

A Study of Ahadith About the Determination of Islamic Dates

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This article examines the following ahadith:

1. A hadith about starting and ending Ramaḍan by *hila* sighting
2. A hadith of Kurayb from Ibn 'Abbas often used to support regional validity of *hila* sighting
3. A hadith stating that the Prophet celebrated 'Id al-*Adha* on the 10th of Dhu al-Hijjah.

The study throws useful light on the questions that have been under discussion in recent decades among Muslims: Can we use only astronomical calculations to determine a lunar month? Does each place follow the *hila* sighting locally or is the *hila* sighting at any one place valid for the whole globe? If it is valid locally, for what distance a moon sighting is valid? Is 'Id al-*Adha* on the 10th day of the month of Dhu al-Hijjah or is it on the day after the day of 'Arafah in Makkah? Can we determine all Islamic dates exclusively by the sighting in Makkah?

This article also has an important bearing on questions about the reliability of ahadith. For, it provides still more evidence that:

1. The Science of Hadith developed by our great early *muhaddithun*, though very impressive, has not yet reached its full potential and growth. Much further work still can be and should be done.
2. Even the ahadith found in several well reputed Hadith collections with complete *isnad* judged to be sound are not as reliable as is generally assumed.
3. There is also no basis for the view of some orientalist that the whole Hadith literature is the result of Muslim creative activity. This article will show that starting from the *sahabah* there were people in every generation of Muslims who took care in remembering what the Holy Prophet taught and in passing it on to the next generation. Their work is engulfed by the distorting activity of some other much less responsible people who either fabricated words for the Prophet or changed his received words to reflect their interpretations of them. But by careful application of the rational method to the very extensive data that the past scholars have left for us – may God bless them for this – we can in many cases recover with high confidence the actual words of the Prophet. This rational method is not radically different from

the one applied by earlier *muḥaddithun*. It simply consists of a more consistent and comprehensive application of common-sense principles often cited and applied by those *muḥaddithun*.

4. Further development of the Science of Hadith to recover more reliably the words of the Prophet is not just a curiosity. It is an important part of the reforms that we need for the Muslim Ummah to come closer to what God and his Messenger have taught us and thus move forward to assume our role as leaders and guide of humanity, assigned to us by God Most High.

[A NOTE ON TRANSLITERATION OF ARABIC WORDS: Long vowels are indicated in italics or bold, e.g. *ḥadīth* or **ahṛuf**. If a word itself is in italics or bold -- (Arabic words except the most well-known ones will be written in italics) -- the long vowels are indicated by the ordinary font, e.g. *ḥadith* or **ahruf**. Also, note that underlining instead of dotting is used to distinguish between related letters (d and d, h and h, s and s, z and z), ṣaḥḥ, riād, zuhr. When s and h or t and h occur together and represent different letters, they will be sometimes separated by – in order to avoid confusion with the letters represented by th and sh; e.g. as-hal (easier). However, if any one of the two letters has underlining, then no separation will be required, as, e.g., Ishaq or mushaf, aṥhar, Buṥhan. Finally, once a word has been transliterated with proper diacritical indicators, such indicators may be omitted subsequently. Diacritical indicators may also be omitted from well-known words like Allah, Muhammad, Qur`an, or Hadith.

The above system of transliteration was devised to cause minimum disruption when computer files are converted for various purposes.]

(I)

A HADITH ABOUT STARTING/ENDING RAMAḌAN WITH *HILAL* SIGHTING

The basic guidance about the period of fasting is already provided by the Qur`an. Thus it states that there are twelve months in a year (9:36), that obligatory fasting is to be done for the month of Ramaḍan (2:185), that the movements of the sun and the moon are according to a mathematical pattern (*bi ḥusban*, 55:5; see also 10:5, 36:39-40) and that months are counted by new moons (2:189, 10:5). If any authentic hadith provided some further clarification or elaboration of this Qur`anic picture, then we should expect it to be widely known and be found in almost every Hadith collection, since when to start and when to end the obligatory Ramaḍan fast is a question of great practical importance for Muslims.

Well, there is indeed one such hadith. But it has many narrations and since not all of them can be authentic, it is necessary to determine, if possible, the authentic narration.

Muwatta gives three narrations, two on the authority of Ibn 'Umar and one on that of Ibn 'Abbas. The two narrations from Ibn 'Umar are also found in Bukhari and Muslim. They are the only ahadith relevant to the determination of Islamic dates and common to all three of our best^[1] collections. Since the two ahadith are really two narrations of the same hadith, we see that there is only one hadith that is found in all the three collections.

We now examine the various narrations to see what they are saying, why they differ and what authentic words of the Holy Prophet lie behind them.

NARRATIONS FROM IBN 'UMAR

Narration of Malik from Nafi' from Ibn 'Umar

Yahya related to me from Malik from Nafi' from 'Abd Allah bin 'Umar that the Messenger of God once mentioned Ramaḍan and said: "Do not begin the fast until you see the *hila*l and do not break the fast until you see it. If it is obscured from you (*ghumma 'alaykum*), *fa aqduru la hu*." (Muwatta)

The words *fa aqduru la hu* (or *fa aqdiru la hu*) left without translation require a closer look. The verb *qadara* used here has two primary meanings: a) set a limit for something (Qur`an 77:22-23, 6:96); b) evaluate or estimate or measure something (6:91). The first meaning leads to another meaning: to restrict something, to set a limit that is low. In this sense it is the opposite of *basata*, to spread, enlarge, expand and is often used in the Qur`an in connection with *rizq* (sustenance). For example, in 89:16 it is said: "And when (God) tries (man) and restricts (*qadara*) his sustenance, he says, My Lord has humiliated me" (see also 17:30, 28:82, 29:62, 30:37, 34:36, 39, 39:52, 42:12).

Both meanings are possible in the above hadith. Thus if we use the first meaning, the words can be interpreted: when it is obscure for you (due to clouds, haze, fog, dust storm etc.), then calculate or estimate the length of the month of Ramaḍan. If we use the second meaning, then the sense would be: when it is obscure for you, restrict the month to twenty-nine days.

Other Narrations from Nafi' from Ibn 'Umar

We can be fairly certain not only that Malik heard the hadith from Nafi' but also that another third-generation transmitter, 'Ubayd Allah also heard it from him. For, Muslim

gives three different lines of transmission reaching 'Ubayd Allah from Nafi' from Ibn 'Umar:

Abu Bakr bin Abi Shaybah related to us: Abu Usamah related to us: 'Ubayd Allah related to us from Nafi' from Ibn 'Umar that the Messenger of God once mentioned Ramaḍan, made a gesture by his hands and said: "A month is like this and this and this," folding his thumb the third time. Then he said: "Start fasting when you see it and end fasting when you see it. If it is obscured from you (*ughmiya 'alaykum*), *fa aqduru la hu thalathin* (count for it 30 (days)). (Muslim)

Ibn Numayr related to us: My father related to us: 'Ubayd Allah related to us from Nafi' from Ibn 'Umar: similar to the above hadith of Abu Usamah except that *ghumma* was used instead of *ughmiya*. (Muslim)

'Ubayd Allah bin Sa'id related to us: Yahya bin Sa'id related to us from 'Ubayd Allah from Nafi' from Ibn 'Umar that the Messenger of God once mentioned Ramaḍan and said: "A month is like this and this and this." Then he said: "*fa aqduru la hu*" but he did not say *thalathin*, "thirty". (Muslim)

Muslim gives two more narrations from Nafi' from Ibn 'Umar, which makes it still more certain that the hadith was transmitted by Nafi':

Zuhayr bin Harb related to us: Isma'il related to us from Ayyub from Nafi' from Ibn 'Umar that the Messenger of God said: "A month rather (*innama*) is 29 days. Do not begin the fast until you see it and do not break the fast until you see it. If it is obscured from you, *fa aqduru la hu*. (Muslim)

Humayd ibn Mas'adah al-Bahili related to us: Bishr bin al-Mufaddal related to us: Salamah (who is Ibn 'Alqamah) related to us from Nafi' from Ibn 'Umar that the Messenger of God once mentioned Ramaḍan, made a gesture with his hands and said: "A month is 29 (days). When you see the new moon, start fasting and when you see it end fasting. If it is obscured from you, *fa aqduru la hu*. (Muslim)

But while we can be certain that Nafi' transmitted the hadith, it is not clear what exactly did he transmit, since there are obvious and significant differences in the above narrations, a fact that demands that we try to explain those differences and to find first the original words of the successors, then of the companions and then of the Prophet himself.

One difference among the narrations quoted above is that two of the narrations from 'Ubayd Allah add the word *thalathin* after *fa aqduru la hu*. Since one transmitter from 'Ubayd Allah is saying that "he did not say thirty" and since all the remaining narrations from Nafi' do not mention "thirty" we conclude that the word was no part of the hadith as Nafi' transmitted it.

