



Islamic Institute of Toronto
Education for Virtuous Living

**The Sunnah and Elements of Flexibility
in Determining the Times of Fajr and
Imsak (beginning of fasting)**

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The *Sunnah* and Elements of Flexibility in Determining the Times of *Fajr* and *Imsak* (beginning of fasting)

By Shaikh Ahmad Kutty

The following essay is an attempt to clarify the issue of *fajr al-sadiq* (the true dawn) and the cut-off point for *suhur* (the pre-dawn meal), in light of the Qur'an, the authentic traditions, and the sound practices of the companions, their successors, and the venerable imams and scholars.

The Spirit of Ease in *Shari'ah*

Let me state from the outset that *Shari'ah* is all about ease and the removal of hardship for people in order to facilitate things for them. *Shari'ah*, as it has been articulated by eminent jurists, has the sole objective of catering to the welfare of people in both worlds. Consequently, practicality, balance, ease, and removal of hardship are all valid principles that have always been used as the criteria for providing rulings for people, according to changing times and circumstances.

The Qur'an and the Prophetic *Sunnah* have reiterated this principle throughout. Allah says, "Allah intends to bring for you ease; and He does not wish to make things hard upon you." (*Qur'an: 2:185*) and "He did not appoint for you any hardship in this religion: the way of your ancestor Ibrahim" (*Qur'an: 22:78*).

Additionally, the Prophet (peace and blessings be upon him) is known to have said: "I have been sent to teach the simple, natural way (of Ibrahim)." (*Cf. Ibn Hajar, Kashf As-Sitr, #37*); "This religion is easy and simple to follow; whoever makes it hard will only be defeating himself." (*Reported by Nasa'i*); "Make things easy for people; do not make things hard for them. Give them glad tidings, and don't turn them away from religion



(by making it hard on them)" (*Reported by Bukhari*). A'ishah, the beloved wife of the Prophet (peace be upon him), tells us about the Prophet, when left to choose between two viable options, he would always choose the easier of the two, as long as it was not sinful; for if it had been sinful, he would be the farthest from it. (*Reported by Bukhari, Muslim and others*).

This spirit of ease, comfort, and removal of hardship, was the basis for how the Prophet (peace and blessings be upon him) and his Companions practiced and applied Islamic principles.

While stressing ease and comfort, the Prophet (peace and blessings be upon him) also warned against rigidity and hair-splitting in religion. In this regard, he is reported to have said: "Woe to those who are rigid." (*Reported by Muslim*); "Abstain from what I had forbidden, and fulfill the duties I had enjoined as best as you can (shunning rigidity) for the nations before you perished because of their (excessive rigidity and) hair-splitting interpretations of religion." (*Reported by Muslim*)

Time of Fajr According to Arabic Linguists

Before elaborating on this issue further, let us look at the meaning of the word *fajr* as used in the Arabic language:

"*Fajr* means the light of the morning; because it is the cleaving of darkness from before the light: i.e. the redness of the sun in the darkness of the night; the *fajr* in the end of the night is like the *shafaq* in the beginning. It is two fold: the first is called *al-fajr al-kadhib* (the false dawn); that which rises without extending laterally, which appears black, presenting itself like an obstacle (on the horizon); the second is called *al-fajr al-sadiq* (the true dawn); which is the rising and spreading (dawn) which appears to rise and fills the horizon with its whiteness, and this is what is called '*amood al-ssubh*'; rising after the former has disappeared, and by its rising the day



commences, and everything by which fasting would be broken becomes unlawful to the faster. Hence, The time of the *fajr*.” (Cf. E.W. Lane’s *Arabic-English Lexicon*.)

Time of Fajr According to the Quran

The above definitions, as compiled from various authoritative Arabic lexicons, are directly based on the Qur’an and the *Sunnah*. Thus, while stipulating the rules of abstinence as applicable to the person fasting, Allah says:

“It is lawful for you to go in unto your wives during the night preceding the [day’s] fast: they are as a garment for you, and you are as a garment for them. God is aware that you would have deprived yourselves of this right, and so He has turned unto you in His mercy and removed this hardship from you. Now, then, you may lie with them skin to skin, and avail yourselves of that which God has ordained for you, and eat and drink until you can discern the white streak of dawn against the blackness of night, and then resume fasting until nightfall; but do not lie with them skin to skin when you are about to abide in meditation in houses of worship. These are the bounds set by God: do not, then, offend against them - [for] it is thus that God makes clear His messages unto mankind, so that they might remain conscious of Him.” (*Qur’an: 2: 187*)

