless offers a moment to reflect deeper on how public voices invoke certain touchstones of knowledge to arrive at decisions so implicated in religious discourse. In Mo-

rocco, as elsewhere, the simultaneous public appeal to scientific, religious, and indeed historical knowledge conjures a dizzying array of assumptions serving as the basis for action in crisis.

The historical trajectories of such actions and ensuing public debates are also less ‘unprecedented’—perhaps the foremost buzzword of the COVID-19 experience—than they may appear. With due deference to the immediacy of current public health research, I propose that some historical anchoring in the discourse of past debates—indeed beyond the actions and policies themselves—are instructive to present debates. That is, the way in which political and intellectual figures past balanced the exigencies of mortal danger with their complex of worldly and spiritual anxieties can shed light on the doubts and unknowns that characterize this experience. In Morocco, the social and religious contentions concerning the very concept of plague and quarantine from well over a century ago provides striking insights for this purpose.

#### AḤMAD AL-NĀṢIRĪ AND *KITĀB AL-ISTIQṢĀ*

In 1895, the Moroccan scholar and historian Aḥmad al-Nāṣirī published a magisterial work of history entitled *Kitāb al-istiṣṣā li-akhbār duwal al-Maghrib al-aqṣā* (“The Book of Inquiry into Moroccan Empires,” hereinafter *Kitāb al-istiṣṣā*). The work itself embraces the enormous pretention of recounting the entire history of Morocco, from the pre-Arab and pre-Muslim Berber era to his contemporary society under Sultan Hassan I (r. 1873-1894). In doing so, the text reifies the notion of an “independent political<sup>1</sup>” Moroccan state at a moment when the inevitability of colonial rule became increasingly apparent. Throughout its constituent volumes, al-Nāṣirī evinces a keen interest in the broader world around him and its increasingly pan-national intellectual trends.<sup>2</sup> This spirit, one that Eric Calderwood

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1 Eric Calderwood, “The Beginning (or End) of Moroccan History: Historiography, Translations, and Modernity in Ahmad b. Kahlid al-Nasiri and Clemente Cerdeira,” *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 44, no. 3 (2012): 399.

2 “Al-Nasiri’s admiration for European science, his interest in European

forcefully argues as a distinct figment of “modernity,”<sup>3</sup> frames al-Nāṣirī’s telling of his country’s own history and how it reflects on his present. It is amidst the epic retelling of this history that al-Nāṣirī arrives with a deeply vested interest in the political and religious dimensions of plague.

**PLAGUE AND QUARANTINE: THE ANXIETIES OF  
SULTAN AḤMAD AL-MANŞŪR (R. 1578-1603)**

In the fifth of *Kitab al-Istiṣā*’s nine volumes, al-Nāṣirī takes up the Sa’dian Dynasty, whose sultans ruled Morocco from 1549 to 1659. Based in Marrakesh, the most well-known Sa’dī *sulṭān*, Aḥmad al-Manṣūr, ruled over a territory spanning contemporary Morocco, Mauritania, and Mali. It is within his extended and florid biographical narratives of al-Manṣūr that al-Nāṣirī first broaches the topic of disease and its containment. The specific chapter, entitled “The Uprising of Crown Prince Muhammad Shaykh Ma’mūn against his Father al-Manṣūr and Its Causes,” begins as a searing indictment of al-Manṣūr’s son al-Ma’mūn’s moral depravity, a problem that apparently weighed heavily on the Sulṭān.<sup>4</sup> Al-Nāṣirī recounts that al-Manṣūr had been living in Fez, yet upon preparing to return to Marrakesh, he received an alarming letter from Abū Fāris, his other son and representative (*khalīfa*) in Marrakesh. In the letter, Abū Fāris reported the outbreak of plague (*wabā’*)<sup>5</sup> in the southern Sūs

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languages, and his participation in Pan-Arab journalism ... also align his *Kitab al-Istiṣā* with important trends in 19<sup>th</sup>-century Arabic historiography.” Calderwood, “The Beginning (or End),” 401.

3 Calderwood, “The Beginning (or End),” 402.

4 Sulṭān al-Manṣūr’s advisers reportedly went to Meknes to visit Ma’mūn, only to return confirming the unabashed immoral behavior that the latter exhibits. Al-Manṣūr ignores advice to kill his son, instead ordering him confined. Abū al-‘Abbās Aḥmad b. Khālīd al-Nāṣirī, *Kitāb al-istiṣā li-akhbār duwal al-Maghrib al-aqṣā*, Vol. 5 (Casablanca: Dār al-Kitāb, 1997), 169. Citations to this source hereafter made in-text.

