



Upholding the Sunnah of Moonsighting

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Following the Sunnah of the Prophet Muḥammad ﷺ is a cornerstone of Islamic practice, as it ensures that we align our actions with divine guidance. Allah ﷻ says in the Qur'ān:

لَقَدْ كَانَ لَكُمْ فِي رَسُولِ اللَّهِ أُسْوَةٌ حَسَنَةٌ لِمَن كَانَ يَرْجُو اللَّهَ وَالْيَوْمَ الْآخِرَ وَذَكَرَ اللَّهَ كَثِيرًا

"Indeed, in the Messenger of Allah you have an excellent example for anyone whose hope is in Āllah and the Last Day and who remembers Allah often". (33:21)

The Prophet ﷺ also said:

فَعَلَيْكُمْ بِسُنَّتِي وَسُنَّةِ الْخُلَفَاءِ الرَّاشِدِينَ الْمُهَدِّدِينَ، عَصُوا عَلَيْهَا بِالنَّوَاجِذِ، وَإِيَّاكُمْ وَمُحَدَّثَاتِ الْأُمُورِ؛ فَإِنَّ كُلَّ بِدْعَةٍ ضَلَالَةٌ

"So you must keep to my Sunnah and to the Sunnah of the Khulafā ar-Rāshidīn (the rightly guided caliphs), those who guide to the right way. Cling to it stubbornly [literally: with your molar teeth]. Beware of newly invented matters [in the religion], for verily every Bid'ah (innovation) is misguidance." (Abū Dāwūd: Ḥadīth 28)

As the holy month of Ramaḍān approaches, we find ourselves at that time of the year again when the issue of Moonsighting becomes a topic of discussion in every household across Australia, often leading to confusion over the varying announcements regarding its start date. Quarrels and arguments surface annually at the commencement of this blessed month, detracting from its sanctity. This is not the objective of Ramaḍān, rather a month meant to cultivate Taqwā and commemorate the revelation of the Qur'ān.

It is deeply unfortunate that Muslims across Australia remain so divided on this matter when the solution is straightforward. The Prophet ﷺ commanded us to begin and conclude fasting based on the sighting of the moon, leaving no room for dispute or division. This clear instruction should serve as a unifying guideline for the community. In one Ḥadīth, the Prophet ﷺ said:

صُومُوا لِرُؤْيَيْهِ وَأَفْطِرُوا لِرُؤْيَيْهِ فَإِنْ غُمِّيَ عَلَيْكُمْ فَأَكْمِلُوا الْعِدَّةَ

"Observe fast on sighting it (the new moon) and break (fast) on sighting it (the new moon), but if the sky is cloudy for you, then complete the number (of thirty)". (Saḥīḥ Muslim 1081b)

Another narration states:

لَا تَصُومُوا حَتَّى تَرَوْا الْهَلَالَ وَلَا تُفْطِرُوا حَتَّى تَرَوْهُ فَإِنْ غُمَّ عَلَيْكُمْ فَأَكْمِلُوا الْعِدَّةَ ثَلَاثِينَ

"Do not start the fast or break it until you see the new moon. If the new moon is obscured from you, then complete a full thirty days". (Muwatta Mālik Book 18, Hadith 3)

There are over 30 narrations emphasising the importance of sighting the moon. In fact, Ibn Taymiyyah (RA) cites 32 traditions of the Prophet ﷺ in his work Ru'yat al-Hilāl wal-Hisāb al-Falakī (Sighting the Moon and Astronomical Calculations). The two narrations mentioned above are sufficient to underscore the significance of adhering to the Sunnah of sighting the moon.

According to Islamic law, duties spanning full days are based on sighting the moon. The start and end of fasting, the days of Ḥajj—a pillar of Islam—are determined by the moon. Zakāt is calculated upon the completion of a lunar year, and a woman's 'Iddah is also based on lunar days. Many other Islamic rulings similarly rely on moon sighting.

Muslims who, unfortunately, base their religious understanding and practices on personal notions and flawed ideas will be held accountable in the Hereafter. Islam is a universal religion, revealed for all of humanity, regardless of location, wealth, education, or level of scientific progress. The laws and rulings of Islam are equally binding on all Muslims across the world, with no exceptions.

Furthermore, it is important to reflect on the real purpose of fasting, 'Eīd, Ḥajj, and similar acts. Are these events mere celebrations, or are they acts of 'Ibādah? If we consider them only as celebrations, there is no need for further thought—we could celebrate 'Eīd whenever convenient and prioritise unity over all else. However, if we acknowledge that these are acts of 'Ibādah, then we are obligated to follow the rules of Sharī'ah strictly. Personal opinions or logic hold no place in matters already defined by the Sharī'ah. Whatever conditions it has set for us must be adhered to.

