
FACT SHEET

COVID-19 and the Plague of Amwas

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Background

Since COVID-19 was first reported in the United Arab Emirates on January 29, 2020, regional news outlets and social media circles have been awash with reports of the Plague of Amwas. In 639 AD/18H, a plague emerged in the village of Amwas, located 12 kilometers southeast of Ramlah and approximately 26 kilometers from Jerusalem (Biblical ‘Emmaus’, destroyed in 1967 and converted into ‘Canada Park’). The Plague of Amwas figures into a long series of epidemics known as the Justinian Plagues, which ravaged Byzantine territories beginning in 541 and re-emerged sporadically until 750. The plagues were genetically related in a way not unlike the family of coronaviruses first found in humans in the 1960s. The Plague of Amwas became significant for the quarantine measures that authorities under the Caliph ‘Umar bin al-Khattāb (644/23) took to contain its spread and the number of prominent Companions that had died. For many in the region, the story of Amwas supplied the ethical impetus to uphold and observe COVID-19 quarantine orders issued by authorities.

The Plague: Outbreak and Response

The Plague of Amwas survives in recent memory largely because of its documentation. Classic history books such as *Tārīkh al-Tabarī* and Ibn Kathīr’s *al-Bidayah wal-Nihāyah* dedicate large sections to the Plague of Amwas, and biographies of the Companions (*tabaqāt* or *kutub al-siyar*) mention it too. Most critical in

terms of detail and rigour of authenticity, the collections of Sahīh al-Bukhārī and Sahīh Muslim narrate the decision to apply the quarantine, the crux of which is the prophetic instruction providing its moral authority. Marked by paragraph breaks, what follows is an account of the narration found in Sahīh al-Bukhārī woven into an account of the political consequences related by al-Tabarī:

A plague appeared in Amwas two years after the conquest of Jerusalem (637/16), and then briefly lapsed. In the period in which it had lapsed, ‘Umar left al-Madina with a delegation in order to meet with the leaders of the provinces of al-Shamⁱ in a place called Sargh (one of the valleys of Tabuk close to al-Sham). The leaders of al-Sham who came to greet ‘Umar’s delegation included its governor, Abu ‘Ubaidah bin al-Jarrah (commander in the conquest of Damascus and Jerusalem, d. 639/18), Khālīd bin al-Walīd (commander in the Ridda Wars and the conquest of Iraq, d. 642/21), ‘Amr bin al-‘Aas (commander in the conquest of Palestine and later governor of Egypt, d. 664/43), Yazīd bin abī Sufyān (commander in the conquest of Palestine, d. 639/18), Suhail bin ‘Aumer (leader of one of the brigades in the Battle of Yarmouk, d. 639/18). At the meeting, they told ‘Umar and his delegation that a plague had struck al-Sham. ‘Umar consulted his delegation – first the early Muhajirūn – asking, ‘Should we continue to Amwas or return to al-Madina?’ They disagreed amongst themselves, but most recommended a return to al-Madina. Then he called upon the Ansār, who likewise disagreed. Finally, he called upon those Quraysh notables who had migrated to al-Madina the year Mecca was conquered, who unanimously agreed that ‘Umar and his delegation should return. ‘Umar ultimately decided upon that course of action. He

announced to all that were present, “I’m leaving in the morning, mounting my camel, and going back to al-Madina”. Disagreeing with the decision, Abu ‘Ubaidah bin al-Jarrāh said, “Are you fleeing from Allah’s Qadr?” To which ‘Umar said, “If only someone other than you had said such a thing, O Aba ‘Ubaidah” – pointing to both his high esteem of Abu ‘Ubaidah and the severity of what he had just said. “Yes”, he continued, “We flee from Allah’s Qadr to Allah’s Qadr! Imagine you had a camel down in the valley. One side of the valley is fertile and the other side is barren. If you grazed her on the fertile side, would you not be doing so by Allah’s Qadr? And if you grazed her on the barren side, would you not be doing so by Allah’s Qadr?” Then Abdel-Rahman bin ‘Auf (one of the first ten men to accept Islam and a nominator of caliphs, d. 656/~31) – who had been absent from the previous consultations – came in to say that he had knowledge about this affair (i.e. plagues). He said, “I heard Allah’s Messenger upon whom be peace and blessings say, “If [the plague] is in a land where you happen to be, then do not leave that land. And if it is in a land where you are not, then do not approach that land”. Pleased at that word, ‘Umar and his delegation returned to al-Madina while Abu ‘Ubaidah and his returned to their posts in al-Sham. ⁱⁱ

Over the course of ‘Umar’s journey back to al-Madina, the plague of Amwas had spread with more intensity, rapidly taking lives across al-Sham. When ‘Umar heard of this, he composed a letter to Abu ‘Ubaidah, “I have a pressing need from you that I wish to speak to you verbally, so I ask that when this letter reaches you, you come forward (to al-Madina).” Abu ‘Ubaidah understood from this letter that ‘Umar wanted him to come in person in order to save him from the plague. He replied to ‘Umar’s letter thanking him for his concern but he informed him that he is but a soldier amongst Muslim soldiers and that he will not separate from them until death do them part. When ‘Umar received Abu ‘Ubaidah’s letter, he cried. The people around him said, “O Commander of the Faithful, did Abu ‘Ubaidah die?” To which he replied, “No, but it is as if he had”. Then ‘Umar wrote back to Abu ‘Ubaidah, ordering him to lead the people out of the low lands to elevated places. When Abu ‘Ubaidah received the letter, he called for Abu Mūsā al-Ash’arī (a Qur’an reciter and later governor of