5 The term *wabā’* is used in modern Arabic to mean “pandemic,” including in current media coverage of COVID-19. Due to the contemporary technical meaning conveyed by “pandemic,” I translate it in al-Nāṣirī’s text as “plague.” This is distinct from the Arabic term *ṭā’ūn*, meaning “plague” with the connotation of divine punishment.

(Sousse) region and in Marrakesh itself. Al-Nāṣirī proceeds to quote the entirety of Sultan al-Manṣūr's decisive letter of response.

From the outset, al-Manṣūr's letter succinctly addresses his son's warning: he instructs Abū Fāris to leave Marrakesh "if any signs of the plague appear, even the smallest bit, even on one person" (179). In that case, Abū Fāris should make his way to the coastal city of Salé, where apparently an antidote (*tiryāq*) awaits for his consumption.<sup>6</sup> More crucially, al-Manṣūr then prescribes two additional measures for Abū Fāris to protect himself and the city entrusted to his guardianship. First, al-Manṣūr orders that no piece of his mail originating in the disease-afflicted region (Sūs) be taken into his home—rather, Abū Fāris should have his scribe open it elsewhere, read it independently, and then come to inform him of its contents. Secondly, al-Manṣūr continues, "I recommend to you that if the plague appears, you close off the area and leave safely and soundly" (182). In other words, in a severe outbreak, Abū Fāris should seal entry to and exit from Marrakesh, ostensibly to avoid risk of further spread, and leave while he still can. Like the previous point, this recommendation appears based on nothing more or less than the pragmatic association of human movement with the spread of disease. At no point in the letter, as quoted by al-Nāṣirī, does al-Manṣūr express anxiety about the social or political implications of these measures. After addressing a few other ancillary matters, al-Manṣūr implores his son to keep him apprised of the situation and concludes his missive.

#### THE HISTORIAN'S AMBIVALENCE: AL-NĀṢIRĪ'S DIGRESSION ON QUARANTINE AND *SHARĪʿA*

Following the letter, al-Nāṣirī resumes his historian's voice to ask the reader to pay attention to two matters: first is the fact that al-Manṣūr permitted his son Abū Fāris to leave

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6 Though he does not specify the nature of the antidote, al-Manṣūr adds that there is a separate "beneficial drink" antidote for Abū Fāris's young son to use instead as much as needed (179).

Marrakesh upon any sign of the plague, even though, according to al-Nāṣirī, “this matter is impermissible (*maḥẓūr*) in shari‘a” (183). Second is the fact that al-Mansūr ordered Abū Fāris not to touch any of the mail coming to him from the infected region of Sūs. According to al-Nāṣirī, this second point clearly evokes “the actions of Europeans (*al-Faranj*), and those who go their way, to preserve themselves from plague: [actions] called quarantine (*al-kurantīna*).”

Al-Nāṣirī’s narrative then turns personal, explaining that the issue of plague and quarantine has been on his mind since he traveled from his hometown of Salé in March 1879 (late Rabī‘a I 1296 AH). That being the “year of the plague,” the topic of how to address such calamities arose in conversation one day when al-Nāṣirī met a group of jurists (*fuqahā’*) in the coastal city of El Jadida. Al-Nāṣirī recalls that the men began discussing what the Christians (*al-Naṣārā*) have done in such situations, namely this concept of quarantine: confining the population, forbidding interregional travel, and prohibiting the accompaniment of other people. Al-Nāṣirī recalls being enthralled by this discussion, adding that he later came across competing legal opinions on the matter within the famed travel report of Egyptian diplomat Rifā‘a al-Ṭaḥṭāwī.<sup>7</sup> Most famous for his musings on Parisian culture and government, al-Ṭaḥṭāwī recounts disembarking at the port of Marseille and immediately being forced into quarantine due to his foreign provenance.<sup>8</sup> Al-Ṭaḥṭāwī uses that occasion in his own narrative to consider how Maghribī religious scholars have addressed quarantine, comparing the opposing opinions of a Tunisian Mālikī scholar with a Tunisian Ḥanafī scholar.<sup>9</sup> Al-Ṭaḥṭāwī reports that the Mālikī’s opinion forbade quarantine on the basis that its measures are considered “fleeing [God’s] justice” (*al-firār min al-qadā’*).<sup>10</sup> By contrast, the

7 *Takhlīs al-Ibrīz fī Talkhīṣ Bārīz* (lit., “Extracting Gold in the Synopsis of Paris”).