Philosophy of Moon Sighting

'Allāmah Ḥāfiẓ Ibn Ḥajar (RA) beautifully explained the philosophy of Moonsighting, stating that the Prophet ﷺ commanded completing 30 days of fasting if the sky is cloudy and the moon is not sighted. He did not instruct consulting scientists or astronomers. This principle ensures simplicity and equality, allowing everyone to determine the new month without dispute.

The great scholar Shāh Walīyyullāh (RA) of Delhi also echoed this in Ḥujjatullāh al-Bālighah, emphasising that if the moon is not sighted, completing 30 days is the Sharī'ah principle, eliminating doubt.

Mufti Muḥammad Shafī' (RA) highlighted that Islam's laws are universal, not confined to specific places or people. The reliance on modern technology to determine the moon would disadvantage poorer communities, contradicting Islam's inclusive spirit. The simplicity of moon sighting ensures fairness and accessibility for all Muslims, regardless of their resources or location. This timeless practice reflects Islam's universal and equitable nature.

The Myth of Muslim Unity and Its Clarification

The argument presented by some Muslims is that sighting the moon is Sunnah, whereas Muslim unity is Farḍ. They claim that for the sake of unity, even if fasting begins on the wrong day or 'Eīd is celebrated on a day of fasting, it is acceptable. While this argument appears appealing and promotes a sense of harmony, it requires evidence from the Qur'ān or Ḥadīth to justify abandoning an explicit command of Āllah ﷻ or the Prophet ﷺ or for the sake of unity. If such evidence existed, this myth could be easily justified. However, the reality is quite the opposite. Āllah ﷻ commands in the Qur'ān:

وَاعْتَصِمُوا بِحَبْلِ اللَّهِ جَمِيعًا وَلَا تَفَرَّقُوا

"And hold fast to the Rope of Āllah together and do not divide". (3:103)

This verse emphasises unity based on adherence to the Rope of Āllah—the Qur'ān and the Sunnah—not unity that compromises the fundamental teachings of Islam. **True unity is achieved through collective submission to the commands of Āllah ﷻ and His Messenger ﷺ, not by disregarding them for convenience or superficial harmony.**

The verse forbidding differences and divisions does so within the framework of Sharī'ah, not by abandoning it. The Qur'ān warns that abandoning Sharī'ah leads to disputes, as Āllah ﷻ states:

يَا أَيُّهَا الَّذِينَ آمَنُوا أَطِيعُوا اللَّهَ وَأَطِيعُوا الرَّسُولَ وَأُولِي الْأَمْرِ مِنْكُمْ فَإِنْ تَنَازَعْتُمْ فِي شَيْءٍ فَرُدُّوهُ إِلَى اللَّهِ وَالرَّسُولِ
إِنْ كُنْتُمْ تُؤْمِنُونَ بِاللَّهِ وَالْيَوْمِ الْآخِرِ

"O you who believe! Obey Allah, and obey the Messenger, and those in authority among you. If you disagree on anything, refer it to Allah and the Messenger, if you truly believe in Allah and the Last Day". (4:59)

This verse clarifies that unity is achieved through adherence to Sharī'ah, not by abandoning it.

The Prophet ﷺ also said:

لَا طَاعَةَ لِمَخْلُوقٍ فِي مَعْصِيَةِ اللَّهِ عَزَّ وَجَلَّ

"There is no obedience to any created being if it involves disobedience to Allāh". (Musnad Aḥmad 1095)

Unity based on disregarding Sharī'ah is a dangerous deception. True unity requires following Islam in its entirety, as the Prophet ﷺ said: *"A group from my ummah will always be upon the truth, fighting for it"*. (Saḥīḥ Muslim 1923)

This Ḥadīth emphasises that truth is not determined by the majority but by adherence to Sharī'ah, upheld by those who follow the Sunnah of the Prophet ﷺ. The consensus of knowledgeable scholars who follow the Sunnah is essential to guide the Ummah towards unity on the path of truth.