The verse mentioned above has been further explained in a number of traditions. When one of the Companions, namely, Adiy b.Hatim, mistakenly thought this to be an order to determine whether he can distinguish a white thread from a black thread, the Prophet (peace and blessings be upon him) pointed out to him that what is meant is the whiteness of the day as distinct from the blackness of the night, and he said, "Eat and drink and do not be misled by the ascending white light. Eat and drink until the redness (of the dawn) appears." (*Reported by Ahmad*)

Dawn According to Natural Sciences

It may be expedient here to refer to the various usages and definitions of the dawn as applied in natural sciences:



“Dawn is the time that marks the beginning of the twilight before sunrise. It is recognized by the presence of weak sunlight, while the sun itself is still below the horizon. ...Dawn may easily be determined by observing a thread. When the color of a thread can be determined, changing from black to the thread's distinctive color, the 'crack of dawn' has occurred. This same measure of ambient light can be used to determine, conversely, the instant of dusk.”

There are also more technical definitions of dawn, including the following:

“Astronomical dawn: the moment after which the sky is no longer completely dark; formally defined as the time at which the sun is 18 degrees below the horizon in the morning.

“Nautical dawn: the time at which there is enough sunlight for the horizon and some objects to be distinguishable; formally, when the sun is 12 degrees below the horizon in the morning.

Civil dawn: that time at which there is enough light for objects to be distinguishable, so that outdoor activities can commence; formally, when the sun is 6 degrees below the horizon in the morning.” (Source:

<http://www.absoluteastronomy.com/topics/Dawn>)

Time of Fajr According to Qur'anic Commentators

Now it is pertinent to ask the question, which of the three definitions of dawn should be the criterion to determine the beginning of *imsak* and the *Fajr* Prayer. This can be answered by a perusal of the Islamic sources.



In examining the various authentic commentaries of the Qur'an on the definition of the verse we have referred to above, we find that all of them indicate that *fajr* starts when we can be assured by means of our naked eyes of its arrival in no uncertain terms (the word used in the verse is *yatabayyana*).

The commentaries refer to various traditions and precedents of the Prophet (peace be upon him) and the companions in order to clearly distinguish the false dawn from the true dawn. Whereas the false dawn is described as being deceptive in that it appears like dawn but does not dissipate the darkness, the true dawn is what is described as dispelling darkness gradually. Therefore, explaining the words, *yatabayyana*, Ibn Jarir cites the following statement, "The proper way to describe this state is to say that the glow of dawn should be so wide-spread in the sky in such a way that the whiteness and light emanating from it should fill the streets." Therefore, it is said, "Whoever has any doubt whether the dawn has arrived or not, he or she may eat until they are certain that *Fajr* has indeed arrived." The criterion for determining true dawn is the certainty of its arrival beyond a shadow of doubt.

Time of Fajr According to the Sunnah of the Prophet & His Companions

It is no wonder then that we find the companions demonstrated remarkable latitude when it came to *imsak*, by postponing *suhur* and eating it until such time that it was plainly clear to them that the true dawn had arrived. In short, rather than erring on the side of abstention from foods, they chose to err on the side of consumption. The traditions, in support of this, are numerous:

Hudhayfah states that Abu Bakr al-Siddiq and I were on a roof during *Ramadhan* and I came to him, asking, "Won't you eat (*suhur*), O the Caliph of the Messenger of Allah?" He said, "Not yet"; I came again, and he repeated the same answer; when I came a third time, he looked at dawn, and told me, again, not yet. Then, after a while, I came, again, asking the same question, and he said, "Yes, now let us have our meal (i.e.



suhur). Soon after, he prayed two *rak'ahs*, and stood up to pray *fardh* (in congregation).

Hammad b. Salamah reports from Asim from Zirr b. Hubaysh, "I had my *suhur*. Then I went to the mosque (to pray *Fajr*). On my way, I stopped by Hudhayfah (the Prophet's companion). He brought a camel to be milked; then the milk was warmed up... and he told me to partake of *suhur* with him. I told him, 'But, I intend to fast!', he said, 'I also intend to fast'; so we both ate and drank. Soon after, we went to the mosque and the *iqamah* was given. Hudhayfah told me, 'The Prophet (peace be upon him) had done the same thing with me.' I asked him. 'Did he have *suhur* after the daybreak? He said, yes, it was the daybreak, but the sun had not appeared yet.'"

Zirr b. Hubaysh asked Hudhayfah: "When did the Prophet (peace be upon him) used to have his *suhur*?" He said, "During the daybreak, but the sun did not appear in the sky yet!" Zirr reports, again, that Hudhayfah said, "The Prophet (peace be upon him) used to eat *suhur* when you could see where an arrow would fall-if you were to shoot it." Anas said, "I saw the Prophet (peace be upon him) having *suhur* with Zayd b. Thabith (while he was intending to fast). Having done so, he prayed two *rak'ahs* and headed to the mosque where the *iqamah* was already given."