Another difference is that while some narrations use a positive language -- "fast when you see ... " -- others use a negative language -- "Do not fast till you see ... ". This is not a big difference except that the second form makes the command firmer. Malik and Ayyub give negative form while 'Ubayd Allah and Salamah give positive form. So the evidence is fairly equally divided, but in view of the fact that Muwatta is much earlier than Muslim, we can accept Malik's negative form.

A third difference is that the words "A month is 29 days" are not found in Muwatta while they are present in all the narrations from Nafi' in Muslim except the one that Muslim quotes from Malik. The fact that an overwhelming majority of narrations contain the words, strongly suggests that they are a part of the original transmission from Nafi'. But it should be noted that the words are found as a separate hadith in several narrations from Ibn 'Umar (see below) and the hadith about starting and ending Ramaḍan by moon sighting is also found separately, not only in Muwatta but also in narrations in Bukhari and Muslim with an independent line of transmission – Ibn Shihab from Salim from Ibn 'Umar (quoted below). This raises the possibility that the two ahadith were originally separate and later combined. If Ibn 'Umar had a written collection of ahadith, as is suggested by some reports^[2], this possibility becomes much more plausible: in the written source the two ahadith were recorded one after the other because of their obvious relevance to determination of the beginning/end of a month and for the same reason they were often related together.

In view of the above discussion, the original narration of Nafi' can be stated thus:

Nafi' reported from Ibn 'Umar that the Messenger of God said:

"A month is 29 (days)".

"Do not begin the fast until you see the *hila* and do not break the fast until you see it. If it is obscured for you, *fa aqḍuru la hu*."

Narration of Malik from Ibn Dinar from Ibn 'Umar

Malik related to me from 'Abd Allah bin Dinar from 'Abd Allah bin 'Umar that the Messenger of God said: "A month has twenty-nine (days). Do not begin the fast until you see the *hila* and do not break the fast until you see it. If it is obscured from you, *fa aqḍuru la hu*."

This narration is almost the same as the one we constructed above from the various narrations reported from Nafi'. In view of the following narration in Muslim we can take it to Ibn Dinar with almost the same confidence with which we can take it to Nafi'. For, Muslim records:

Yahya bin Yahya and Yahya bin Ayyub and Qutaybah bin Sa'id and Ibn Hujr said (Yahya bin Yahya using the word *akhbara na*, while others using *haddatha na*^[3]): Isma'il who is Ibn Ja'far related to us from 'Abd Allah bin Dinar that he heard Ibn 'Umar say: The Messenger of God said: "A month has twenty-nine nights. Do not begin the fast until you see the *hila*l and do not break the fast until you see it except when it is obscured for you. If it is obscured from you, *fa aqduru la hu*." (Muslim)

Here four transmitters – Yahya bin Yahya, Yahya bin Ayyub, Qutaybah bin Sa'id, and Ibn Hujr are reporting to Muslim from Isma'il bin Ja'far a narration from Ibn Dinar. To the extent we can accept the written word of Muslim, we can be sure that Isma'il related the hadith from Ibn Dinar and in substantially the same form as reported in Muwatta. So we have now the following facts in which we can have high degree of confidence:

- At least two transmitters – Malik and 'Ubayd Allah – narrated the hadith from Nafi'.
- At least two transmitters – Malik and Isma'il bin Ja'far – narrated the hadith from Ibn Dinar.
- The report transmitted by Nafi' that we arrive at by comparing its different narrations is substantially the same as the report transmitted by Ibn Dinar.

We can therefore with the utmost confidence say that the hadith was transmitted by Ibn 'Umar. The agreement among Muslim's four transmitters and between Nafi' and Ibn Dinar suggests very strongly that transmission was backed by a written collection coming from Ibn 'Umar.

DIFFERENCES BETWEEN MUWATTA AND BUKHARI

The above conclusion is not affected by the fact that the narration of Ibn Dinar is found in Bukhari in a surprisingly different form, since we can show that the narration in Bukhari is the result of some error. Bukhari's version reads:

'Abd Allah bin Maslamah related to us: Malik related to us from 'Abd Allah bin Dinar from 'Abd Allah bin 'Umar that God's Messenger said: "A month is twenty-nine nights. So do not fast till you see the new moon, and if it is obscured for you, then complete thirty (days for Sha'ban)." (Bukhari 3/131)

There are two significant ways in which the narration of Ibn Dinar in Bukhari differs from the one in Muwatta: a) in Bukhari the hadith talks only about starting the fast and not about ending it and b) the words *fa aqduru la hu* have become *fa akmilu al-'iddah thalathin* "complete the period as thirty (days)", which apply only to Sha'ban.

We earlier saw that the interpretation of *fa aqḍuru la hu* as "complete thirty days" also entered some narrations from Nafi' by the addition of the word *thalathin* and we could see clearly by comparing various narrations that the addition was a *tahriḥ*, probably done "innocently"^[4] by a transmitter to clarify the hadith in the light of his own interpretation. The same is true in the case of this narration from Ibn Dīnar, as we can easily see from the following considerations:

From the *isnad* we notice that Bukhari's immediate source – 'Abd Allah bin Maslamah – is quoting Malik from Ibn Dīnar from 'Abd Allah bin 'Umar, but the hadith is considerably different from what we read in Malik's own Muwatta when he quotes Ibn Dīnar from Ibn 'Umar. What is going on here? Has the Muwatta misquoted it or is it Bukhari or his immediate source? We saw earlier that Muslim also has a narration coming from Ibn Dīnar that is independent of Malik and that agrees with Malik's narration in Muwatta. This shows that Muwatta is recording the more original form of Ibn Dīnar's narration and the form in Bukhari is the result of later changes.

Those Muslims who endlessly argue about minor *fiqhi* details on the basis of ahadith should pay attention to this fact: ahadith can change considerably even as they pass from one great Hadith scholar such as Malik to another giant of the science of Hadith such as Bukhari. It is difficult to tell what caused the change in the narration. Bukhari's immediate source – 'Abd Allah bin Maslamah – has also narrated from Malik the narration of Nafi' and in that narration he is very faithful to his source. So we cannot automatically ascribe the change to him and the same is true about Bukhari. What we can say with near certainty is that in this particular case the change did take place and that for this reason we have to be careful in attributing to the Prophet what we read in Bukhari or Muslim or Muwatta.

Narration of Ibn Shihab from Salim from Ibn 'Umar

The above conclusions are further supported by a narration that is independent of Malik as well as Nafi' and Ibn Dinar. It comes from Ibn Shihab al-Zuhri from Salim from Ibn 'Umar:

Yahya bin Bukayr related to us saying: al-Layth related to me from 'Uqayl from Ibn Shihab who said: Salim informed me that Ibn 'Umar said: I heard God's Messenger saying: "When you see it start the fast and when you see it break the fast and if it is obscure for you, *fa aqḍiru la hu*." And he also said differently from al-Layth: 'Uqayl and Yunus related to me: *li hilal ramāḍan*". (Bukhari 3/124)

This narration also reached Muslim from Ibn Shihab via different chain of transmitters. There is a complete verbal agreement in Arabic between Bukhari and Muslim, suggesting a written source. This narration does not contain the statement that "a

month is 29 days", supporting our conclusion that this statement was originally a separate hadith. Also missing from this narration is any mention of completing 30 days in case of obscurity. Yet, Muhsin Khan translates *fa aqdiru la hu* as "then regard the month of Ramaḍan as of 30 days". This shows how our interpretation can be reflected in the way we translate. In ancient times the interpretations were reflected in the narration itself.

Ahadith About 29 Days In A Month

One further indication that the statement, "A month has 29 days," was originally a separate hadith is provided by the fact that in many ahadith this statement appears separately without any reference to the month of fasting. Let us examine these ahadith a little more closely.

In some narrations the Prophet simply says that a month has 29 days.

Hajjaj bin al-Sha'ir related to me: Hasan al-Ashyab related to us: Shayban related to us from Yahya who said: Abu Salamah informed me that he heard Ibn 'Umar say: I heard God's Messenger say: "A month is twenty-nine (days)." (Muslim 13/11)

In most ahadith, the number 29 is shown by gestures of the hands:

Abu al-Walid related to us: Shu 'bah related to us from Jabalah bin Suhaym who said that I heard Ibn 'Umar saying that the Prophet said (showing his ten fingers thrice): "The month is like this and this" and left out (*khanasa*) one thumb the third time (Bukhari 3/132)

Harun related to us: Ruḥ bin 'Ubadah related to us Zakariyya` bin Ishaq related to us: 'Amr bin Dinar related to us that he heard Ibn 'Umar saying that the Prophet said (showing his ten fingers thrice): "A month is like this and this and this" and folded (*qabada*) one thumb the third time. (Muslim 13/10)

'Ubayd Allah bin Mu 'adh related to us: My father related to us: Su 'bah related to us from Jabalah who said: I heard Ibn 'Umar say: God's Messenger said: A month is thus, and thus, and thus, and he flapped (*saffaqa*) his hands with all their fingers twice but the third time, folded his right thumb or left thumb (Muslim 13/13).