Scientific Research and Islamic Law

Today, certain long-standing Sunan (plural of Sunnah), practiced by the entire Ummah for 1400 years, are being challenged. One such great Sunnah is Rū'yat al-Hilāl (sighting the crescent moon). Many argue that since we live in an era of science and technology, we should embrace scientific advancements and exercise Ijtihād, allowing the determination of the new month without actual Moonsighting, relying solely on astronomical calculations. However, relying on astronomical calculations is incorrect for several reasons:

1. Ignoring Mutawātir Aḥādīth

Over forty Mutawātir (mass-transmitted) Aḥādīth emphasise Moonsighting. Imām Ṭaḥāwī declared these Aḥādīth as Mutawātir.

2. Disobedience to the Prophet ﷺ

Since numerous Aḥādīth stress sighting the moon, abandoning this practice contradicts the direct command of the Prophet ﷺ.

3. Contradiction to the Sunnah of the Prophet ﷺ and the Early Generations

The Prophet ﷺ, the Khulafā' al-Rāshidūn, Tābi'ūn, major scholars, and almost the entire Muslim world—especially the Arab world—have always followed Rū'yat al-Hilāl.

4. Astronomical Calculations are a Bid'ah (Innovation)

Ibn Taymiyyah (RA) stated: "Relying on calculations for the new moon is misguidance in Sharī'ah and an innovation in religion". (Majmū' al-Fatāwā, 25/207)

5. Opposition to the Consensus of the Ummah

Ibn al-Mundhir, Ibn Taymiyyah, Abū al-Walīd al-Bājī, Ibn Rushd, al-Qurṭubī, and Ibn 'Ābidīn (RA), among others, affirmed the Ijmā' (consensus) that relying solely on astronomical calculations to determine the new month is impermissible.

6. Following the Ways of Jews, Christians, and Sectarian Groups

Ibn Taymiyyah (RA) noted: "Our religion does not rely on calculations like the People of the Book (Jews and Christians)". (Majmū' al-Fatāwā, 25/140) He further compared it to the deviation of these groups (Majmū' al-Fatāwā, 6/590) and associated it with the Ismā'īlī sect, which disregards moon sighting in favor of numerical calculations. (Majmū' al-Fatāwā, 25/133)

7. No Support from any of the Four Imāms

Those who follow astronomical calculations do not adhere to any of the four Imāms or their schools of thought.

Why Restrict Moon Sighting to Man-Made Boundaries?

A common question often posed is why local Moonsighting should be restricted to man-made boundaries. Who defines what constitutes local sighting? Did scholars of the past address this issue? While these are valid questions, many are unaware that jurists from the past did discuss the concept of local sighting and often used the term "country" to define it. Islamic scholars have ruled that a whole country can be considered as one horizon (Maṭla') for the purpose of Moonsighting.

'Allāmah Ḥāfiẓ Ibn Ḥajar al-'Asqalānī quoted Ibn al-Mājishūn, who stated that if a ruler endorses a local sighting, the entire country should follow it, treating the country as one unified city under the ruler's authority. 'Allāmah al-Shawkānī supported this view in his writings.

This principle is widely implemented today. For example, in Saudi Arabia, a sighting of the moon in Makkah is accepted for Riyadh, despite the distance of almost 900km between the two cities. Similarly, in Pakistan and India, sightings in one city are valid for the entire nation. In Australia, this means that a sighting in Sydney should also apply to Perth and other cities.

Why Not Adopt Regional or Global Sighting?

While some jurists support the notion of regional or global moon sightings, Australia's unique geographical location makes it impractical. Positioned just west of the International Date Line, Australia is one of the first countries to experience sunset, with the sun setting hours later in regions to the west. For example, sunset in Saudi Arabia occurs about 8 hours after Australia, while in the Americas, it is approximately 18 hours later.

If Australia were to adopt global sightings, it would require waiting for reports from distant locations like California. This delay creates significant challenges. For instance, if the crescent is not sighted in Australia on the 29th of Sha'bān and the next day is declared the 30th, reports from Los Angeles could arrive around midday (on the next day) in Sydney, informing us that Ramaḍān has already begun. Following this approach would mean fasting for the remainder of the day and making up the day later, which is both impractical and disruptive.

A similar issue arises with 'Eīd. Australians could be fasting on the 30th of Ramaḍān when moon sighting reports from countries to the west indicate the start of Shawwāl. This would require immediately breaking the fast and rushing to perform 'Eīd prayers close to midday. Such a system would be chaotic and unfeasible for practical implementation in Australia.

Some suggest including Australia and its neighbours, like Indonesia, New Zealand, and Fiji, but this raises two issues. Firstly, the term "neighbouring countries" is vague—does it include Malaysia, Thailand, or China? Secondly, filtering sighting reports becomes increasingly difficult with a larger region. Past experiences show unreliable reports from neighbouring countries that cannot be verified, complicating the process.

