

# Moon Sighting by Shaykh Mohammed Ibrahim Memon Madani (Darul Uloom Al Madania, Buffalo, NY, USA)

## Introduction

One only has to mention Ramadan and you envision many things. The first of them, moon sighting, and then the altercations and the incessant squabbling that resound in the masajid and the communities throughout the beginning and at the end of the month of Ramadan.

There are two roles in regards to moon sighting. The first role is that of the eminent scholars who have always been the well-wishers of the Ummah. They aspired to take out confrontation and sectarianism from the concept of moon sighting. They make efforts every year to bring this matter to a consensus and to unify the communities and masajid on one decision. Despite their attempts, however, their efforts have fallen on deaf ears with little to no difference on the outcome of each coming Ramadan.

The second role is played by those who put aside intellect and judge matters based on their emotions. The result: they remain stubborn on their personal opinion though it may clearly contradict the Quran and Sunnah. People are forced to follow their opinion to the extent that one who disagrees with it becomes a social pariah. There is no accountability if these emotional people back-bite him, falsely accuse him, or curse him as if it is permissible. Sometimes it goes to the extent of physical abuse for his difference of opinion and even worse, the one who beat him actually thinks he is performing a good deed.

In essence, a purely juristically Islamic issue becomes the playground for a few people who try to solve and settle it with emotions and fieriness. It is relegated from an Islamic issue to a personal one. Differing with an opinion translates to an attack on the individual who holds that opinion. The result of this is self-evident. One of the most sacred days of worship in Islam and two days of celebration of the Ummah are transformed (by Shaytan) into three days of disunity and chaos.

That is why it is important to analyze this issue of moon sighting through the Quran and Sunnah. Thus, every Muslim can establish his position according to the Quran and Sunnah and likewise know the position of others based on the evidences used to support their position. Following are a few points that are discussed that will help us reflect on this issue and will alleviate, if not eliminate, the schisms and simmering tensions between both parties; most importantly, it will help us open our minds to the opinions of others. And all this is not difficult for Allah ﷻ.

There are a couple of things that we can all agree on. First, the months of the Islamic calendar are based on the moon. Second, there is no disagreement that an Islamic month will be either 29 or 30 days; it can neither be less than 29 days nor more than 30 days. The question then is how do we determine the beginning and the end of the month? The following are the various opinions of how and when to begin a

new month:

- 1) Some people follow astronomical calculations. They say that the birth of the new moon determined by the astronomical calculations will determine the beginning of the new moon.
- 2) Others are of the view that the moon sighted anywhere in the world will initiate the beginning of the month for all Muslims.
- 3) There are those who follow the moon sighting of Saudi Arabia. Therefore, the moon sighted elsewhere, in their view, will not determine the beginning of the new month. This has created a nationalistic tendency amongst Muslims of different ethnic backgrounds. A Pakistani may say I will only follow the moon sighting from Pakistan or from a person of Pakistani descent or a Turk may say I will only accept the moon sighting of a Turk or the beginning of the new month when it is officially declared in Turkey.
- 4) Some people believe in following Saudi Arabia for the month of Dhul-Hijjah only and local moon sighting for the remaining eleven months.
- 5) Finally, there are people who believe in local moon sighting, which means that the new month will not begin in their area until the moon is sighted in their own or surrounding areas even if the moon is sighted elsewhere in the world.

## 1. ASTRONOMICAL CALCULATIONS

Determining the beginning and the end of a new month through astronomical calculations is unfounded in the Quran and the Sunnah. The standard in the *shari'ah* for discerning the beginning of a new month and the end of the last month is based on actual moon sighting; which means that if the moon is not sighted, the month will be completed with 30 days. In the Ahadith, the Blessed Prophet ﷺ incessantly put emphasis on this:

لَا تَصُومُوا وَلَا تُفْطَرُوا حَتَّى تَرَوْا الْهَيْلَالَ

"Do not fast unless you see the moon; do not break your fast until you see the moon." (*Bukhari H.1773, Muslim H.1795, Nasai H.2093, Abu-Dawood H.1976, Muatta Malik H.557*)

This means that if you do not see the moon, then do not begin the month of Ramadan; likewise, do not celebrate the Eid until you sight the moon. In another Hadith the Blessed Prophet ﷺ clearly prohibited the use of calculations. He said:

عَنْ إِبْنِ عُمَرَ رَضِيَ اللَّهُ عَنْهُمَا - عَنِ النَّبِيِّ صَلَّى اللَّهُ عَلَيْهِ وَسَلَّمَ قَالَ إِنَّا أُمَّةٌ أُمِّيَّةٌ لَا نَكْتُبُ وَلَا نَحْسِبُ الشَّهْرَ هَكَذَا وَهَكَذَا وَهَكَذَا - وَعَقَدَ الْإِبْهَامَ فِي الثَّلَاثَةِ - وَالشَّهْرُ هَكَذَا وَهَكَذَا وَهَكَذَا

"We are an illiterate nation. We do not write or calculate months. He said it is like this, this, or this. Saying this, the Blessed Prophet ﷺ lifted his hands three times with all fingers spread the first two times and the thumb hidden the third time to indicate 29 days. Then he said the month is like this, this, and this and again lifted his hands three times, this time all fingers spread out each time to indicate 30 days." (*Muslim H.1806, Bukhari H.1780, Nasai H.2111, Abu-Dawood H.1975*)

In this Hadith, the Blessed Prophet ﷺ certainly does not mean to say that this is an Ummah of illiterates, but rather he is emphasizing their simplicity of not being educated in the subject which we are discussing. The purpose behind this is to declare that we do not know calculations nor are we going to use this method to figure our months. This is a universal religion. Anyone from anywhere can follow it wherever he may be. If the system was based on calculations, the decision of millions of people would be in the hands of the few who would decide when the month begins and when it ends. Instead, Islam based the lunar calendar on moon sighting so that even Bedouins, who are out of touch with most modern sciences and technologies, could sight the moon and know when the month begins and ends.

This may raise a question in the minds of many that if Islam is all about simplicity, then why do we use timetables for Salah and depend on the calculations that produce those timetables. This is an important question because the answer to it will prove how Islam is indeed a universal religion and will also reveal the most fascinating miracle of the Blessed Prophet ﷺ. To understand this, we need to remember that **in Islam, the beginning and the end of each month rely on the sighting of the moon, while the Salah timings are based on the movement of the sun.**

Calculations, to this day, have not been able to inform us of when the moon can first be sighted; the only thing we know from the calculations is when the moon is born. And we as humans cannot see the moon immediately after its birth. How many hours does it take before the moon can be seen? Sometimes it can be seen after 14 hours and at other times it cannot be seen even after 20 hours. This is because there are many different factors that contribute to the sighting of the moon.

The sun is different. During the day, the sun is very easily seen except for when the skies are overcast. This is one of the differences between the sun and the moon. Another major difference between the two is that the sun runs on a set path that is the same each and every year. For example, if one measures the time of the rising and setting of the sun on the first of January, 2005, he will find that there is no difference from the time of the rising and setting of the sun on the same date, one year before or after. And if one measures the time of the rising and setting of the sun on the same date ten years later, it will still be no different from the time the sun rose and set on January 1, 2005. Thus, if one person notes the movement of the sun one whole year and makes a timetable out of his observations, he could continue using that timetable for the rest of his life. In reality, this is exactly how the timetable for the Salah was made. Once this timetable was produced, there was no need to repeat the process of observing the sun.

In regards to the moon, it is a very different case. If Ramadan was 30 days this year, it won't necessarily be 30 days the next year or the year after that. This highlights the miracle of the Blessed Prophet ﷺ in which he prohibited the use of calculations and formulas to determine the birth of the moon (“**we don't write nor do we make calculations**”), but did not include under this order, the movement of the sun. How was the Blessed Prophet ﷺ to know 1,400 years ago of the consistency that was in the movement of the sun and that, despite the latest breakthroughs in astronomical data and calculations, no one would ever be able to read the exact time of the sighting of the new moon.

In summary, it is not possible nor has the *Shari'ah* allowed the Islamic lunar calendar to be based on calculations. This has never been permitted and has been the consensus of the Ummah. Though, this much can be said that Islam does allow using astronomical calculations to aid in moon sighting. For example, it can be helpful in providing us the approximate timings to when the moon will most likely be visible, or the age of the moon at the time of the setting of the sun, or the time the moon will set.