Sahl bin 'Uthman related to us: Ziyad bin 'Abd Allah al-Bakka`i related to us from 'Abd al-Malik bin 'Umayr from Musa bin Talha from 'Abd Allah bin 'Umar from the Prophet who said: A month is thus and thus and thus – ten and ten and nine. (Muslim 13/12)

Abu Kamil al-Jah̄dari related to us: 'Abd al-Wah̄id ibn Ziyad related to us: al-Hasan ibn 'Ubayd Allah related to us from Sa' d bin 'Ubaydah who said: Ibn 'Umar heard a person saying: This night is the middle night (of the month). He said to him: How do you know that it is the middle night? I heard the Messenger of God as saying: A month is thus and thus (he pointed with his ten fingers twice) and thus (the third time he pointed with all his fingers but withdrew (*habasa*) or folded (*khanasa*) his thumb)?^[5]

All the above ahadith are traced back to Ibn 'Umar but the following are narrated on the authority of another companion – Sa'd bin Abi Waqqas:

Abu Bakr bin Abi Shaybah related to us: Muhammad bin Bishr related to us: Isma'il bin Abi Khalid related to us: Muhammad bin Sa'd related to me from [his father] Sa'd bin Abi Waqqas that he said: the Messenger of God struck his hand against the other and said: "A month is thus and thus." The third time he withdrew a finger.

Al-Qasim bin Zakariyya` related to me: Husayn ibn 'Ali related to us from Za`idah from Isma'il from Muhammad bin Sa'd from his father from the Prophet that he said: "A month is thus and thus, and thus, i.e. ten, ten and nine." *Marratan*.

Marratan means "once". Here it is probably meant to negate that the Prophet a second time made three gestures with his ten fingers to show the number 30.

Muhammad bin 'Abd Allah bin Quhzad related (also) related this (hadith) to me (saying): 'Ali bin al-Hasan ibn Shaq'iq and Salamah bin Sulayman related to us saying: 'Abd Allah (ibn Mubarak) informed us: Isma'il bin Abi Khalid informed us – the rest of the *isnad* is the same and the hadith is with the same meaning as the above hadith.

In all of the above traditions it is only said that a month has 29 days. But in some traditions 30 days are also mentioned.

Muhammad bin al-Muthanna related to us: Muhammad bin Ja'far related to us: Shu'bah related to us from 'Uqbah (who is Ibn Hurayb) who said: I heard Ibn 'Umar say: God's Messenger said: "A month is twenty-nine (days)," and Shu'bah brought his hands together (*tabbaqa*) three times, folding his thumb the third time. 'Uqbah said: I think that he said that a month is thirty days and brought his palms together three times (without folding his thumb). (Muslim 13/14).

The fact that 'Uqbah says "I think he said a month is 30 days" shows that he is not at all sure of this. But in the following hadith the introduction of 30 days is done without expression of any uncertainty:

Adam related to us: Shu'bah related to us: al-Aswad ibn Qays related to us: Sa'id ibn 'Amr related to us that he heard Ibn 'Umar report from the Prophet who said: "We are

an unlettered people. We neither write, nor calculate. A month is like this and this", that is (*ya'ni*) , sometimes of 29 days and sometimes of 30 days." (Bukhari 3/137)

Here the word *ya'ni* shows that the subsequent words "sometimes of 29 days and sometimes of 30 days" are not a part of what the Prophet said but an interpretation. Prophet's words end with "a month is like this and this" which, as we have seen, is reported in many other ahadith. In all those ahadith the words "like this and this (*hakadha wa hakadha*)" refer to the ten fingers shown twice, but in Bukhari's narration the words are understood to mean "this or that" (29 or 30). This different interpretation is not only in conflict with most of the narrations but also has some other weaknesses. Thus it is not clear what is the relationship between the statement that "we are an unlettered people ... " and the statement that "a month has 29 or 30 days". Regardless of whether a people are an unlettered a lunar month is 29 or 30 days. To say that "we are an unlettered ... and a month is 29 or 30 days" is like saying "we are an unlettered people and the sun sets in the west," that is, it makes no sense. The relationship between the two statements begins to be understandable if we take the second statement to be only that a month has 29 days. The meaning then would be: Since we do not write or do not make calculations, therefore we do not have written calendars so that when we do not know the actual length of a month we should take the month to be 29 days.

Muslim also has a version of the above hadith:

Abu Bakr bin Abi Shaybah related to us: Ghundar related to us from Shu'bah: (Also, related to us Muhammad bin al-Muthanna and Ibn Bashshar; Ibn al-Muthanna said: Muhammad bin al-Ja'far related to us Shu'bah related to us) from al-Aswad ibn Qays who said: I heard Sa'id ibn 'Amr bin Sa'id (say) that he heard Ibn 'Umar report from the Prophet who said: "We are an unlettered people. We neither write nor calculate. A month is thus and thus and thus, folding his thumb the third time and a month is thus and thus and thus (not folding his thumb the third time), that is, (*ya'ni*) 30 (days).

Unlike in Bukhari, here in Muslim, the words *hakadha wa hakadha ...* are used with the same meaning as in other ahadith, each time referring to ten or nine fingers. But in this hadith the Prophet shows by his hand gestures two numbers (29 and 30) instead of one (29), as is the case in all other ahadith. In this way the interpretation found in Bukhari has become part of the hadith itself. But Muslim gives another version raising doubt about any reference by the Prophet to 30 days:

This hadith is related to me by Muhammad bin Hatim (thus): Ibn Mahdi related to us from Sufyan from al-Aswad bin Qays with the rest of the *isnad* same as above, but in that narration no mention has been made for the other month: thirty (days). (Muslim 13/15)

From the above discussion it seems almost certain that the Prophet only said that a month is 29 days without mentioning 30 days. The evidence for this may be summarized thus:

1. In almost all the ahadith the Prophet mentions only the number 29 and not 30.
2. 'Uqbah raises the possibility that the Prophet also mentioned 30 days. But he is not sure about it.
3. Bukhari and Muslim have a narration in which 30 is mentioned. But in Bukhari the mention of 30 days only appears in an interpretation and not in the words of the Prophet. In Muslim the mention of 30 is part of the hadith, but Muslim also gives a version that clearly says that 30 days were not mentioned by the Prophet. Moreover, the statement that a month may be either 29 or 30 days seems to bear no relation with the statement that the Arabs were an unlettered people.
4. To state that a month has 29 or 30 days is to state such a well known fact that it is not of any interest by itself and yet several ahadith make the statement by itself as if it is significant in its own right.

In view of the above considerations we conclude that in its original form the hadith only said that a month has 29 days. This clearly has some significance since the month is not always 29 days. What is this significance?

We can answer the question by remembering that people had many dealings that required counting the number of days in a month. For example, a person who bought an item on a Thursday may promise to make the payment after a month. How will the duration of a month be determined? One way would be to note the date on the day of purchase, say the 10th, and then make the payment on the 10th of the next month, which may be either after 29 days or 30 days. Another way would be to fix a particular number of days 29 or 30 as the number of days in a month. This is something that is also done in case of the solar calendar. The solar month is 28, 29, 30 or 31 days but generally it is taken to be 30 days for many purposes. Giving the month a default duration of 29 days was particularly useful for the mostly unlettered people of Arabia who did not have written calendars and did not always keep track of the days. This is why one of the above ahadith begins by saying we neither write nor calculate (that is, keep count).

The idea that a month is 29 days is actually applied by the Prophet in the following hadith relating a well known story:

Abu 'Asim related to us from Ibn Jurayj from Yahya bin 'Abd Allah bin Sayfi from 'Ikramah bin 'Abd al-Rahman from Umm Salamah that the Prophet vowed to keep aloof from his wives for one month, and after the completion of 29 days he went either in the morning or in the afternoon to his wives. It was said to him: "You vowed

that you would not enter for one month." He said: "A month is of 29 days" (Bukhari 3/134)^[6].

Here the month was not determined by keeping track of the new moons and of the dates but simply by counting the number of days.