8 Rifā‘a Rāfi‘ al-Ṭaḥṭāwī, *Takhlīs al-Ibrīz fī Talkhīṣ Bārīz* (Cairo: Hindāwī, 2012), 57.

9 The Mālikī is Shaykh Muḥammad al-Manā‘ī (d. 1250/1834), a teacher at al-Zaytūna mosque. The Ḥanafī is *mufīṭ* Shaykh Muḥammad al-Bayram (d. 1889).

10 More precisely, this refers to removing oneself from the domain of

Ḥanafī scholar's opinion permitted quarantine measures based on (unspecified) proof texts from the Qur'ān and Sunna.<sup>11</sup> Upon encountering these conflicting opinions, al-Nāṣirī reports his growing desire to revisit the matter and establish the valid Islamic legal ruling (*ḥukm sharī*) for instituting quarantine.

Al-Nāṣirī asserts that the best way to approach the legal ruling for quarantine is to weigh the benefit (*maṣlaḥa*) against the harm (*mafsada*) that it incurs. To do this, al-Nāṣirī appeals explicitly to the Mālikī methodological principle (*aṣl al-fiqh*) of *maṣlaḥa mursala*, by which jurists may establish rulings in the absence of scriptural evidence.<sup>12</sup> The qualified jurist relies on individual reason to determine whether an action conforms to the underlying purposes of *sharī'a* (*maqāṣid al-sharī'a*) by weighing its benefits and harms. The jurist then may determine the preponderance (*rujḥān*) of either benefit or harm in the practice, thereby conferring its Islamic legal status as licit or illicit.

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sharī'a rule. This may intend to evoke certain *ḥadīth* in which the Prophet Muhammad addresses whether it is permissible to flee lands that have been stricken with plague (*tā'ūn*). E.g., from the collection of *Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim*, Usāma b. Zayd reported that Prophet Muḥammad said: "This ailment [*waja*] or illness [*saqm*] was a divine punishment by which some nations before you were punished. Then it remained on earth afterward, and it goes away sometimes and comes back another time. So whoever hears of in a land should not go to it, and whoever is in a land with [the illness] should not to flee from it" Muslim b. al-Ḥajjāj al-Qushayrī, *Al-Musnad al-ṣaḥīḥ al-mukhtaṣar min al-sunan bi-naql al-'adl 'an al-'adl 'an rasūl Allāh ṣallā Allāhu 'alayhi wa-sallam*, Vol. 4 (Beirut: Dār Iḥyā' al-Turāth al-'Arabī, 2010), 737; and in the *Muwatta'*, Mālik reports that Usāma b. Zayd heard the Prophet Muḥammad say: "The plague [*tā'ūn*] is an affliction [*rajz*] that was sent down on a group of Israelites or some other group before them. If you hear of it striking a land, do not go there. If it strikes a land where you are already present, however, stay and do not flee." Mālik b. Anas, *Al-Muwatta': the recension of Yahyā b. Yahyā al-Laythī (d. 234/848)*, eds. and trans. Mohammad Fadel and Connell Monette (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Program in Islamic Law, 2019), 736-37.

11 These scriptural citations are not provided by al-Ṭaḥṭāwī or al-Nāṣirī. Al-Ṭaḥṭāwī likewise notes that al-Manā'ī and al-Bayram debated whether the earth is round or flat, with al-Bayram holding the former opinion and al-Manā'ī the latter. al-Ṭaḥṭāwī, *Takhlīs al-Ibrīz*, 58.

12 For classical legal opinions on *maṣlaḥa mursala*, see Felicitas Opwis, *Maṣlaḥa and the Purpose of the Law: Islamic Discourse on Legal Change from the 4<sup>th</sup>/10<sup>th</sup> to 8<sup>th</sup>/14<sup>th</sup> Century* (Leiden: Brill, 2010), 3; 165-69. For the distinct Mālikī treatment of *maṣlaḥa mursala* as a principle of jurisprudence (*aṣl al-fiqh*), see 'Umar al-Jīdī, *al-Tashrī' al-Islāmī: Uṣūluḥu wa-maqāṣiduhu* (Rabat: Manshūrāt 'Ukāz, 1987), 111-12.