## 2. UNIVERSAL MOON SIGHTING

The second opinion is that wherever the moon is sighted in the world, whether it be for the beginning or the end of the month, all Muslims are obligated to accept that moon sighting for the beginning (or end) of the new month. If we review the Ahadith, we find that it certainly accepts the possibility of this view. For example, it says in the Ahadith:

وَأَفْطِرُوا لِرُؤْيَيْهِ صُومُوا لِرُؤْيَيْهِ ،

**"Upon seeing the moon, begin your fast and upon seeing the moon, end your fast (meaning, make your next day the day of Eid)."**  
(*Bukhari H.1776, Muslim H.1809, Tirmizi H.620, Nasai H.2088*)

It could be said that this means that wherever the moon is sighted, Muslims all over the world will begin or end the month. Thus, many people of this opinion use this type of Ahadith to support their claim that wherever the moon is sighted, every Muslim around the world should begin the new month. But if we look at this practically and realistically, we see that few actually act upon this opinion because those who do follow this opinion use it as back-up evidence to prove that we should only follow Saudi Arabia. When news of a moon sighting reaches them from any other part of the world, they do not accept it.

Secondly, this opinion is very impractical. Who is going to keep constant watch on 200+ countries around the world, receive incoming reports of moon sighting, and filter the false reports from the true reports? For this reason, none of the Islamic countries follow this opinion. Even Saudi Arabia does not accept reports of moon sighting from other countries. Therefore, it is impractical for many reasons.

A few years ago, when Morocco reported sighting the moon before Saudi Arabia, I asked some of our brothers who were of this opinion to accept this announcement. They said we are going to wait for the moon sighting announcement from Saudi Arabia. No one gave any consideration to the moon sighting announcement in Morocco. Even some years prior to that, there were official moon sighting reports from Italy, yet nobody gave this report any serious thought. Instead, they waited for the announcement to come from Saudi Arabia. Similarly was the case with Libya, whose sighting was also rejected in lieu of Saudi Arabia's moon sighting announcement.

This clarifies the point that this opinion is not in practice. Nobody has actually ever attempted, even once, to establish that everyone should start the new month because of a moon sighting somewhere else in the world.

### 3. FOLLOWING SAUDI ARABIA

The third opinion is that we should follow Saudi Arabia. From the *Shari'ah* point of view, there is no evidence for this in the Quran and Sunnah. There is only the emotional argument put forth by some that say since Saudi Arabia is the birthplace of Islam, or it is where the Blessed Prophet ﷺ lived, so it should be recognized as the prime decision maker in such important matters.

Aside from having no basis in *Shari'ah*, this opinion is problematic in another way too. What if the moon is sighted elsewhere before it is sighted in Saudi Arabia? What are the Muslims of that region suppose to do? If they wait for the announcement to come in from Saudi

Arabia, they would be violating the directives of Ahadith, which clearly state that fasting and breaking the fast should begin with the moon sighting. On the other hand, if they follow their own moon sighting, they would then be ignoring Saudi Arabia, whether it is for Ramadan, Eid Al-Fitr or Eid Al-Adha. Therefore, to follow the moon sighting of Saudi Arabia is incorrect.

Since the promulgation of this opinion, Muslims from other countries have sought to do the same. For example, Pakistan performs its own local moon sighting. Pakistan may argue that since Saudi Arabia goes according to its own moon sighting, Pakistan will also go with its own moon sighting; it does not need to follow any other country. Who is to tell Pakistan that there is no proof for its opinion or for the opinion of those in Saudi Arabia.

Many of those who follow the moon sighting of Saudi Arabia also say that the Hajj takes place in Saudi Arabia; therefore, we should follow its moon sighting. This type of argument has no evidence in the *Shari'ah* either. If somebody does base the body of their claim on this evidence then prays his Salah according to the timings of Saudi Arabia, everyone would understand the extent of the waywardness of this *daleel*. Again, the main problem that arises in this viewpoint is that if the moon is sighted elsewhere before it is seen in Saudi Arabia, then what are they to do? The Saudi's for sure will not follow the other's moon sighting; therefore, that is completely out of the question.

This opinion is centered on the argument that the day of Arafah is followed by the day of Eid. Therefore, all Muslims of the world should celebrate the Eid following the day of Arafah in Saudi Arabia. This argument is not only bereft of any evidence from the Quran and Sunnah but, in fact, evidence from the Quran and Sunnah is to the contrary.

Eid Al-Adha was established in Islam in the 2nd year of hijra and the first Hajj in the Islamic calendar was performed in the 9th year of hijra. This means that for nearly seven years, the Sahabah ﷺ celebrated Eid and slaughtered their animals even though the Hajj had not yet begun. If the day of Eid is associated with the day of Arafah the way some think it is, then both would have been brought into the *Shari'ah* at the same time. Never in the history of Islam has any Islamic country tried to follow the moon sighting of Saudi Arabia based on the idea that its Eid should follow the day of Arafah, except only until very recently.