NARRATIONS FROM ABU HURAYRAH

In addition to Ibn 'Umar we also have some narrations from other companions. Muslim gives four such narrations from Abu Hurayrah and Bukhari gives one. I reproduce below these five narrations:

Yahya bib Yahya related to us: Ibrahim bin Sa'd related to us from ibn Shihab from Sa'id bin al-Musayyab from Abu Hurayrah that the Messenger of God said: "When you see the new moon, start fasting, and when you see it, end fasting. But if it is obscure for you, fast for 30 days *sumu thalathin yawman*." (Muslim)

'Abu Bakr bin Abi Shaybah related to us: Muhammad bin Bishr al-'Abdi related to us: 'Ubayd Allah bin 'Umar related to us from Abu Zinad from al-A'raj from Abu Hurayrah that the Messenger of God mentioned the *hila* and said: "When you see it, start fasting, and when you see it, end fasting. But if it is obscure for you, and if it is obscure for you, count 30 (*fa 'uddu thalathin*)." (Muslim)

'Abd al-Rahman bin Sallam al-Jumahi related to us: al-Rubay', that is, Ibn Muslim related to us from Muhammad (who is Ibn Ziyad) from Abu Hurayrah that the Prophet said: "Start fasting on seeing it, and end fasting on seeing it, and if it is obscure for you, complete the number (*akmilu al-'adad*)." (Muslim 13/2/18)

'Ubayd Allah bin Mu'adh related to us: My father related to us: Su'bah related to us from Muhammad bin Ziyad who said: I heard Abu Hurayrah saying that the Messenger of God said: "Start fasting on seeing it, and end fasting on seeing it, and if the month is obscure for you, count 30 (*fa 'uddu thalathin*)." (Muslim 13/2/19)

Adam related to us: Shu'bah related to us: Muhammad bin Ziyad related to us saying: I heard Abu Hurayrah say: The Prophet said or, (I heard him say) Abu al-Qasim said: "Start fasting on seeing it, and end fasting on seeing it, and if it is obscure for you, complete thirty days of Sha'ban (*fa akmilu 'idda Sha'ban thalathin*)." (Bukhari 3/133)

In the last two narrations both Bukhari and Muslim are receiving the hadith from Shu'bah from Ibn Ziyad from Abu Hurayrah but in Bukhari's narration there is some special concern with completing the 30 days of Sha'ban. This concern, which we earlier encountered in his narration of Ibn Dinar's hadith, is completely absent from all

other narrations, not only from Abu Hurayrah but also from Ibn 'Umar and Ibn 'Abbas. Consequently, Bukhari's version is the result of some alteration during the process of transmission.

Let us now consider the question: do any of the above narrations go back to Abu Hurayrah? There is some probability that Abu Hurayrah narrated the hadith but this probability is not as high as in the case of Ibn 'Umar. For, in case of Ibn 'Umar, proceeding from the written testimony of Muwatta, Bukhari, and Muslim, we were able to successively take the hadith back from one generation of transmitters to the previous generation with multiple witnesses. Thus we saw that at least two third-generation transmitters – Malik and 'Ubayd Allah – narrated the hadith from Nafi' and at least two – Malik and Isma'il bin Ja'far – narrated it from Ibn Dinar. Then the testimony of these two second-generation transmitters gives us confidence that the hadith was transmitted by Ibn 'Umar. Such is far from being the case with Abu Hurayrah's narration. Only to the third generation transmitter Shu'bah (d. 160) can we take the narration by two independent chains (see the *asanid* in the last two narrations quoted above). As we try to go further back, we have only Shu'bah's word that he heard the narration from Ibn Ziyad and if we accept his word we have only Ibn Ziyad's word, which may or may not be true, that he heard the narration from Abu Hurayrah.

Still we can use the narrations from Abu Hurayrah for additional support for conclusions that have been otherwise reached on some sound basis. Thus for example we earlier concluded on the basis of narrations from Ibn 'Umar that the hadith is authentic. This conclusion is strengthened further by the fact that there is some probability that the hadith was transmitted not only by Ibn 'Umar but also by Abu Hurayrah, thus providing two witnesses in the first generation. We also concluded earlier that the statement "a month has 29 days" was originally a separate hadith. This conclusion is supported by the narrations from Abu Hurayrah since none of those narrations contain the statement.

There is an important difference in the narrations from Ibn 'Umar and those from Abu Hurayrah: the former generally use the phrase *fa aqduru la hu* while the latter use a phrase saying that in case of obscurity 30 days should be completed. We need to give priority to the phrase *fa aqduru la hu* found in Ibn 'Umar's narrations because of the greater reliability of the narrations from Ibn 'Umar. Another reason to regard this phrase more original is that in the narrations from Abu Hurayrah we have four different phrases in place of *fa aqduru la hu*:

fa sumu thalathin yawman (fast for 30 days)

fa 'uddu thalathin (count 30)

fa akmilu al-'adad (complete the number)

fa akmilu 'idda Sha'ban thalathin (complete the period for Sha'ban to 30)

This amount of variation in language shows that transmitters of the hadith are describing an idea freely in their own words rather than attempting to transmit the hadith with faithfulness to the original words. In contrast, in the narrations of Ibn 'Umar a single expression *fa aqduru la hu* is very firmly established, being encountered in almost all narrations.

Still more evidence that counting 30 days is a later interpretation of *fa aqduru la hu* is provided by the following tradition:

Ayyub said: 'Umar bin 'Abd al-'Aziz wrote to the people of Baṣrah: It has reached us from the Messenger of God like the tradition narrated by Ibn 'Umar from the Prophet. This version adds: The best calculation is that when we sight the moon of Sha'ban on such-and-such date, fasting will begin on such-and-such date, God willing, except that they sight the moon (for Ramaḍan) before that. (Abu Da`ud).

Here the view expressed is probably that Sha'ban should be counted as 30 days unless moon is sighted on the 29th. The view is an official ruling by 'Umar bin 'Abd al-'Aziz (who became *khalifah* in 99 and died in 101) and is not part of the hadith narrated by Ibn 'Umar. The view is described as "the best calculation", that is, as the best interpretation of *fa aqduru la hu*. This suggests that there are other acceptable interpretations.

NARRATIONS FROM IBN 'ABBAS

There are also a few narrations from Ibn 'Abbas but these are not well attested. None of them is found in Bukhari or Muslim and the one that is found in Muwatta does not have complete *isnad*.

Narration of Malik from al-Dayli from Ibn 'Abbas

In the Muwatta we read:

Malik related to me from Thawr bin Zayd al-Dayli from 'Abd Allah bin 'Abbas that the Messenger of God once mentioned Ramaḍan and said: "Do not begin the fast until you see the *hila* and do not break the fast until you see it. If it is obscured from you, *fa akmilu al-'adad (al-'iddah) thalathin* (then complete the number or period to 30 (days))." (Muwatta, also found in Abu Da`ud, Tirmidhi, and Nasa`i)

The difference between this narration and that of the two narrations from Ibn 'Umar is that here we have the words *fa akmilu al-'adada (al-'iddah) thalathin* instead of *fa aqdiru la hu*. This is the same change that is found in Bukhari's narration of Ibn Dīnār's narration and in one of the narrations from Abu Hurayrah. We cannot give too much weight to this narration from Ibn 'Abbas, since it suffers from a fatal weakness. A note in the Muwatta informs us that this narration is *munqati'*, meaning that a link is missing in the middle of the *isnad*. That is, al-Dayli either did not meet Malik or did not meet Ibn 'Abbas. Not surprisingly, the hadith is not accepted by Bukhari and Muslim.

Another narration from Ibn 'Abbas

Abu Da`ud also records a narration from Ibn 'Abbas:

Ibn 'Abbas reported the Messenger of God as saying: Do not fast one day or two days before Ramaḍān except if a man is in the habit of fasting (on those days). And do not begin fasting until you see it. Then keep fasting until you see it. If a cloud appears on that day, complete the number 30 (of days) and then end the fasting. A month is 29 days. (Abu Da`ud who said: This tradition has also been transmitted by Ḥatim bin Abi Ṣaghīrah, Shu'bah and al-Ḥasan bin Ṣālih on the authority of Simak to the same effect. But they did not mention the words "then end fasting".)

This narration has three parts, each of which is found by itself in other narrations. The first part says that as a rule one should not fast a day or two before Ramaḍān. This means that one should not fast on the 29th of Sha'ban and if Sha'ban is of 30 days, one should also not fast on the 30th. This rule is also found in a hadith narrated in both Bukhari and Muslim from Yahya bin Abi Kathir from Abu Salamah from Abu Hurayrah^[7]. The second and third parts should by now be quite familiar to the reader from many narrations. In the form in which the narration is given in Abu Da`ud the statement "a month has 29 days" simply makes no sense: If in case of obscurity we fast for 30 days what is the meaning of saying that a month is 29 days? Also, why is it said "complete the number 30 and then end the fasting"? Was it not known to everyone that a month cannot be more than 30 days and therefore after 30 days of fasting the month must come to an end? We can make much better sense of the narration if we remove the words "complete the number 30". The narration would then read: "If a cloud appears on that day, then end fasting; a month is 29 days." That is, continue fasting till you see the new moon. But if on the 29th Ramaḍān it is cloudy, then end fasting, for, a month by default is 29 days. The fact that we can make some sense of the narration by reading it without the words "complete 30 days" strongly suggests that these words are a later addition. Thus we once again encounter a case in which reference to 30 days is very probably a later addition.

THE AUTHENTIC WORDS OF THE PROPHET

On the basis of the above discussion, we can say that on the subject of starting and ending Ramaḍan we can confidently attribute to the Blessed Messenger of God only the following words:

"Do not begin the fast until you see the *hila* and do not break the fast until you see it. If it is obscured from you (*ghumma 'alaykum*), *fa aqduru la hu*."