Basra and Kufa, d. 662/44) and hastened him to find an elevated place for people to resettle. When Abu Mūsā returned to his home, he found that his wife had been afflicted by the plague. With Abu Mūsā unable to carry out the order, ‘Ubaidah then went to search for himself. By the time Abu ‘Ubaidah had mounted his camel, he had fallen ill. Before the plague overcame him, he advised the people in a speech, the end of which contained, “Indeed Allah has decreed for Banī Adam death, so all of them will die. The wisest of them are those who are most obedient to their Lord, and most active in working towards their Return”. The death of Abu ‘Ubaidah was followed shortly by that of Shurhabīl bin Hasana (military commander in the conquest of Jordan, d. 639/18). The governorship of al-Sham then passed from Abu ‘Ubaidah to Mu’āth bin Jabal (a compiler of the Qur’an and later governor of Yemen, d. 639/18) who then wrote the letter informing ‘Umar of Abu ‘Ubaidah’s death. Shortly after taking power, Mu’āth bin Jabal died and passed command to Yazīd bin abī Sufyān – himself dying shortly thereafter – and then to ‘Amr bin al-‘Aas, who then led groups of people up the mountains, which helped stem the spread of the plague. ⁱⁱⁱ

The Response: Aftermath and Legacy

After running its course for about a year, the Plague of Amwas claimed around 25,000 lives across Bilad al-Sham. The plague presents a compelling case study of leadership in times of crisis and marks what may have been the first documented application of a cordon sanitaire: the prohibition of people entering or leaving a contaminated land. ^{iv} Medical isolation – the isolation of diagnosed patients from undiagnosed patients – appears in Biblical scripture (1, Lev. 13.46) and was applied by Emperor Justinian in Byzantine territories when he ordered the isolation of travelers arriving from contaminated areas in 549. ^v In 1377, this kind of quarantine was applied to ships docking in southern Europe to contain the spread of the Black Plague. ^{vi} But these quarantines still allowed for travel between lands. It was only late into the spread of the Black Plague in the fourteenth century that some Asian and European

cities began preventing people from entering and leaving contaminated areas^{vii}, thus adopting the kind of quarantine applied in Amwas. In the era of COVID-19, countries that have closed their borders and airports to all but emergency cases are again practicing this kind of quarantine. As of mid-March, ninety per cent of people currently live in countries with some form of travel restrictions. Among them, about 3 billion people, or 39 per cent, live in countries with borders completely closed to noncitizens and nonresidents, several of which are part of the WANA region.^{viii}

ⁱ In the time of the Four Rightly-Guided Caliphs and the Umayyad Empire, Bilad al-Sham or Greater Syria was divided into five provinces (*ajnād*): *jund al-urdun*, *jund filastīn*, *jund dimasq*, *jund homs*, and *jund qinasrīn*.

ⁱⁱ For the narrations mentioned in Sahīh al-Bukhārī and Sahīh Muslim and their explanation, “الدرر السننية” الموسوعة الحديثية”, www.dorar.net/hadith/sharh/24620.

ⁱⁱⁱ “Part 4, Reports on the Plague of Amwas.” *Tārīkh Al-Tabarī: tārīkh Al-Rusul Wa-Al-mulūk Li-Abī Ja‘far Muhammad Ibn Jarīr Al-Tabarī*, by Tabarī, Muhammad ibn Jarīr and Ibrāhīm, Muhammad Abū al-Fadl, Dār Al-Ma‘ārif, 1967.

^{iv} The only other mention of a cordon sanitaire before the fourteenth century is an obscure reference in which armed guards prevented travel between plague-stricken Provence and the Diocese of Cahors in France, sometime in the seventh century, found in Knowelden J (1979) Quarantine and Isolation. The New Encyclopedia Britannica, 15th ed., pp. 326–327. Chicago, IL: Helen Hemingway Benton.

^v Ibidem.

^{vi} Paul S. Sehdev, “Origin of Quarantine.” *OUP Academic*, Oxford University Press, 1 Nov. 2002,

academic.oup.com/cid/article/35/9/1071/330421.; Paul S. Sehdev, “The Origin of Quarantine.” *Clinical Infectious Diseases*, no. 35, 2002, pp. 1071–1072.

^{vii} “Quarantine.” *Encyclopedia of Public Health: Principles, People, and Programs*, by Sally Kuykendall, ABC-CLIO, LLC, 2018, pp. 519–521.

^{viii} Phillip Connor. “More than Nine-in-Ten People Worldwide Live in Countries with Travel Restrictions amid COVID-19.” *Pew Research Center*, Pew Research Center, 1 Apr. 2020, www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2020/04/01/more-than-nine-in-ten-people-worldwide-live-in-countries-with-travel-restrictions-amid-covid-19/.