Even more surprising than this is that the Blessed Prophet ﷺ performed the Hajj only once after it was made compulsory. After that, he remained alive for only three months. During that time, the moon sighting of Makkah and Madina were differing (for details, see the **appendix** in the end).

In brief, Hajj and Eid are separate and distinct from each other and aside from that, they were introduced into Islam at different times. The Muslims who celebrate Eid are not pilgrims, and the ones who are, do not celebrate Eid. The *fugaha* (jurists), *muhaditheen*, *mufasireen*, and *mujtahedeen* have never tried to associate the two together the way some are trying to do presently.

#### 4. FOLLOWING SAUDIA FOR DHUL-HIJJAH ONLY

The fourth opinion is that we follow Saudi Arabia for the month of Dhul-Hijjah and local moon sighting for the remaining eleven months. The problems with this opinion are as mentioned above. In addition, this opinion has no evidence (*daleel*) from the Quran and Sunnah that some months should start in a certain way while the remainder months start in a different way. Another problem that arises with this viewpoint is that sometimes the month of Dhul-Qa'dah has ended with 28 days, which is a clear rejection of the Ahadith (it has actually occurred in the previous years). Islamic months can only be 29 or 30 days.

#### 5. LOCAL SIGHTING FOR ALL MONTHS

The fifth opinion is that we follow the local moon sighting solely. This was the predominant method in the time of the Blessed Prophet ﷺ and continued to be the only method used throughout the history of Islam. A narration of Ibn Abbas in *Sahih Muslim* indicates that this was the prevailing method at the time of the Blessed Prophet ﷺ and was a part of Blessed Prophet's ﷺ teaching to the Sahabah ﷺ :

عَنْ كُرَيْبٍ أَنَّ أُمَّ الْفَضْلِ بِنْتَ الْحَارِثِ بَعَثَتْهُ إِلَى مُعَاوِيَةَ بِالشَّامِ قَالَ فَقَدِمْتُ الشَّامَ فَقَصَيْتُ حَاجَتَهَا وَاسْتَهَلَّ عَلَيَّ رَمَضَانُ وَأَنَا بِالشَّامِ فَرَأَيْتُ الْهَيْلَالَ لَيْلَةَ الْجُمُعَةِ ثُمَّ قَدِمْتُ الْمَدِينَةَ فِي آخِرِ الشَّهْرِ فَسَأَلَنِي عَبْدُ اللَّهِ بْنُ عَبَّاسٍ - رَضِيَ اللَّهُ عَنْهُمَا - ثُمَّ ذَكَرَ الْهَيْلَالَ فَقَالَ مَتَى رَأَيْتُمُ الْهَيْلَالَ فَقُلْتُ رَأَيْنَاهُ لَيْلَةَ الْجُمُعَةِ . فَقَالَ أَنْتَ رَأَيْتَهُ فَقُلْتُ نَعَمْ وَرَأَاهُ النَّاسُ وَصَامُوا وَصَامَ مُعَاوِيَةُ . فَقَالَ لَكِنَّا رَأَيْنَاهُ لَيْلَةَ السَّبْتِ فَلَا نَزَالَ نَصُومُ حَتَّى نُكْمِلَ ثَلَاثِينَ أَوْ نَرَاهُ . فَقُلْتُ أَوْ لَا تَكْتَفِي بِرُؤْيَا مُعَاوِيَةَ وَصِيَامِهِ فَقَالَ لَا هَكَذَا أَمَرَنَا رَسُولُ اللَّهِ صَلَّى اللَّهُ عَلَيْهِ وَسَلَّمَ .

“Kuraib ﷺ narrates that Umm Al-Fadhl ﷺ sent him to Muawiya ﷺ in Sham for something. Kuraib ﷺ says I went to Sham and finished the job. I was in Sham when the month of Ramadan began and we saw the moon the night of Friday. When I reached Madina at the end of the blessed month, Ibn Abbas ﷺ asked me about Sham. (After answering him) He then asked me when we saw the moon. I said: We saw the moon the night of juma. He said: did you see it as well. I said: Yes, I saw it too and many others saw it and we all kept fast and so did Muawiya ﷺ (that is according to that moon sighting). Ibn Abbas ﷺ said: But we saw the moon on Saturday night, therefore, we will keep thirty days fast according to that unless we sight the moon on the 29<sup>th</sup>. I said:

You don't think the moon sighting of Muawiya ؓ and his fasting is enough for you. Ibn Abbas ؓ replied: No, this is how the Blessed Prophet ﷺ taught us." (Muslim H.1819, Tirmizi H.629, Nasai H.2084, Abu-Dawood H.1985, Musnad Ahmad H.2653 Darqutni H.2234)

This Hadith is clear evidence. When Ibn Abbas ؓ was informed by the person who himself sighting the moon that the people of *Sham* had begun Ramadan one day prior, he ؓ responded that it was not only his opinion, but also the teachings of the Blessed Prophet ﷺ that the moon sighting of another locality was not compulsory upon them.