He also stated that "a month has 29 days" but this was a separate statement.

Further support for the above reconstruction is provided by the fact that starting with it we can easily explain the remaining narrations whereas if we start with any other narration such explanations are difficult to find.

Explaining the different versions

There were two ways in which words/actions were wrongly attributed to the Holy Prophet. First, some shameless people simply fabricated sayings and stories and attributed them to him. Second, the words of the Prophet were understood in various ways and these different interpretations were reflected in the narration, thus changing the original hadith. The new changed narration raised other questions and interpretations that in turn needed new changes in the hadith. In the case of ahadith concerning the start/end of Ramaḍan this latter process is at work, as we now proceed to show.

The words *fa aqduru la hu* were meant to say what they say: estimate the duration. The actual method of estimation was left unspecified, since that would depend on the available information and analytical tools, which can change from place to place and time to time. However, people tried to make the phrase more specific and establish a simple rule applicable in all situations. One simple way to do that would be to give to the month a particular number of days in case of obscurity – 29 or 30. This raised the question whether the same number will apply to both Sha'ban and Ramaḍan. The following four answers were possible depending on whether in case of obscurity both Sha'ban and Ramaḍan are taken to consist of 29 days or 30 days or one of them is taken to consist of 29 days and the other of 30 days:

- a) If there is obscurity on the 29th of Sha'ban, take that month to be 30 days and the same is true of Ramaḍan.

In this case, you would never fast more than 30 days but sometimes you will fast only 28 days. For, suppose that both Sha'ban and Ramaḍan are 29 days but it is cloudy on 29th of Sha'ban and clear on 29th of Ramaḍan. You will count Sha'ban as 30 days and in this way miss one day of Ramaḍan. But if the sky is clear on the 29th of Ramaḍan you will be able to see the *hila* of Ramaḍan and therefore end fasting, even though you fasted only for 28 days. In places like Caribbean Islands, Trinidad, and Guyana where it is cloudy very often this process could lead even to less than 28 days of fasting.

- b) If there is obscurity on the 29th of Sha'ban, take that month to be 29 days and the same is true of Ramaḍan.

In this case, you would never fast for less than 29 days but sometimes you would fast 31 or more days or have 'Id al-Fiṭr in Ramaḍan. For suppose that both Sha'ban and Ramaḍan are 30 days and it is cloudy on 29th of Sha'ban and clear on the 29th of Ramaḍan. By the rule of restricting the month to 29 days in case of obscurity, you will count Sha'ban as 29 days and thus fast on the last day of Sha'ban, but since the sky is clear on the 29th of Ramaḍan you will know that Ramaḍan has not ended. So you will fast 30 days of Ramaḍan and one day of Sha'ban, a total of 31 days. In case it is cloudy for several months leading to Ramadan you will need to fast even more than 31 days.

- c) If there is obscurity on the 29th of Sha'ban, take that month to be 30 days but if there is obscurity on the 29th of Ramaḍan take it to be 29 days.

In this case you will never fast for more than 30 days but sometimes you will fast 28 days.

- d) If there is obscurity on the 29th of Sha'ban, take that month to be 29 days but if there is obscurity on the 29th of Ramaḍan take it to be 30 days.

In this case you will never fast for less than 29 days but sometimes you will fast 31 days.

Today we all assume (a), that is, in case of obscurity we should take the month as of 30 days whether it is Sha'ban or Ramaḍan. It would therefore surprise some readers to hear that all of the above views have been held by Muslims. Indeed, the differences in the various narrations of the hadith about starting/ending Ramaḍan can be explained as attempts to reflect these interpretations.

Both months given 30 days

Thus, we have already seen that while the earliest narrations of the hadith had simply the phrase *fa aqḍuru la hu* some narrations introduce the idea of completing the

month to 30 days. This is done variously. Sometimes the word *thalathin* (30) is added to the phrase *fa aqduru la hu*. More often it is completely replaced by its interpretation by saying "complete the period or number to 30" or "count 30" or "fast for 30 days". But these modified narrations still left the possibility that Sha'ban may be taken to consist of 29 days in case of obscurity. This possibility was closed by attributing the following words to the Holy Prophet:

'Aishah said: The Messenger of God used to count the days in Sha'ban in a manner he did not count any other month. Then he fasted when he sighted the *hila* of Ramaḍan, but if the weather was cloudy he counted thirty days and then fasted. (Abu Da`ud)

Hudhayfah reported the Messenger of God as saying: Do not fast before the coming of the month until you see the new moon or complete the number (30 days); then fast until you see the new moon or complete the number (30 days). (Abu Da`ud who said: This tradition has been transmitted by Sufyan and others from Mansur from Rib'i on the authority of a person from the Companions of the Prophet, but he did not mention the name of Hudhayfah.)

It is possible that this view was held by Abu Hurayrah, since all narrations from him replace *fa aqduru la hu* by a phrase stating that the month should be completed to 30 days.

Both months given 29 days

We earlier noticed that many narrations from Ibn 'Umar have the additional words: "A month has 29 days". Originally this was probably a separate hadith but it was combined with the hadith about starting/ending Ramaḍan, as if they are to be read and interpreted together:

"A month has twenty-nine (days). So (*fa*) do not begin the fast until you see the *hila* and do not break the fast until you see it. If it is obscured from you, *fa aqduru la hu*."

Usually the statement that "a month has 29 days" is understood to mean that a month has sometimes 29 days (and sometimes 30 days). The hadith is then interpreted as follows: Since a month is sometimes 29 days and sometimes 30 days, you have to determine the month by sighting the moon. In case of obscurity, *fa aqduru la hu*, this is understood to mean "complete 30 days". But to interpret the words "a month has 29 days" to mean that a month is sometimes 29 days seems unjustified. Moreover, in one version there is an emphasis on 29 days:

"A month rather (*innama*) is 29 days. Do not begin the fast until you see it and do not break the fast until you see it. If it is obscured from you, *fa aqduru la hu*. (Muslim)

Here the use of *innama* puts an emphasis on 29 days and at least in this version our interpretation should take the statement in its obvious sense: A month has 29 days by default. The narration can then be interpreted as: Determine the exact duration of Ramaḍan by observing the new moons for Shaʿban and Ramaḍan. If due to any circumstances you cannot, then use the default value of 29 days. In this interpretation *fa aqḍuru la hu* is used in the sense of limiting something to a low value, in this case 29.

In view of the above, we conclude that some Muslims in very early times interpreted the hadith to mean that in case of obscurity every month should be taken to consist of 29 days and they reflected this view in their narrations. In this case, they were not changing the words of the Holy Prophet but simply combining two originally separate statements, interpreting one in the light of the other. It is possible that this view was held by Ibn ʿUmar.

Shaʿban given 30 days and Ramaḍan given 29 days

This view explains the following narration:

Ṣilbah stated from ʿAmmar: Whoever fasts on a doubtful day has disobeyed Abu al-Qasim [that is, the Prophet]. (Bukhari)

Abu Ishaq reported on the authority of Ṣilbah: We were with ʿAmmar on a day when the appearance of the moon was doubtful. (The meat of) goat was brought to him. Some people kept aloof from it (because they were fasting). ʿAmmar said: He who keeps fast on this day disobeys Abu al-Qasim (i.e. the Prophet). (Abu Daʿud, also found in Tirmidhi, Nasaʿi, Darimi, Ibn Majah)

In order to harmonize this tradition with other traditions stating that in case of obscurity count 30 days, it is often restricted to Shaʿban. But the prohibition of fasting on a doubtful day is general and should be applied to both Shaʿban and Ramaḍan. In case of Shaʿban, if the view is obscured on the 29th the following day becomes doubtful and so one should not fast and hence take Shaʿban as 30 days. In case of obscurity on 29th Ramaḍan, the following day will again be doubtful and so one should not fast, thus taking Ramaḍan as 29 days.

The view also explains some of the strange changes that take place in some narrations in Bukhari. Thus recall the following hadith:

Adam related to us: Shuʿbah related to us: Muhammad bin Ziyad related to us saying: I heard Abu Hurayrah say: The Prophet said or, (I heard him say) Abu al-Qasim said: "Start fasting on seeing it, and end fasting on seeing it, and if it is obscured for you, complete thirty days of Shaʿban (*fa akmilu ʿidda Shaʿban thalathin*)." (Bukhari 3/133)

Muslim also records a narration from Shu'bah from Ibn Ziyad from Abu Hurayrah, but that narration simply says "count 30 days", which can apply to both Sha'ban and Ramaḍān. But in the above narration in Bukhari only Sha'ban is mentioned. This singling of Sha'ban is clearly done to reflect a point of view, which seems to be that in case of obscurity, Sha'ban should be counted for 30 days but Ramaḍān need not be. The same point of view is also present in the following narration in Bukhari:

'Abd Allah bin Maslamah related to us: Malik related to us from 'Abd Allah bin Ramaḍān from 'Abd Allah bin 'Umar that God's Messenger said: "The month is twenty-nine nights. So do not fast till you see the moon, and if it is obscured for you, then complete thirty." (Bukhari 3/131)

Malik recorded in his Muwatta a narration with the same *isnad* but the narration in Bukhari differs from that of Muwatta in that it talks only of starting Ramaḍān, so that the command, "complete thirty" becomes applicable only to Sha'ban.

