

# **The Lunar Dates and the Unity of the Muslims**



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Deciding the lunar dates to coordinate the Islamic festivities to bring about unification during these events has been a point of sore, and sometimes contention for the Muslims of North America. In predominantly Muslim countries, all Muslims follow the decision made by their respective authority of Shari'ah for the beginning of any celebration and to begin the month of Ramadan. The Shari'ah authority can be the Ministry of Fatwa (verdicts) or the Department of Justice.

In those countries, no mosque or religious entity would violate Shari'ah and celebrate the event on a different day. Shari'ah protects the community as a whole and the individual member. However, for the diverse Muslim population of North America and due to the absence of the structure found in the Muslim countries, it has been difficult to celebrate their festivities and begin fasting Ramadan as a united community. Besides, many Muslims of North America influenced by the dominant philosophy

or schools of thoughts, in their respective mother countries, often affect the lunar dates' decision differently. Individual mosques and Islamic centers across America and Canada have often celebrated these festivities separately, defeating the purpose of these communal rituals.

Many Muslim organizations of North America such as the Islamic Society of North America (ISNA), the Islamic Center of Southern California (ICSC), the Islamic Shura Councils of North America and Southern California and the Fiqh Council of North America instituted committees and specialized tasks to remedy this painful problem. As part of its administration, ISNA created a Moon Sighting Committee, whose sole responsibility is to determine the lunar dates for these Islamic occasions. The ICSC and the Moon Sighting Committee of ISNA consult astronomers and apply astronomical data to help determine the lunar dates. It is also evident that ISNA's Moon Sighting Committee has worked with several other Fatwa, astronomical and moon sighting committees in the Middle East, notably Saudi Arabia in the making of its decisions.

Apparent in the solution of these organizations is the relevant issues of Muslims of North America since many of them are required to give in-advance notice to leave work. Another pertinent matter pertinent to Muslims in North America is reserving large conventional places in advance to accommodate their crowded festivities. These critical considerations are irrelevant issues for the Muslims overseas who nevertheless are given a holiday by their respective countries, and have adequate accommodations. Other Islamic centers and organizations in North America took a separate decision than that of ISNA, the Islamic Shura and Fiqh councils of North America or ICSC and followed a different verdict, yet others insist on obeying Saudi Arabia.

Although there are several methods for determining the lunar dates for these occasions, no single approach should undermine the unity of the Muslim community. Such an act would be in direct conflict with the spirit of Shari'ah and the particular occasion. Unison is why no single mosque or Islamic organization in Syria, Egypt, Saudi Arabia or any other Muslim country defies the decision made by their respective state to follow that of another. Furthermore, in determining the lunar dates, the Sunnah of the Prophet Muhammad is solely based on an astronomical foundation. Here are the Prophet's Traditions for Ramadan:

***“We are Umah (a nation) Umiyah (unlettered) we do not write [in astronomical circles,] nor do we calculate [to arrive at the exact lunar dates.]”***

In a different Hadith the Prophet (PBUH) said:

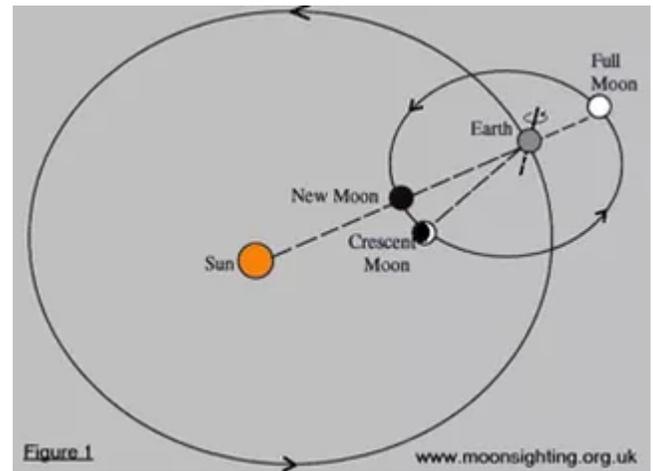
***“Therefore, fast when you see the moon and break your fast.”***

There are three important key points in the above Traditions of Prophet Muhammad (PBUH).

