

ON THE GEOGRAPHICAL LIMITS OF ACCEPTABLE MOON SIGHTINGS
FOR ESTABLISHING THE LUNAR MONTHS

by

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Question: How is the Islamic calendar to be established? What reports about sighting the moon may be accepted? In particular, what are the geographical limits of such reports?

Answer: In the Qur'ân, Allâh has designated the crescent moon as the sign by which the Islamic calendar shall be kept (2:189). The month of Ramadân is to be observed with fasting from dawn to sunset (2:185, 187). To establish the calendar, it is necessary that a continuous announcement of each month be made, so that no month will exceed thirty nor fall short of twenty-nine days. To be able announce the month, Muslims must make an actual observation of the crescent moon. This is based on the hadîth, "Fast upon its being seen." Such observations cannot be made based on astronomical calculations but must be naked-eye sightings. To establish a month, the crescent moon must be seen by at least two honest Muslim witnesses ('adlân), or by indisputable evidence of many persons, or by the proclamation of a Muslim ruler.¹ If one single person sees the moon by himself, that person alone must fast, but others may not follow him without a general order. But according to Ibn Juzayy, the report of a single honest Muslim that he saw the moon may be used to establish the fast in a country where there is no Muslim ruler.² According to al-Nafrâwî, this only applies in a place where the Muslims have not established the observation of the moon in an organized fashion.³

Generally, if a reliable report of moon observation is received from any place, it must be followed, according to Ibn al-Qâsim and the early Egyptian Mâlikî scholars. But it should be noted that Ibn al-Mâjishûn, al-Mughîrah, and other early followers of Mâlik from al-Madînah disagreed that one place should follow any other, unless the local ruler commanded it.⁴ In any case, it is generally agreed that a report is not to be followed if it comes from very far away. According to Ibn Rushd and Ibn Juzayy, very far in this context is considered to be the distance between al-Andalus (Spain) and the Hijâz, where Makkah and al-Madînah are located. This distance is over 3,000 miles. Ibn Rushd and Ibn Juzayy say that there is a consensus of the 'ulamâ' on this point.⁵ According to Abû 'Umar Ibn 'Abd al-Barr, the great Andalusian muhaddith, reports are not to be accepted if the distance between two places is like that between al-Andalus (Spain) and Khurâsân (Iran), a distance of nearly 4,000 miles. Rather, each geographical region of the Muslim world having a first-class city (misr) should follow its own schedule, but all of the

¹Muhammad 'Arafah al-Disûqî, Hashiyat al-Disûqî 'alâ al-sharh al-kabîr, Cairo: 'Isâ al-Bâbî al-Halabî, n. d., Vol. I, p. 510; Wahbah al-Zuhaylî, al-Fiqh al-Islâmî wa-adillatuhu, Damascus: Dâr al-Fikr, 1409/1989, Vol. II, p. 606.

²Muhammad Ibn Juzayy, al-Qawânîn al-fiqhiyyah, Beirut: Dâr al-Fikr li-al-Tibâ'ah wa-al-Nashr wa-al-Tawzî', n. d., p. 103.

³Ahmad b. Ghunaym al-Nafrâwî, al-Fawâkih al-dawânî, Cairo: Mustafâ al-Bâbî al-Halabî, 1374/1955, Vol. I, p. 352.

⁴Muhammad b. Ahmad Ibn Rushd, Bidâyat al-mujtahid wa-nihâyat al-muqtasid, Cairo: Mustafâ al-Bâbî al-Halabî, 1401/1981, Vol. I, pp. 287-288.