Sha'ban given 29 days and Ramaḍān given 30 days

According to the following tradition in Abu Da`ud this view was held by Ibn 'Umar:

Ibn 'Umar reported the Messenger of God as saying: The month consists of twenty-nine days, but do not fast till you sight it and do not break your fast till you sight it. If it is obscured for you, calculate it thirty days. When the twenty-ninth of Sha'ban came, Ibn 'Umar would send someone to see the moon for him. If it was sighted, then well and good; in case it was not sighted, and there was no cloud or dust before him, he would not keep fast the next day. If there appeared before him cloud or dust, he would fast the following day. Ibn 'Umar would end his fasting along with the people, and did not follow this calculation. (Abu Da`ud 2/2313).

The underlined words clearly mean that Ibn 'Umar took Sha'ban to consist of 29 days in case of obscurity while he did not follow this calculation for Ramaḍān, that is, took Ramaḍān as 30 days in case of obscurity.

Ahmad Hasan in his translation of Abu Da`ud comments on the above hadith by referring to Ibn al-Jawzi: "About fasting on the 29th day of Sha'ban when the moon is not sighted due to cloud or dust, according to Ahmad, there are three viewpoints: First, fasting is necessary as if it was Ramaḍān (that is, assume 29 days in Sha'ban). Secondly, keeping the obligatory and supererogatory fast on the day when the vision of the moon is doubtful is not lawful (assume 30 days in Sha'ban). But one can keep fast as atonement, or expiation, or vow, or supererogatory fast, provided one was habituated to it. This view is held by Shafi'i. Abu Hanifah and Malik maintain that it is not lawful to fast with the intention of the fast of Ramaḍān on the day when the appearance of the moon is doubtful. To keep other kinds of fast is lawful. Thirdly, it

depends on the decision of the ruler of a country. If he keeps fast, the people too must do. If he does not fast, the people also should follow him."

There is a good logic behind the view that Sha'ban should be taken of 29 days in case of obscurity, for otherwise, as we noted earlier, sometimes we would fast only for 28 days, which means that we would not fast for a month in any reasonable sense of "month". This may be one of the reasons why Ibn 'Umar stressed that a month is 29 days.

HOW FAR WE CAN USE ASTRONOMICAL CALCULATIONS

Here there are two questions: Can we establish the start of a month purely by using astronomical calculations? Can we do so, when the *hila* cannot be seen because of clouds, fog, dust storm etc.?

Some Muslims argue that calculations should not be used under any circumstances to determine the start/end of the Islamic month. They appeal to those narrations, in which it is said: "complete the number (30)". They view "complete the number" as *mubayyan* (clear), clarifying the *mujmal* (general and imprecise) words *fa aqdu la hu* and appeal to the principle that "it is obligatory to refer the *mujmal* to the *mubayyan*, and this is the way of the scholars of *uṣul*, without any disagreement." (Ibn Rushd, *Bidayat al-Mujtahid*). But this argument is now seen to be invalid since we have shown that the original words used by the Prophet were only *fa aqdu la hu* and the phrases like *akmilu al-'iddah* found in some narrations are a *taḥrīf*, probably done "innocently" to clarify the hadith in the light of an interpretation.

In its original authentic form the hadith is giving priority to *hila* sighting and admitting calculation when there are factors obstructing the visibility of the new moon. Thus the answer to the two questions would seem to be that calculations should determine the start/end of Ramaḍan or any other lunar month only in case it is not possible to see the new moon.

One may, however, argue for the use of calculations in all cases, whether or not conditions for *hila* visibility exist, by saying that when the Prophet told Muslims to start/end fasting upon seeing the new moon, he was not laying down a law for all times to come but giving a convenient and reliable way to define and determine the start/end of Ramaḍan. If our increased knowledge of astronomy allows some other way of defining and determining the start/end of a lunar month, then we may do so. It is like the Qur`anic command to "prepare against them all you can of power and of horses of war to deter thereby the enemies of God and your enemies ..." (8:60) or the Qur`anic command to fast from dawn to dusk. Here we cannot consider horses of war as a requirement of God's commandment but a specific means to build a deterrent

force that proved useful during many past centuries but which is no longer useful in this age of enemies armed to the teeth by nuclear weapons, cluster bombs etc. Also, dawn to dusk cannot be taken as a requirement but a means to determine a period of fasting that proves to be satisfactory for an overwhelming majority of Muslims but not for the tiny minority that lives near the poles of the earth. Similarly, when the Prophet told us to start/end a month by seeing the new moon, "seeing" was not a requirement but a specific method to determine the start/end of a month, a method that was the best method for all the past centuries but may not be best now and therefore may be replaced by a better method.

Some Muslims also argue from the following hadith that calculations can completely replace *hila* sighting:

"We are an unlettered people. We neither write, nor calculate. A month is like this and this", that is (*ya'ni*), sometimes of 29 days and sometimes of 30 days. (Bukhari 3/137)

"We are an unlettered people. We neither write nor calculate. A month is thus and thus and thus, folding his thumb the third time and a month is thus and thus and thus" (not folding his thumb the third time), that is, (*ya'ni*) 30 (days). This hadith is related to me by Muhammad bin Hatim ... but in that narration no mention has been made for the other month: thirty (days). (Muslim 13/15)

Those who propose using only astronomical calculations argue that the way to establish the duration of a lunar month adopted by the Prophet reflected the level of knowledge that people had at the time and place of the Prophet's appearance and that this method can change with the increase in that level of knowledge.

Are the above considerations enough for us to use astronomical calculations even when the moon is visible? Regardless of how we interpret a command of God or his Messenger, it is better to preserve its letter as long as the cost of doing so is not too high. In the formulation of this principle "cost" can be "opportunity cost", that is, the foregoing of certain advantages that will ensue had a course of action been taken. In limiting our armies to horses of wars or fasting from dawn to dusk near the poles the result is individual or collective death, a very high cost; so we need not preserve the letter of the corresponding laws^[8]. Clearly, there is no such cost involved in giving priority to actual sight of the *hila*. The only question is whether the opportunity cost of not using astronomical calculation even in case of the moon's visibility is too high, that is, the advantages for the ummah of entirely depending on astronomical calculations are too much greater than the disadvantages. At the present time this is a matter of judgment and so we should stick to the letter of the Prophet's words. Hence we should go by sight when the moon is visible and use the best available astronomical calculations when the visibility is obstructed.

(II)

A HADITH ABOUT THE REGIONAL VALIDITY OF THE HILAL SIGHTING

Yahya bin Yahya and Yahya bin Ayyub and Qutaybah (bin Sa'id) and Ibn Hujr said (Yahya bin Yahya using the word akhbara na, while others using haddatha na^[9]): Isma'il who is Ibn Ja'far related to us from Muhammad who is Ibn Harmalah from Kurayb that Umm al-Faql, daughter of Harith, sent him to Mu'awiyah in Syria. He said: I arrived in Syria, and did what she needed. While I was in Syria the month of Ramadan commenced. I saw the *hila* on Friday. I then came back to Madinah at the end of the month. 'Abd Allah bin 'Abbas asked me, mentioning the new moon, and said: When did you see it? I said: We saw it on the night of Friday. He said: You saw it yourself? I said: Yes, and the people also saw it and they fasted and Mu'awiyah also fasted. He responded: But we saw it on Saturday night and so we would continue to fast till we complete thirty (days of fasting) or we sight it. I said: Is the sighting of Mu'awiyah not sufficient for you (*taktafi*)? He said: No; this is how the Messenger of God has commanded us. Yahya bin Yahya was undecided between *naktafi* (sufficient for us) and *taktafi* (sufficient for you). (Muslim)

Here there is some ambiguity about the identity of the person who was sent to Syria by Umm al-Faql. The Arabic allows him to be identified as either her son al-Faql or as Kurayb. The first understanding is adopted in the English translation by Abdul Hamid Siddiqui and the second in the Urdu translation by Wahid al-Zaman. The speaker in the subsequent report in the first person, "I arrived in Syria ..." is clearly purported to be the same person who was sent by the lady and so the same ambiguity arises in his case.

This hadith is not found in Muwatta and Bukhari, which does not give us a great deal of confidence about its reliability. For, the only argument for its authenticity is that Muslim found its *isnad* trustworthy, but we have seen earlier that narrations with sound *isnad* can quite significantly change the original report.