Al-Nāṣirī enthusiastically takes on this task and proceeds to outline the normative attributes that one may expect from imposing a quarantine.

Starting with the benefits, al-Nāṣirī recognizes that quarantine is supposed to ensure the safety (*al-salāma*) of a nation from the plague. Yet he immediately hedges on this presumption: “[But] this benefit, as you see, is neither determinate nor probable, because safety is not related to [quarantine] as they claim.” Al-Nāṣirī reasons that rulers invoke it while exaggerating the danger, and worse yet, that people under quarantine fall ill anyhow from the disease that they intended to flee. Compelled by the ambiguity of quarantine’s efficacy, al-Nāṣirī brusquely concludes that “the benefit of quarantine is doubtful or lacking. If it is as such, then shari‘a would not take it into consideration” (184).

Having so briefly assessed quarantine’s principle benefit by doubting its veracity, al-Nāṣirī then turns to its harms. He states that these detriments may be categorized as both worldly (*dunyāwī*) and religious (*dīnī*)—a two-fold categorization that he did not afford to its benefits. As for the worldly detriment, al-Nāṣirī articulates an anxiety with striking contemporary resonance: that quarantine measures cause irrefutable harm to commerce by confining people, forbidding their movement, and impinging on their markets. The author does not elaborate the point further, allowing the succinct base appeal to human livelihood to speak for itself.

Al-Nāṣirī then takes up the question of religious harms stemming from quarantine, especially its impact on the faith of common believers (*al-‘amma*). The essence of this harm is that imposing quarantine could distort the beliefs (*‘aqā’id*) of commoners by rankling their trust (*tawakkul*) in God’s capacity for protection: “for commoners—due to their lack of understanding—these phenomena give rise to delusions, they believe them, and they fall into the trap of weak faith (*di‘f al-īmān*)” (184). Al-Nāṣirī’s logic thus implies that the faith of common believers is easily shakable, especially if they are forced by fear into a

practice with unclear benefits.<sup>13</sup> On top of this, Al-Nāṣirī situates these dire religious consequences within a well-trodden religious and political trope of his time: the justifiability of emulating of foreigners (*iqṭadā' al-a'jām*). This question in fact pervades many of the other parts of *Kitab al-Istiqṣā*, along with, among others, the work of al-Ṭaḥṭāwī that he cited previously.<sup>14</sup> For al-Nāṣirī, the embrace of quarantine fits unfortunately well within this dubious history: as whenever “foolish” (*ḥamqā*) commoners aggrandize foreign ways, such imitation will lead to the much-loathed state of social rebellion (*fitna*), “and what harm is worse than that?” (185).

He concludes the assessment of quarantine’s harms by citing two other jurists who expressed similar opinions. One jurist, Egyptian scholar Shihāb al-Dīn al-Qaṣṭallānī (d. 923/1517), addressed the topic in an exegesis (*tafsīr*) of Qur‘ān 4:102 (Sūrat al-Nisā’).<sup>15</sup> Al-Qaṣṭallānī interprets the verse as an appeal to humanity to be on guard against disease and even their obligation to use available medicines to treat them.<sup>16</sup> Here, al-Nāṣirī agrees with al-Qaṣṭallānī that any means necessary should be taken against plague, such as avoiding infected areas and taking medicines approved by doctors. However, al-Nāṣirī adds

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13 Al-Nāṣirī denies that his admonition denigrates commoners, stating that his concern arises from “fear for them and taking precaution for them so we do not leave them ignorant to do whatever they want or [that we] do with them what harms their religion and world” (184).