### CONCLUSION:

In summary, of the five viewpoints that are mentioned above, only two are compliant with the *Shari'ah*.

- 1) The first viewpoint is that wherever the moon is sighted in the world, it is compulsory on all the Muslims in the world to follow it. The only condition to this is that the moon sighting cannot be limited to any one country. For example, it cannot be said that we will only accept a moon sighting from a particular country but not from other countries. This is regardless of whether the country is a Muslim or non Muslim country so as long as those who sight the moon are Muslims. But as we mentioned previously, nobody, in our times, has put this viewpoint into practice and the burdens of putting it into practice have also been mentioned above.
- 2) The second viewpoint is that we follow local moon sighting. Not only is this much simpler, but it is actually a continuation of the tradition of the Blessed Prophet ﷺ and of the people after him throughout the history of Islam.

### APPENDIX:

During the time of the Prophet ﷺ, moon sighting was always conducted locally and the people of Makkah and Madina maintained their own Islamic calendars. One of the proofs for this can be found by carefully analyzing the seerah.

When Rasulullah ﷺ performed his one and only Hajj, the 9<sup>th</sup> of Dhul-Hijjah was a Friday. He passed away three months later in Madina on Monday, the 12<sup>th</sup> of Rabi Al-Awwal. These historical facts are established through Ahadith. However, when one tries to reconstruct the Islamic calendar given those days, the 12<sup>th</sup> of Rabi al-Awwal does **not** fall on a Monday, any way you try. (see figure 1 and figure 2)



The first calendar shows the **least** possible days for those 3 months, which would make the 12<sup>th</sup> of Rabi Al-Awwal a Thursday. The second calendar shows the **most** possible days for those 3 months, which would make the 12<sup>th</sup> of Rabi Al-Awwal a Sunday.

**All combinations** of 29 or 30 days can only fall between the minimum and maximum limits, which means the 12<sup>th</sup> of Rabi al-Awwal can only be **between Thursday and Sunday**.

However, the fact that Rasulullah ﷺ passed away on a Monday simply means that during that time, the calendar of Makkah was different from the calendar of Madina. They each maintained their own calendar based on local moon sighting.

Based on the local Makkan moon sighting, if every month was **29 Days**, 12<sup>th</sup> of Rabi al-Awwal would fall on **Thursday**.

Dhul-Hijjah						
Fri	Sat	Sun	Mon	Tue	Wed	Thur
9	10	11	12	13	14	15
16	17	18	19	20	21	22
23	24	25	26	27	28	29

Muharram						
Fri	Sat	Sun	Mon	Tue	Wed	Thur
1	2	3	4	5	6	7
8	9	10	11	12	13	14
15	16	17	18	19	20	21
22	23	24	25	26	27	28
29						

Safar						
Fri	Sat	Sun	Mon	Tue	Wed	Thur
	1	2	3	4	5	6
7	8	9	10	11	12	13
14	15	16	17	18	19	20
21	22	23	24	25	26	27
28	29					

Rabi Al-Awwal						
Fri	Sat	Sun	Mon	Tue	Wed	Thur
		1	2	3	4	5
6	7	8	9	10	11	12

Based on the local Makkan moon sighting, if every month was **30 days**, 12<sup>th</sup> of Rabi al-Awwal would fall on **Sunday**.

Dhul-Hijjah						
Fri	Sat	Sun	Mon	Tue	Wed	Thur
9	10	11	12	13	14	15
16	17	18	19	20	21	22
23	24	25	26	27	28	29
30						

Muharram						
Fri	Sat	Sun	Mon	Tue	Wed	Thur
	1	2	3	4	5	6
7	8	9	10	11	12	13
14	15	16	17	18	19	20
21	22	23	24	25	26	27
28	29	30				

Safar						
Fri	Sat	Sun	Mon	Tue	Wed	Thur
			1	2	3	4
5	6	7	8	9	10	11
12	13	14	15	16	17	18
19	20	21	22	23	24	25
26	27	28	29	30		

Rabi Al-Awwal						
Fri	Sat	Sun	Mon	Tue	Wed	Thur
					1	2
3	4	5	6	7	8	9
10	11	12				