⁵Ibn Rushd, I, 288; Ibn Juzayy, 103.

subordinate towns and villages should follow the first-class city.⁶ This is supported by the hadith of Kurayb in Sahih Muslim. Kurayb traveled to Damascus, where he and many other people saw the crescent of Ramadan on a Friday, so the Caliph Mu'awiyah ordered the fasting to begin the next day. Then Kurayb returned to al-Madinah in the Hijaz, where Ibn 'Abbas told him that they had begun fasting on Saturday rather than Friday, that they would continue fasting on their own schedule despite his report, that they would pay no attention to Mu'awiyah's advice or command on this point, and that the Prophet (SAAS) had thus commanded them.⁷ The scholars followed by Ibn 'Abd al-Barr state that this is a clear proof that reports coming from places as far as Damascus is from al-Madinah, a distance of about 700 miles need not be followed. But al-Qurtubi rebuts this by quoting Ibn al-Qasim from Ibn Wahb that the position of Malik was that a report from al-Basrah in Iraq should be followed by al-Kufah, al-Madinah, and Yaman. This would be a distance of up to 1200 miles. Also, only the subjects of the governor or ruler who has proclaimed the fasting should follow his proclamation; other places should establish their own observation. All this long discussion in the Tafsir of al-Qurtubi supports the idea that the contiguous United States should have its own independent observation.⁸

Al-Dardir in his commentary on Khalil says that all who hear of the beginning of the month, whether this is based on the testimony of two witnesses, or a large number of witnesses, or the command of a ruler, should begin fasting. But in his supercommentary on al-Dardir, al-Disuqi qualifies this by saying that al-Dardir cannot have meant that places very far away from each other should follow one another's reports. In support of his position, al-Disuqi cites Ibn 'Abd al-Barr and Ibn 'Arafah.⁹ It should be noted that our shaykh Isma'il Sadiq al-'Adawi, may Allah have mercy on him, who was a direct descendant of Ahmad al-Dardir, likewise stated that faraway places ought not to follow each other's moon observations and that this applied in particular to America not following the Middle Eastern countries.

Based upon this, it is not proper for Muslims in America to follow fasting or other calendrical scheduling of Muslims in the Old World, that is, in Asia, Africa, and Europe. But it is proper to follow fasting and other calendrical scheduling based on reports of moon observation in all of the United States itself, with the exception of Hawaii, which is separated by ocean and too remote from the mainland, and the same applies to Alaska. Monthly observations for the other forty-eight states should be united, however.

⁶Muhammad ibn Ahmad al-Qurtubi, al-Jami' li-ahkam al-Qur'an, Beirut: Dar al-Kutub al-'Ilmiyyah, 1408/1988, Vol. I, p. 198 (Vol. II, pp. 295-296 on the margin, referring to the main Egyptian edition).

⁷For this hadith, see Muslim ibn al-Hajjaj, Sahih Muslim, Lahore: Sh. Muhammad Ashraf, 1971-1975, Vol. II, p. 529, hadith 2391; Yahya al-Nawawi, Sahih Muslim bi-sharh al-Nawawi, Cairo: al-Matba'ah al-Misriyyah wa-Maktabatuhâ, 1349/1930, Vol. VII, p. 197. This hadith is also found in the collections of Abu Dawud, al-Tirmidhi, al-Nasai, and Ibn Hanbal. Abu Dawud, Sunan Abi Dawud, ed. Kamal Yusuf al-Hut, Beirut: Mu'assasat al-Kitab al-Thaqafiyyah, 1409/1988, Vol. I, p. 712, hadith 2332; Abu Dawud, Sunan Abu Dawud, tr. by Ahmad Hasan, Lahore, Sh. Muhammad Ashraf, 1984, Vol. II, p. 638, hadith 2325; Muhammad b. 'Isa al-Tirmidhi, Sunan al-Tirmidhi, ed. Sidqi Muhammad Jamil al-'Attar, Beirut: Dar al-Fikr li-al-Tibah wa-al-Nashr wa-al-Tawzi', 1414/1994, Vol. II, p. 161, hadith 693; Ahmad Ibn Hanbal, al-Musnad, ed. Sidqi Muhammad Jamil al-'Attar, n. p.: Dar al-Fikr li-al-Tibah wa-al-Nashr wa-al-Tawzi', 1414/1994, Vol. I, p. 656, hadith 2790 (main Egyptian ed. Vol. I, p. 306).

⁸Qurtubi, I, 198 (II, 295-296).

⁹Disuqi, I, 510.