14 See also, e.g., Khayr al-Dīn al-Tūnisī (d. 1890), *Aqwam al-masālik fi ma'rifat aḥwāl al-mamālik*; Maḥdī al-Wazzānī (d.1923), *Al-Nawāzil al-jadīda al-kubrā fīmā li-ahl Fās wa-ghayrihim min al-badū wal-qurā al-musammā'a bi'l-Mi'yār al-Jadīd al-jāmi' al-mu'rib 'an fatāwā al-muta'akhirīn 'ulamā' al-maghrib*; and Shakīb Arslān, (d. 1946), *Limādhā ta'akhhara al-Muslimīn? Limādhā taqaddama ghayrihim?*

15 Qur‘ān 4:102 (Sūrat al-Nisā’), in its part cited by al-Nāṣirī: “There is no fault in you, if rain molests you, or you are sick, to lay aside your weapon; but take your precautions. God has prepared for the unbelievers a humbling chastisement.” AJ Arberry, *The Koran Interpreted* (New York: Touchstone, 1996), 116.

16 “[The verse] indicates the necessity of being on guard against (*ḥadhar*) all presumable harms (*maḍārr maẓnūna*), and thus it is known that treatment by medicine, being on guard against the plague, and being wary of sitting under a leaning wall is obligatory (*wājib*).” (185). For the full exegesis of the verse, see Abū ‘Abbās Shihāb al-Dīn Aḥmad b. Muḥammad b. Abī Bakr b. ‘Abd a-Malik al-Qaṣṭallānī al-Qutaybī al-Miṣrī, *Irshād al-sārī li-sharḥ Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī*, Vol. 7 (Cairo: al-Maṭba‘a al-Kubrā al-Amīriyya, 1905/6 [1323 AH]), 96.



that this obligation clearly excludes any means that would result in a legal harm (*mafsada shar'yya*) “like this quarantine” (185). Al-Nāṣirī likewise cites his contemporary al-Hāshimī b. Khaḍrā', then Qāḍī of Marrakesh, who agreed that skepticism is well warranted: “as for the ruling on quarantine, it is prohibited (*min al-ḥaẓr*) as you mentioned,” Bin Khaḍrā' wrote in a letter to al-Nāṣirī. For Bin Khaḍrā', this is namely due to its association with “fleeing from [God’s] justice” (cited previously in al-Ṭaḥṭawī), the harm of which outweighs quarantine’s benefits.<sup>17</sup> Al-Nāṣirī reports that Bin Khaḍrā' then cited numerous texts that he (al-Nāṣirī) excluded for length, relying on the clarity of the ruling without them. Bolstered by these two voices, al-Nāṣirī concludes his personal digression and returns to the history of Sultan al-Manṣūr’s own death from the very plague that so worried him (186).

#### ANALYSIS: REASON, JURISPRUDENCE, AND THE USES OF HISTORY

This brief excursus that al-Nāṣirī presents as historical commentary contains a rich and diverse array of historical insights for both his own period and the contemporary moment. Perhaps most relevantly, it demonstrates how a public intellectual voice concerned with pandemic articulated its dangers within concurrent and sometimes competing political, social, and economic anxieties. Despite his negative assessment, al-Nāṣirī does not deny the danger of plague or the logic that human proximity contributes to its spread. He endeavors instead to weigh quarantine’s broader consequences within the rubric of *maṣlaḥa mursala*, a Mālikī legal methodology that 1) presupposes no textual evidence for the issue, and 2) presupposes the Islamic jurisprudential qualification for its undertaker.<sup>18</sup> Al-Nāṣirī therefore ap-

17 According to al-Nāṣirī, Bin Khaḍrā' surmises that, “this ruling is violated only by arrogant followers of caprice” (186).

18 Islamic legal scholars disagreed on whether the juriconsult undertaking *maṣlaḥa mursala* necessarily should have attained the rank of *mujtahid*, a scholar qualified to perform independent legal reasoning (*ijtihād*). Opwis, *Maṣlaḥa and the Purpose of Law*, 171 (Footnote 141).

peals to his own judgment, arguing that the supposed benefits of quarantine cannot outweigh its potential consequences on human faith and livelihood. In the end, he gives credence to these ostensible harms to argue that quarantine is forbidden in *sharīʿa*.