1. It is apparent that Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) is seeking a precise date to begin fasting the month of Ramadan. However, the Prophet is pointing out that the resources available for making an accurate decision are inadequate in the absence of advanced astronomical calculations, “We are an unlettered nation concerning writing [in astronomical circles] and mathematical calculations.”
2. It is also apparent that the Prophet (PBUH) considered the best mechanism available to him at the time for the determination of the beginning of the fast. “Fast when you see the moon and break the fast when you see the next moon.”
3. In the absence of accurate astronomical data, one can readily establish from the second Tradition of the Prophet that there is no particular divinity missed out by not starting or ending the month of Ramadan according to the exact astronomical dates. “If the circumstances did not allow you to see the next moon, then complete the month to thirty days.” Thirty-days is the worst-case scenario, irrespective of the actual days of the month. In fact, on one occasion the Prophet (PBUH) did not give his companions any special instructions when they informed him that the moon appeared to be two or three days old. Appreciating the rationality of the Prophet (PBUH) over the crescent observation matters, see Sahih Muslim. “Irrelevancy of whether the New Moon is Larger [or not]” And “Do not Fast a Day or Two Days Ahead of Ramadan.”

The very primary points discussed in the above Traditions are indisputable facts to the truth of the Prophecy of Muhammad (PBUH) as the events of astronomical science later unveil. Today, astronomers tell us that the new moon is born precisely when it is in a straight line between the sun and the earth. Then no light is reflected from it to planet earth, and therefore it cannot be seen by the human eye. When the moon moves away from the straight line, then it begins to show. The new crescent, however, cannot be seen by the human eye until it reaches the age of about 18 to 24 hours old. Then it will be very thin and may appear on the horizon for only a few minutes.

See the illustration below from <http://www.moonsighting.com>



If the glare from the sun, the location of the observer on earth or other obstacles prevent the sighting of the crescent, apparently, the following day the crescent would appear to be two days old. This difficulty in observing the new moon may explain why Prophet Muhammad (p) did not address the criticality of the correctness of the first day of the month and as for the actual birth of the moon, he merely stated the unliterary condition of his people to determine its birth time accurately. For a better understanding of the complications surrounding moon sighting, please visit: <http://www.ummah.net/moonsighting/>

Unfortunately, what is commonly overlooked by many Muslims in the above Traditions of the Prophet (p) is that the Prophet adapted the best method available to him at that time. This technique—using available means in solving present matters, is the right Sunnah of the Prophet that we must be inspired by and draw upon.

For the availability of astronomical vantage to us today, we can accurately establish the beginning and end of all the lunar months. In fact, the lunar data has already been utilized by many civil and military organizations around the world for their benefits. Using the lunar data will lead to uniting our Ummah during its festivities in the least and foremost, it will make us among those who follow Prophet Muhammad’s way of adapting the best solution available.

Dr. Muzammil Siddiqi, the Chairman of the Islamic Shura Council of Southern California, President of the Fiqh Council of North America and ex-President of ISNA is in total agreement with the point in this article for using the most accurate data available in determining the Muslim’s holy days. Dr. Siddiqi said:

1. ***The sighting was needed because the Ummah was not in a position to calculate accurately.***
2. ***It was the Sunnah of the Prophet to use the most accurate method available to him at that time, so astronomical information is the most accurate method available to us. Thus it is Sunnah to rely on the astronomical information for determining Islamic dates.”***

Dr. Maher Hathout, the senior advisor for of ICSC and Muslim Public Affairs Council, is also in full agreement with this approach. Dr. Hathout wrote the following note:

***“It was 17 years ago that the ICSC adopted the scientific calculation method for deciding the beginning and end of the lunar months. We felt that this is the way to live in the modern age and to enable Muslims, particularly in America, to schedule their holy seasons and push for them to be officially recognized. This method to determine the lunar times, hopefully, will maintain the unity of the Ummah. We agree with the Islamic argument elucidated by brother Burhan. We hope to consider the birth of the moon as the decisive factor, not its so-called “visibility,” which again leads to a different set of divisions and confusions.”***

The disunity of the Muslims of North America over the festival dates has reached a considerable level of disgrace. No verdict or philosophy should take a higher priority than that which safeguards the health and the unity of the Muslim Ummah. Dr. Muzammil Siddiqi said: “Muslims must agree on one authority and let

this authority make the decision. Individual Islamic centers and mosques should not give their opinions because this causes confusion, division, and disunity.” The mechanisms to unite the Muslims would work best when based on solid faith, stripped away from human emotions, politics and personal agendas.

Mathematics and astronomical data are precisely that. I believe the expertise, the study, and research taken by ISNA’s Moon Sighting Committee and the ICSC in this matter is in line with the call of the Sunnah of the Prophet and the spirit of Islam. I encourage all Muslim communities to follow the lead of these organizations by joining them in making unified festival dates. Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) said:

***“My Ummah cannot go astray when they get together on a matter.” -Ahmad & al-Tabarani***

He also said:

***“(Alikum be-alJama’ah, be [working] altogether and (lyakum) be aware of (furqah) being separate.” -Al Termezi***

Islam is a universal religion; suitable for all times and places. Muslims do Islam a great injustice when they confine its global capacity to the elements available to Mecca and Medina during the seventh century. We must understand the severe results of our disunity over trivial matters dragging us further away from the cause of this faith. Because of our improper practice, we have made Islam appear to the technologically advanced world poorly organized and at a disadvantage.

Allah and His Prophet set forth wise guidelines designed to lead Muslims to prosperity. Remember, it was early Muslims such as al Khayam (11-12th century), who was responsible for the creation of astronomical tables and the solar calendar, widely used today. It was the Muslims of Cordoba who devised the more popular Farmer’s calendar, Almanac, which is a reflection of the Arabic word, al-manakh, meaning the climate. By using today’s advanced calculations and astronomical data, I believe the Muslims of North America has an opportunity to lead the Muslim world into unity in this matter. We should not miss this golden opportunity. I ask Allah to open my heart and the hearts of all Muslims to see the right guidelines of Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) in resolving issues, his easygoing personality and the essence and intent of this faith.

## **Muslims of North America Invented a Unified Solution**

Our gratitude to Allah that the Institute of Arabic and Islamic Studies, along with the Islamic Shura Council of Southern California, the Fiqh Council of North America. And other active Islamic centers and astronomical organizations and experts, such as the Moon Sighting, have designed a solution to the issue of indecisiveness and chaos over the timing of the Islamic festivals and lunar months.

Over eighty Islamic organizations along with astronomers initiated a universal solution giving all Muslims in America as well as the world an advanced festival and lunar months timing for managing their life affairs. This initiation was in 2005. This solution has facilitated the lives and relationships of the vast majority of Muslims in North America. Consult with the Islamic Shura Council of Southern California and the Fiqh Council of North America for details.

Other useful articles on this subject.

1. The Saudi Hajj Decision Rifts American Muslims, by Dr. Mohammad Auwal, Associate Professor of Communication Studies at California State Univ., Los Angeles.
2. Determination of Eid al-Adha, by Justice Maulana Mufti M. Taqi Usmani.
3. Hajj and Eid-al-Adha An article
4. Message from Zaytuna Institute, by Imam Zaid Shakir.
5. ISNA’s Position on Eid-al-Adha, by Dr. Muzammil Siddiqi, Chairman of the Shura Council of Southern California, President of the Fiqh Council of North America and ex-President of ISNA