Another issue with regional sighting, particularly in following Malaysia, is that Malaysia follows a combined Ru'yah (sighting) and Ḥisāb (calculation) methodology, using criteria of 3 degrees altitude and 6.4 degrees elongation. On the 29th of each Hijri month, an official Moonsighting is conducted. If the moon is sighted, the new Hijri month is declared. However, if the moon is not sighted but meets the predetermined criteria, it is considered sighted but obscured by clouds. This criterion is applied for nine months of the year. However, for the months of Ramaḍān, Shawwāl, and Dhul Ḥijjah, the final decision rests with the keeper of the seals.

For these reasons, limiting Moonsighting to Australia is more logical and practical, as adopted by major Muslim countries like Saudi Arabia, Egypt, and Morocco. Historically, this approach aligns with the practice of following the decision of the local Imām or governor within political boundaries. In countries without an Imām, scholars take on this role.

The Grand Mufti of Saudi Arabia, Sheikh 'Abdul 'Azīz bin Bāz, explicitly stated that the horizons of the entire world can never be unified. **He affirmed that using Makkah as the global reference point for moonsighting has no basis in Sharī'ah. Following discussions at Dār al-Iftā', the majority of scholars agreed that local moonsighting, accounting for differences in horizons, should be adopted.**

'Allāmah Muḥyī al-Dīn al-Nawawī supported this view, stating that moonsighting applies only within a specific region, such as the area where prayer is not shortened (Qaṣr). Similarly, 'Allāmah Ibn Rushd noted unanimous agreement among Fuqahā' that the sighting of the moon in one city does not extend to distant regions, such as Hijāz and Andalusia.

Sheikh al-Islām Ibn Taymiyyah also explained that during the time of the Ṣaḥābah and Ṭābi'ūn, moon sightings varied naturally between regions. Despite this, there is no evidence that people were required to retroactively fast or unify their dates. This demonstrates that differences in horizons were accepted without causing disputes. These perspectives affirm that local Moonsighting is a practical and authentic approach rooted in the Sunnah and early Islamic tradition.

Misconceptions About the 2nd Day Moon

A common misconception arises when people sight a large crescent moon on the 30th day of a month and assume it must be the second day of the new month. This assumption often stems from a lack of understanding of moonsighting and the conditions required for the visibility of the crescent (Hilāl).

From an Islamic perspective, all efforts must be made to sight the Hilāl on the 29th of each month. If it is not sighted, the month is completed with 30 days. The size, thickness, and visibility of the Hilāl depend on factors such as the moon's age from the "new moon" phase and the time difference between moonset and sunset. Importantly, a thicker crescent does not necessarily indicate a second-day moon.

In astronomy, the "new moon" refers to the completely dark and invisible phase when the previous month's moon disappears. Around 17–23 hours later, the crescent becomes visible, marking the start of the new month. If the new moon is born less than 15 hours before sunset, it is generally invisible until the following day. By then, it may be 39 or more hours old and appear thick, yet it remains a first-day moon.

The teachings of the Prophet ﷺ clarify this matter. Abul Bakhtari reported that during 'Umrah, some companions debated whether the crescent was two or three days old. When they consulted Ibn 'Abbās (RA), he replied with the words of the Prophet ﷺ: *"Verily Āllah deferred it until it is seen, so it is to be reckoned from the night you saw it"*. (Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim 1088a)

This Ḥadīth confirms that the start of the month depends on the actual sighting of the moon, not speculation about its size or age. As Muslims, we are guided by the Prophet's instruction to begin the month upon seeing the Hilāl, ensuring that we follow the Sharī'ah rather than assumptions!

To conclude, there has never been any dispute regarding whether the moon should be sighted physically or whether astronomical calculations can be used from the time of the Prophet ﷺ, his companions, the Tābi'ūn, the Tāb' al-tābi'īn, the Khulafā', and the four Imāms. It was unanimously agreed upon by all of them that the beginning and ending of Ramaḍān must be determined by sighting the moon, as evidenced by numerous authentic Aḥādīth. The practice of relying on astronomical calculations to determine the start and end of Ramaḍān is a new phenomenon in Islam, one that did not exist in the early generations.

It is essential for all of us to follow the Prophet ﷺ, especially in an age when many are abandoning his Sunnah. In such times, the importance of adhering to and obeying the Prophet's ﷺ Sunnah increases manifold, as it serves as a beacon of guidance and a means of preserving the integrity of our faith.

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