The normative benefit of quarantine and indeed al-Nāṣirī's own historical narrative of Sultan al-Manṣūr offer paradigms in favor of quarantine, yet al-Nāṣirī ultimately subordinates these to anxieties that clearly speak louder to him. Such rationale has been all too clear in the current moment, as governments and politicians, thrill-seekers, and conspiracy theorists alike shroud scientific data in conspiracy and doubt. Here, I propose that the lesson is not so much one to look back and deride al-Nāṣirī's lack of knowledge and/or ambivalence about public health in his assessment—it is indeed too simple of a conclusion and somewhat ahistorical. Beyond accounting for the limited biological knowledge at his disposal, it is difficult to reject wholly the validity of concerns that he articulates. The worldly detriment that he mentions—the impact of quarantine on economic livelihood—has loomed large in the United States and elsewhere as social interaction has come to a sudden halt. At the same time, al-Nāṣirī logically equates the skepticism of Western practices with a dire fear for the faith of his countrymen. In an era when narrative of Islamic “decline” and European supremacy pervaded Muslim intellectual discourses, this argument should not come as a surprise. Indeed, the fact that al-Nāṣirī so readily and quickly adopts tropes like Western imitation and *fitna* demonstrates how underlying social anxieties—then like now—pervade and indeed shape our responses to these questions.

Al-Nāṣirī's exploration of quarantine through the lens of Islamic normativity likewise sheds light on Islamic legal reasoning as it existed in this context and persists today. The contemporary Moroccan state has adopted the jurisprudential concept of *maṣlaḥa mursala* as a pseudo national creed that embodies the ideal of Moroccan Islam's flexibility. The ensuing rulings based on *maṣlaḥa mursala* are thus highly circumstantial, meaning that a scholar could declare the same action licit or illicit depending

on the context (or the scholars could disagree). As al-Nāṣirī's own writing suggests, the sources of knowledge for doing so may be as varied as political norms, scientific knowledge, and/or spiritual preservation. This means that a jurist then or now could invoke *maṣlaḥa mursala* to come to a starkly opposite view of quarantine: that the benefit of saving lives outweighs the harm that quarantine inflicts. This points, on the one hand, to Islamic jurisprudential reasoning's potential flexibility for addressing novel issues of time and place. On the other hand, however, jurists naturally cannot embark on such discretionary endeavors free of the political and social exigencies of their own times and places. This becomes even more pronounced when evaluating the normativity of a question with such unknown dangers and consequences. Notwithstanding the Islamic ideal of independent jurisprudential reasoning, al-Nāṣirī's intellectual undertaking thereby shows the simultaneous efficacy yet ephemerality of such legal methodologies.

Finally, this section of *Kitāb al-Istiḡṣā* tells us as much about the enterprise of telling history as it does about the content of that history itself. That is to say, the anecdote on al-Manṣūr recounts a snippet of a 1000-plus year history, one that involves the Sultan al-Manṣūr and his movements amidst impending pestilence. However, Al-Nāṣirī diverges from that historical narrative itself to digress into his own thoughts about quarantine based on al-Manṣūr's words. The ensuing excursus, however, scarcely mentions al-Manṣūr's decisions: instead, they recount al-Nāṣirī's own personal narrative—his life in “the year of the plague”—and grappling with the permissibility of quarantine. This, of course, results in an exhibition of his own legal-intellectual approach by which he concludes that *sharī'a* rejects it. In this way, al-Nāṣirī's excursus on nineteenth-century quarantine emerges as the main substance of the text, while the historical narrative of al-Manṣūr itself is merely pretext. Regarded as such, a historical work like *Kitāb al-Istiḡṣā* holds as much, if not more, historical value for al-Nāṣirī's own time than that which he recounts. Whether al-Manṣūr sustained a similar crisis of conscience three centuries prior, he becomes for al-Nāṣirī's

history a crucial case study in the tension of expediency and legality. Consciously or not, al-Nāṣirī writes himself into that narrative as the final arbiter of this timeless political and moral dilemma.

It remains to be seen, of course, what future historians and public voices will conclude about the social and economic casualties of pandemic. Without doubt, the anxieties underlying political control, economic capacity, and social standing will continue to frame these reactions alongside, or in spite of, scientific assessments. In contemporary Morocco, this has included state led religious and scientific justifications for quarantine—as well as coercive measures to enforce them. At the same time, we who see ourselves enduring an unprecedented challenge will not stop trying to look to the past for answers. Doing so will involve not merely invoking comparable incidents past, but inevitably reading them through the lens of our present challenges. At the intersection of moral and legal reasoning, scientific knowledge, and effective policy making, our historical narratives themselves loom large over the choices available for the path forward. Indeed, what we write today about this history—no less, a musing on quarantine in nineteenth-century Morocco—will provide a potent source for future assessments of our actions in this uncertain moment.