Hasan *al-Basari* said, "Umar b. *al-Khattab* used to say: If two people doubt about the arrival of dawn, let them eat until they can ascertain that the dawn has arrived."

Ikrimah said, "Ibn Abbas once told me, 'Give me a drink' I told him, but it is already dawn! He said, 'we still doubt it. So, give me the drink.' Accordingly, I offered him a drink and he drank (in preparation for the fast)." Makhul says, "I saw Ibn Umar draw water from *zamzam* well; he inquired two persons (around him) whether it was daybreak or not. One of them said, 'Yes it is', while another said, 'No'; then he drank the water."



It is reported about Sa'd b. Abi Waqqas that (while he was in Kufah) he had his *suhur*, and then proceeded to pray in the mosque, where the *iqamah* was already given.

Habban b. Harith said that he had *suhur* with Ali, and both were intending to fast; when they had finished, Ali told the *mu'adhin* to call the *iqamah*.

Abu Uqayl said, "I took *suhur* with Ali b. Abi Talib and then he told the *mu'adhin* to call *iqamah* to start the prayer."

Aamir b. Matar said, "I visited Abd Allah b. Mas'ud at his home. He took out some *suhur* for us and we ate it. Then *iqamah* was given and we prayed together."

Ibn Abbas, the Prophet's companion (and the reputed scholar of his generation), was asked, "Should I stop eating when I doubt whether *Fajr* has begun or not?" He replied, "No, eat until you can ascertain clearly that the dawn has arrived." (Reported by Ibn Abi Shaybah)

The fact that such a practice was directly derived from the Prophet (peace and blessings be upon him) is shown by the following tradition:

Imam Ahmad, An-Nasai, and Ibn Majah reported on the authority of Hudhayfah, a prominent companion of the Prophet (peace and blessings be upon him), "We partook of *suhur* with the Prophet (peace and blessings be upon him) until it was plain day, except the sun had not arisen yet." (Cited by Ibn Kathir in his *tafsir*) In other words, to them, there was no question about the arrival of *fajr* when observed by the naked eye.

A'ishah is also reported to have said, "Bilal used to give *adhan* at night. Therefore, the Prophet (peace and blessings be upon him) instructed us to 'Eat and drink until Ibn Umm Makthum calls the second *adhan*, for he will only give *adhan* when *fajr* clearly arrives.' (Reported by Bukhari) In another report, the words, 'when *fajr* clearly



arrives', is replaced with the words, 'until he is told that *fajr* has arrived'" (being blind, Ibn Umm Makthum could not have observed the arrival of dawn on his own).

Commenting on the position of companions in regards to the determination of the time of *fajr*, Ibrahim A-Nakha'i states: "The Prophet's companions have never agreed on any issue as they have agreed on reckoning the time of *fajr* as the time when it is plainly visible for all to see." (Reported by Ibn Abi Shaybah)

After citing numerous traditions from the companions in this regard, Ibn Hazm concludes that eleven companions of the Prophet held the view that if a person ate thinking it was still night, while the daybreak has already arrived, his fast was still valid, and there is no need for him to make up for it. This had been the position of Abu Bakr, Umar, Ali, Ibn Umar, Ibn Abbas, Abu Hyrah, Ibn Mas'ud, Hudhayfah, Anisah b. Khubayb, Zayd b. Thabit, Said b. Abi Waqqas. And there is not a single authentic report from anyone else objecting to it. Therefore, it can be taken as a view widely held by the Prophet's companions. In other words, it can be reckoned as a consensus, albeit *ijma' sukuti* (tacit or silent) among them.

The same has been the view of a great number of successors such as Muhammad b. Ali, Abu Mujliz, Ibrahim, Muslim, companions of Ibn Mas'ud, Ata, Hasan, Hakam b. Utaybah, Mujahid, Urwah, Jabir b. Zayd, and also Ma'mar and A'mash.

Ibn Jurayj said, "I asked Ata, 'If I am at home and I cannot be sure that dawn has arrived, can I still eat and drink?' he said, 'There is nothing objectionable in doing so!'"

A'mash reported from Muslim, they (the prophet's companions) did not reckon the *fajr* as you reckon today. They reckoned *Fajr* as the dawn that spreads light in the streets and houses.

