

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

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The following piece is an effort to clarify the issue of *fajr al-sadiq* (the true dawn), the cut-off point for *suhur* (pre-dawn- meal) in light of the Quran, the authentic traditions, and acceptable practices of the companions, their successors and the great imams/scholars.

To begin this discussion, it is necessary to point out that all evidence in the sources show that shariah is all about ease and the removal of hardship for people in order to facilitate things for them. Shariah, therefore, can be seen as catering to the welfare of people in both worlds. Consequently, practicality, balance, ease, and removal of hardship are all sound principles that have always have been used as the criteria for providing rulings for people, according to changing times, and circumstances.

The Quran and the Prophetic *Sunnah* reiterate this principle throughout as when Allah says: ***“Allah wants ease for you; He does not wish to make things hard for you”***(*Qur’an*: : 185); ***“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 be upon him) (peace be upon him) is known to have said: ***“I have been sent to teach the simple, natural way (of Ibrahim).”*** (Cf. *Ibn Hajar, Kashf al-ssitr*); ***“This religion is easy and simple to follow; whoever makes it hard will only be defeating himself.”*** (*al-Nasa’i*) ***“Make things easy for people; do not make things for hard for them. Give good news, and do not turn people away from religion (by making it hard on them) (Bukhari)*** While stressing ease and comfort, the Prophet (peace 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.”*** (*Muslim*) ***“Abstain from what I have forbidden; and fulfill the duties I have 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.”*** (*Muslim*)

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

Before elaborating on this issue further, let us first 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 the 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 rising, 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)

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 faster, Allah says, *“Eat and drink until the white thread of dawn appears distinct from its black thread. Then fast until the night approaches again...” (Qur’an: 2: 187).*

The verse 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 see whether he can distinguish a white thread from a black thread, the Prophet (peace 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.” (Ahmad)*

It may be helpful to introduce here the various definitions of dawn as applied in natural sciences: A distinction is made between astronomical dawn and nautical dawn:

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

“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.”

Now let us ask ourselves which of the two definitions of dawn would be applicable to our observations of fast and starting of 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 above, we find that all of them indicate that *fajr* starts when we can be certain (by way of our faculty of sight) of its arrival in no uncertain terms (the word used in the verse is *yatabayyana*).

The commentaries also refer to/make mention of the tradition which clearly discriminates 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 bring about dawn or dissipate darkness, the true dawn is what is described as dispelling darkness gradually. And though the false dawn precedes the true dawn, it is initially followed by darkness). Therefore, explaining the words, *yatabayyana*, Ibn Jarir states, "***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, is allowed to eat until they are certain that fajr has arrived.***"

Thus, the criterion for determining true dawn is the certainty of its arrival beyond a shadow of doubt. This being the case, we find that the companions always demonstrated remarkable latitude when it came to *imsak*, by postponing *suhur* and eating 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:

Ibn Abbas, the Prophet's companion and the reputed scholar of his generation, was once asked, "***Should I stop eating when I have doubt whether fajr has begun or not?***" To this, he replied, "***No, eat as long as you are certain that the dawn has arrived.***" (Ibn Abi Shaybah)

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

Imam Ahmad, Nasai and Ibn Majah report on the authority of Hudhayfah, the prominent companion of the Prophet (peace be upon him), "***We partook of suhur with the Prophet (peace be upon him) until it was plain day, except the sun had not arisen yet.***" (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.

Aishah is also reported to have said, “***Bilal used to give adhan at night. Therefore, the Prophet (peace be upon him) (peace 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.’***” (Bukhari) In another report, the words, when *fajr* clearly arrives, is replaced with the words, ‘***until he is told that fajr has arrived***’ (for being blind, Ibn Umm Makthum could not observe the arrival of dawn on his own).

Commenting on the Companions’s position in regards to determination of the time of *fajr*, Ibrahim al-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.***” (Ibn Abi Shaybah)

The various Imams views on this issue include the following:

Imam Ahmad 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 suhor has been reported from a great number of pious predecessors. It has been reported from Abu Bakr, Umar, Ali, Ibn Masud, Hudhayh, Abu Huryah, Ibn Umar, Ibn Abbas, Zayd b. Thabit and a great number of successors, including Muhamad b. Ali b, al-Husayn, ...Ibrahim a-Nakha’I,Ata, al-Hasan, ..Mujahid, Urwah b. al-Zubayr, etc....***”

This is the reason why Ibn Hajar, the great authority in *Hadith* and *fiqh*, denounced those who laid unnecessary restrictions in regard to partaking of *suhur*--describing it as ‘***one of the most reprehensible innovations of later times.***’

It should be clear from the above discussions that, according to the *Sunnah*, and understanding of the pious elders, *fajr* is not determined by minutes, seconds, and/or degrees, but by sufficient latitude, ease, and flexibility. Hence, there is no compelling

reason for us to insist that we prefer either the astronomical or the nautical definition of dawn in fixing the time of *fajr*.

When we consider the above statements and reports carefully, it is clear that their approach to the issue unravels another important 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 are certain 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 al-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 Mustafa al-Zarqa, Muslims living in time zones where day-light hours are unusually long may base their times for *imsak* and iftar on the regular time tables followed in Makkah and Madinah.

If this is the inference of a genuine *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 be upon him), “***There are among you those who simply drive people away from Islam.***”(Bukhari and Muslim).Let us pray that we not be among those - ***Ameen.***