But even if we accept it as authentic, it does not give us any binding teaching. It does not tell us what exactly the Prophet commanded. We are simply told in vague terms that "this is how the Messenger of God commanded us". Not surprisingly these vague words can be and have been understood in different ways:

1. The Prophet commanded that Muslims should follow *hila* sighting of their own "region" whatever "region" may mean. Ibn 'Abbas therefore continued fasting in Madinah despite Kurayb's testimony that he saw the *hila* in Sham.

2. The Prophet instructed that if the news of *hila* sighting reaches after a certain time, one should continue his or her fast. Ibn 'Abbas continued fasting because Kurayb did not deliver his news in time.
3. The Prophet instructed that two witnesses are needed to establish the appearance of the new moon. Ibn 'Abbas continued fasting because he only had the single witness of Kurayb.

The first of these three interpretations seems to be most natural. But no matter what command we read into the vague words of Ibn 'Abbas, we encounter problems. Thus for the first interpretation, the problem is that if the Prophet really commanded that a *hila* sighting is only valid locally, then why do we not find that command in any other hadith? If we say that the command is implicit in some hadith – say, for example, the hadith about starting fast when *hila* is sighted and ending fast when *hila* is sighted – then this is an interpretation by Ibn 'Abbas that is not binding, especially because the same hadith can be interpreted to draw the opposite conclusion: a *hila* sighting is valid globally. For we can argue as follows: When the hadith tells to start/end fast when “you” see *hila* it is addressing the whole ummah and not regional communities of Muslims. Therefore, when some Muslims see the *hila* somewhere on the globe it is as if the whole ummah has seen it and so Muslims everywhere should start/end fast. Al-Shawkani has elaborated these points as follows:

You should know that the acceptable evidence is in what Ibn 'Abbas reported explicitly from the Messenger. It is not in his *ijtihad* that people tried to interpret, and to which he pointed by saying, “This is how God’s Messenger commanded us”. His direct report from the Prophet is what Al-Bukhari, Muslim, and others narrated as, “Do not fast until you see the new moon, and do not end your fast until you see it.” This does not apply to any particular location, but is a general address to all Muslims. Thus it is obviously a piece of evidence that a sighting in one location is binding to people in other locations. This is so because when people in a particular location see it, this means that all Muslims have seen it. Thus what applies to them [those who saw it] would apply to others [in other locations] Despite that al-Sham was not far enough from al-Madinah to warrant different moon rising positions (*matla'*) and for Ibn Abbas to refuse to follow the sighting of its people. This shows that his behavior was based on his *ijtihad*, and is not, therefore, an acceptable evidence". (Nayl al-Awtar, volume 4, page 268)

To hold that *hila* sighting has only regional validity requires specifying the distance for which a sighting remains valid. But no hadith provides any such specification^[10]. Scholars had to use their opinions, which differ one from the other, to specify the distance^[11].

For the second interpretation, a similar problem arises: we do not have any hadith saying that one should continue fasting if the news of the moon sighting arrives after a certain period of time.

For the third interpretation, we do not have any hadith about the number of witnesses needed to establish moon sighting in Muwatta, Bukhari or Muslim but in later collections such ahadith are found^[12]. However, even in these collections several ahadith allow the acceptance of the witness of a single person, so once again choosing two witnesses should be viewed as an interpretation and preference of Ibn 'Abbas which is not binding.

The above discussion shows that the Prophet did not give any clear teaching as to whether moon sighting is valid locally or globally. Muslims can agree on any position that is reasonable and convenient. In my opinion the best position in our times is that an Islamic month should begin/end as soon as *hila* is visible to the naked eye in any part of the globe.

(III)

A HADITH ABOUT THE DATE OF 'ID AL-ADHA

The following ahadith are sometimes used to argue that 'Id al-Adha is the 10th of Dhu al-Hijjah and not necessarily the day after the day of 'Arafah in Makkah:

The Messenger stayed in Madinah for ten years offering his sacrifice. (Tirmidhi, Sahih).

The Messenger sacrificed on the tenth day in Madinah. (Bayhaqi)

But the absence of the ahadith from most collections does not inspire confidence in their reliability. And even if we accept them as authentic, they provide no guidance on the question. Neither in these ahadith nor in any other the Prophet says that 'Id al-Adha should be on the 10th of Dhu al-Hijjah according to *hila* sighting in one's own city or country or region. The stated fact that the Prophet celebrated the 'Id on the 10th of Dhu al-Hijjah does not lead to that conclusion, since it is possible that over the ten years of the Prophet's stay in Madinah the *hila* of Dhu al-Hijjah appeared on the same evening in Madinah as in Makkah, in which case the 10th of Dhu al-Hijjah in Madinah is the same day as the day after 'Arafah in Makkah. Moreover, the very distinction between the 10th of Dhu al-Hijjah and the day after 'Arafah assumes that

moon sighting is only valid locally, for which there is no strong basis in ahadith, as we saw above.

Hence we conclude that there is no hadith, authentic or otherwise, that obliges us to adopt any particular definition of 'Id al-Adha – 10th of Dhu al-Hijjah or the day after 'Arafah. We are free to agree on any definition that is reasonable and convenient. If we adopt global validity of a sure *hila* sighting, then the two definitions will coincide and this is one good reason to adopt that convention.

GOING BY THE *HILAL* SIGHTING IN MAKKAH

Some suggest that we simply follow the sighting in Makkah, either for both fasting and 'Id al-Adha or for 'Id al-Adha. In this regard the following points should be noticed:

First, it seems difficult to accept that we should determine one month by one method and another month by another method. Hence if we follow the sighting in Makkah for 'Id al-Adha, we should do the same for fasting.

Second, we earlier noted that the hadith about starting/ending fast comes in two forms negative and positive:

“Do not start the fast till you see *hila* and do not break the fast till you see it. If it is obscured for you, estimate for it.”

“Start the fast when you see *hila* and break the fast when you see it. If it is obscured for you, estimate for it.”

We favored the negative form because it is found in Muwatta and thus has the earliest documentation. But this reason is not compelling and there is some probability that the positive form is authentic. Now it is easy to see that in its positive form the hadith will not be strictly respected by the suggestion to go by the sighting in Makkah. For, if the new moon of Ramaḍān or Shawwāl is sighted in a locality other than Makkah before it is sighted in Makkah, at least the Muslims in that locality would not be doing what the hadith tells them to do: start/end fasting when you see the new moon.

(IV)

REACHING A CONSENSUS IS OF PRIMARY IMPORTANCE

In discussing the issues connected with the determination of Islamic dates we need to remember a distinction between two types of instructions that God and his Messenger have given to us: 1) those that deal with right and wrong, good and evil; 2) those that provide conventions needed to organize collective religious life. Examples of the first type are the commandments to pray, to give zakah, to stand for justice and the prohibition of lying, stealing and zina`. Examples of the second type are some detailed rules for prayer, fasting etc. relating to the form of these acts of worship. The first type of instruction is unchanging and common to all true religions of God brought by prophets from Adam to Muhammad (may peace be upon them all). But the second type is subject to variation from people to people and from time to time. For example, the command to pray is found in the teachings of all the prophets but the actual form of prayer has varied from time to time and place to place. This is not only established by the historical evidence but also can be affirmed on the basis of the Qur`an, which states that earlier prophets enjoined prayer (4:102, 14:37-40, 19:31, 55, 21:73, 98:5) but the actual form of acts of worship was different for different religious communities:

For every people (*ummah*) we have appointed (a different) system of rites (*mansak*) for them to remember the name of God over the beast of cattle that he has given them for food ... (22:34)

For every people (*ummah*) we have appointed (a different) system of rites (*mansak*) for them to follow. So let them not dispute with you on the matter. Invite them to your Lord. Surely, you (O Prophet) are on the straight path (22:67)

For every (people) among you (O humankind) we have appointed (a different) system of rules (*shir'ah*) and way (*minhaj*) ... (5:48)

The idea that precise form of acts of worship are not questions of good and evil or right and wrong is specifically stated in the Qur`an in reference to the Islamic rule that we should face the *qiblah* while praying:

It is not righteousness (*al-birr*) that you turn your faces east or west, but righteousness rather is (to be) one who believes in God(2:177)

When it comes to questions of right and wrong, good and evil we should not compromise in any way but for detailed rules of convention we should show a much more flexible attitude. But it is a perversion of human nature that we can often be very tolerable in matters related to good and evil, right and wrong but become extremely rigid when it comes to rules regarding ritual acts. For example, the Qur`an puts such emphasis on justice but we have been tolerating the unjust dictatorial systems of governments in our societies for centuries even though this has led us to extreme weakness, humiliation, subjugation to other nations, and other forms of

suffering. On the other hand, when it comes to rules pertaining to ritual acts we can be fierce warriors for the perceived teachings of Islam^[13].