Views of the Eminent Imams on the Time of Fajr & Imsak



The various Imams' views on this issue include the following:

Imam Ahmad b. Hanbal said, "If one has any doubt in his mind about whether *fajr* has arrived, he may eat until he is certain of its arrival." Imam Nawawi states, "Imam Shafi's followers are unanimous on the fact that it is permissible for anyone who doubts the arrival of dawn to eat until he is certain of its arrival. The evidence for this is that Allah has allowed for us to eat and drink until the arrival of dawn; the one who doubts the *fajr* is not certain of its arrival." And Imam Ibn Kathir writes in his famous *tafsir*: "Leniency and flexibility with regard to partaking of *suhur* has been reported from a great number of pious predecessors. It has been reported from Abu Bakr, `Umar, `Ali, Ibn Mas`ud, Hudhayh, Abu Huryah, Ibn `Umar, Ibn `Abbas, Zayd ibn Thabit and a considerable number of successors, including Muhammad ibn Ali, Al-Husayn, ...Ibrahim An-Nakha'i, ...`Ataa', Hasan, ..Mujahid, `Urwah b. al-Zubayr, etc." This is the reason why Ibn Hajar, the great authority on *hadith* and *fiqh*, denounced those who laid unnecessary restrictions in regard to partaking of *suhur*: "Among the reprehensible innovations of our times is the practice of calling the second *adhan* of *fajr* quarter hour earlier in *Ramadhan* and putting off the lights signaling that the one fasting should stop eating-under the false pretext that they would like to exercise caution in the practice of the acts of worship...Such an unwarranted caution has also led them to delay the *adhan* of *magrib* for some time. In this way, they end up delaying *iftar* (breaking the fast) and advancing the *suhur* and thus violate the *Sunnah* of the Prophet (peace be upon him). No wonder then you find them bereft of virtue and rampant in corruption."

Conclusion

In light of the above incontrovertible evidence, it should be rather easy for us to conclude that relying on astronomical dawn to determine the time of *imsak* is unwarranted, and that we cannot go wrong if we consider the nautical dawn, if not the civil dawn, as the starting time of *imsak* and beginning of *fajr*. Furthermore, there is



no basis for compelling people to start the *imsak* way before *fajr*, for, as it has been clearly demonstrated, the companions were in the habit of standing up for *fajr* soon after finishing their *suhur*.

Furthermore, it has been clearly demonstrated from the *Sunnah* and the practices of the pious generations that the time of *imsak* and *fajr* is not determined by minutes, seconds, or degrees, but by sufficient latitude, ease, and flexibility. Hence, there is no compelling reason for us to insist on the astronomical definition of dawn.

Still another point to note: When we consider the above statements and reports carefully, it is clear that their approach to the issue unravels another fundamental principle of jurisprudence. This has been often phrased as “That which is certain cannot be removed by doubts.” When we apply this principle to the issue at hand, since the night precedes dawn, that is a certainty, as such, it cannot be ruled out until we can clearly determine that the dawn has arrived.

Closely allied with the above is the importance of taking into account our own times and circumstances. No one can doubt we are living at a time where Muslims are showing increasing complacency and are slipping away from the practice of Islam. Moreover, since the day hours are excessively long, such rigidity when determining *imsak* can be viewed as only dampening one's spirit about fasting.

We saw all of the above leniency and latitude as pointed out above were demonstrated in standard time zones like those of Makkah and Madinah. So one might legitimately ask: By applying a far more stricter rule in calculating the time of *imsak*, are we trying to prove to be more pious than the Prophet's companions and successors, and end up causing greater and greater hardship for people, who reside in less than standard time zones?



In this regard, therefore, let us recognize that the juristic traditions in all of the acceptable schools of jurisprudence have taken into account the circumstances of people and countries, for they knew too well that *Shari'ah* is based on tangible *maqasid* (higher purposes) and *masalih* (benefits). They also understood that the function of an *`alim* is to render ease where there is difficulty. Long ago, Imam Sufyan Ath-Thawri said, "A true scholar is one who finds (based on sound principles) an easier way for people, because as far as making things difficult is concerned, one need not have any knowledge to do that!"

It is perhaps pertinent to mention here that, according to one of the great jurists of the Hanafi school of the twentieth century, the late Shaikh Mustafa Az-Zarqa, Muslims living in time zones where daylight hours are unusually long may base their times for *imsak* and *iftar* on the regular timetables followed in Makkah and Madinah.

If this is the inference of an eminent Hanafi jurist, coming as he is from a long lineage of authentic representatives of the Hanafi school, how can we be faulted for going by a time-table which calculates the *Fajr* in a slightly flexible manner?

As a final word, it would be wise to remind ourselves of the dire warning of the Prophet (peace and blessings be upon him), "There are among you those who simply drive people away from Islam." (Reported by Bukhari and Muslim).

I pray to Allah to guide us to the straight path, make us instruments of guidance and gather us all under the banner of the seal of prophets and messengers.



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