The above comments do not mean that we should not try to follow the conventions established by God and his Messenger. For example, the fact that turning our face while praying towards any particular direction is not righteousness does not mean that we can start praying to a different *qiblah* or no *qiblah* at all. What it does mean is that we should be much more open to various interpretations and willing to give up our own in order to reach a consensus if others' interpretation has some merit. On questions of right and wrong, good and evil we must follow what we believe to be the correct interpretation of the teachings of Islam, even if the majority of the world thinks otherwise. But in questions of conventions we should be willing to give up our opinion in favor of others in order to form a consensus except in the most unlikely event that the consensus develops in a direction clearly against the explicit injunctions of the Qur`an or of the ahadith whose authenticity is beyond any reasonable doubt. In case of the question of the determination of Islamic dates, this means that as long as we go by lunar months consisting of 29 or 30 days, almost anything Muslims can agree on will be alright in the sight of God and will even be preferable to differences that cause disorganization and inconvenience. What would be unacceptable, for example, is what the Bahais have done by introducing month of fasting as one of 19 months of 19 days or what the black-American sect of "Nation of Islam" has done by making December the month of fasting. But it is next to impossible that Muslims can reach a consensus on such positions.

The conventions the governing ritual acts are more a question of consensus than of right and wrong is an idea found in some sayings attributed to the Prophet:

"Fast when the people fast, break your fast when the people break their fast, and offer your sacrifice when the people offer their sacrifice." (Abu Da`ud).

Abu Hurayrah reported that the Prophet said: "Fasting is when you fast and termination of fasting is when you terminate it and sacrifice is when you sacrifice." Abu 'Isa (i.e. al-Tirmidh) said: "This hadith is sound and rare and that some authorities have explained it to mean that fasting and its termination should be with the majority."

These are among those numerous ahadith whose authenticity is far from being guaranteed but which contain a perfectly valid idea.

CONCLUSION

Matters such as the determination of dates are not matters of good and evil and right and wrong but of conventions. In such matters it is more important to agree on a position than the position itself, unless that position is against very clear injunction in the Qur`an or in a hadith whose authenticity is established beyond any reasonable doubt.

One of the conventions on which Muslims can agree without violating any authentic words of God or his Messenger is as follows:

A lunar month starts with a *hila* sighting in any part of the globe. Calendars should be constructed on the basis of astronomical calculations. It is highly probable that the *hila* will be sighted on the days predicted by such calendars. But if on some rare occasions the *hila* is not sighted anywhere on the globe on that day, then the *hila* sighting will have priority over the result of calculations in deference to the authentic hadith discussed in this article. If this procedure is followed the distinction between 10th Dhu al-Hijjah and a day after 'Arafah ceases to exist.

^[1] We can include Muwatta among the best three books of Hadith because of its relatively early date (written some years before 179, the date of Imam Malik's death). And we can include *Sahihayn* of Bukhari (d. 256) and Muslim (d. 261) among the best because they are the best-researched Hadith collections in existence.

^[2] Bukhari in his *Tarikh Kabir* says that Ibn 'Umar had "books". Ibn Sallam in his *Amwal* says that one kitab belonging to 'Umar and in his possession was read to him several times by Nafi '. See M.M.Azami, *Studies in Early Hadith Literature*, p.45.

^[3] Many Hadith scholars including Muslim make a distinction between haddatha na (related to us) and akhbara na (informed us). The former means that the teacher transmitted the hadith by reading from a book or by oral narration. The latter means that the student read the hadith to the teacher and the teacher confirmed it in some way.

^[4] No matter how innocently the words of the Prophet are changed or invented, the action is wrong and harmful for Islam.

^[5] The objection attributed here to Ibn 'Umar to speaking about the middle of a month is not quite consistent with the following hadith, which talks of the middle of Sha'ban:

Abu Hurayrah said that the Messenger of God said: "When Sha'ban reaches its middle (intaṣafa), do not fast." (Mishkat al-Masabih, referring to Abu Da`ud, Tirmidhi, Ibn Majah, Darimi)

[6] This narration is also found in Muslim. There are many other narrations in Bukhari and Muslim coming from Anas bin Malik via Ḥumayd bin Abu Ḥumayd al-Ṭawāl, from Ibn ‘Abbas via ‘Ubayd Allah bin ‘Abd Allah bib Abi Thawr and Abu al-Daḥa, from ‘Aishah via ‘Urwah bin Zubayr and from Jabir bin ‘Abd Allah via Abu al-Zubayr.

[7] Other relevant ahadith:

Abu Hurayrah reported that the Messenger of God said: When Sha‘ban reaches its middle, do not fast. (Mishkat al-Masabih from Abu Da`ud, Tirmidhi, Ibn Majah, Darimi)

Umm Salamah said: I did not see the Holy Prophet fast for two consecutive months except in Sha‘ban and Ramaḍan.

[8] It should be noted that it is only the letter of individual injunctions in the Qur`an that may not at times be preserved. As far as the Qur`anic teachings as a whole are concerned, they are always preserved, since departure from individual injunctions takes place within the Qur`anic principle that “God has not put any undue hardship (haraj) for you in the religion” (22: 78) and “God intends for you ease and does not intend for you undue hardship (*‘usr*)” (2: 185).

[9] Many Hadith scholars including Imam Muslim make a distinction between *haddatha na* (related to us) and *akhbara na* (informed us). The former means that the teacher transmitted the hadith by reading from a book or by oral narration. The latter means that the student read the hadith to the teacher and the teacher confirmed it in some way.

[10] To the contrary in the many ahadith where the Prophet starts/ends fasting when some Bedouin(s) come to the Prophet (see note 9 below) with news of moon sighting, he never takes into account the distance between Madinah and the place of moon sighting.

[11] In a comment on this hadith, Ahmad Hasan says in his translation of Abu Da`ud: “Opinion is also divided as to the distance of the places. First, if the horizons change, the appearance of the moon will also change. Second, the appearance may change at a distance of shortening the prayer during the journey. Third, visibility may change with the change of the countries. Fourth, the countries known to each other will observe the fasting and ‘Id on the appearance of the moon in any country. Fifth, the appearance of the moon will be binding on the people of a place where the appearance was established by witness, and not binding on others. In case the ruler of a country or the caliph of the whole community announces the visibility of the moon, then it will be binding on all Muslims.”

[12] ***Ahadith about witnesses of hilal sighting***

Rib'i bin Hirash reported on the authority of a man from the companions of the Holy Prophet: People differed among themselves on the last day of Ramadan. The two Bedouins came and witnessed before the Prophet, swearing by God, that they had sighted the moon the previous evening. So the Messenger of God commanded the people to break the fast. The narrator Khalaf has added in his narration: "and that the people should proceed to the place of prayer". (Abu Da`ud)

Abu Umayr reported on the authority of some of his paternal uncles who were Companions of the Prophet: Some men came riding to the Holy Prophet and testified that they had sighted the new moon the previous day. He thereupon commanded the people to break the fast and to go out to their place of prayer in the morning. (Abu Da`ud)

Ibn 'Abbas said: A Bedouin came to the Prophet and said: I have sighted the moon. Al-Hasan added in his narration: of Ramadan. He asked: Do you testify that there is no god but Allah? He replied: Yes. He again asked: Do you testify that Muhammad is the Messenger of Allah? He replied, yes, and testified that he had sighted the moon. He said: Bilal, announce to the people that they must fast tomorrow. (Abu Da`ud)

'Ikrimah said: Once the people doubted the appearance of the moon of Ramadan, and intended neither to offer the *tarawih* prayer nor to fast. A Bedouin came from al-Harrah and testified that he had sighted the moon. He was brought to the Prophet. He asked: Do you testify that there is no god but Allah, and that I am the Messenger of God? He said, yes, and testified that he had sighted the moon. He commanded Bilal who then announced to the people to offer the *tarawih* prayer and to fast. (Abu Da`ud who commented: A group of narrators has narrated this from Simak on the authority of 'Ikrimah in *mursal* form [i.e., without mentioning the name of the Companion]. No one mentioned the offering of the *tarawih* prayer except Hammad bin Salamah.)

Ibn 'Umar said: The people sighted the moon, so I informed the Messenger of God that I had sighted it. He fasted and commanded the people to fast.

The Prophet said: "If two just Muslim witnesses testify [that they saw it] then fast or break your fast." (Ahmad, Nasa`i and al-Daraqutni)

The absence of these traditions from all three of our best collections, the existence of some versions in *mursal* form, references to unnamed companions ("a man from the companions," "paternal uncles who were Companions") shows that we cannot place a great deal of confidence in their authenticity. They are designed to express some *fiqhi* rules – whether one or two witnesses are needed to establish the appearance of the crescent, whether testimony should be in the form of a formal oath or a simple communication of the information is sufficient.

[\[13\]](#) It should be noted that this is not a Muslim problem but a universal one. Christians and Jews can split into sects on very minor issues. If any thing, thanks to the presence of the authentic word of God among us Muslims have shown less of this tendency than other ummahs.