

READING, SIGHTING, AND CALCULATING
From Moon Sighting to Astronomical Calculation

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هُوَ الَّذِي جَعَلَ الشَّمْسُ ضِيَاءً وَالْقَمَرَ نُورًا وَقَدَرَهُ مَنَازِلَ لِتَعْلَمُوا عَدَدَ السِّنِينَ وَالْحِسَابَ مَا خَلَقَ اللَّهُ ذَلِكَ إِلَّا بِالْحَقِّ يُفَصِّلُ
الآيَاتِ لِقَوْمٍ يَعْلَمُونَ (يونس 5)

It is He who made the sun to be a shining glory and the moon to be a light (of beauty), and measured out stages for it; that you may know the number of years and the count (of time). Allah has not created this but in truth. (Thus) does He explain His signs in detail, for those who understand. (10:5)

The debate over the determination of the birth of the new crescent (*Hilal*) has taken a new urgency in North America after the Fiqh Council of North America (FCNA) announced, in August 2006, its new ruling (*fatwa*) on the use of calculation for establishing the beginning of the Islamic lunar month. The ruling established for the first time in recent history astronomical calculations as the sole criteria for deciding the birth of the new crescent.¹ Thus for the first time we come face to face with the prospect of confirming the beginning of Ramadan and Eids without the recurring hassle and flare.

The debate over confirming the *Hilal* is an old one dating back to the second century of the Islamic era. The debate intensified in the second half of the last century as many Muslim scholars became concerned about the inconsistency of sighting reports and the fragmentation of Muslim communities over the determination of the first day of Ramadan and the two *Eids*. Although strong arguments were made several decades ago by illustrious scholars, such as Muhammad Mubarak and Ahmad Shakir, in support of replacing the practice of sighting the moon with astronomical calculation, Muslim communities, by and large, continued to follow the moon sighting tradition.

The debate over how the new Islamic lunar month is to be decided transcends beyond just that of a debate in favor of one method over the other, and the transition from moon sighting to astronomical calculation is more than a transition from one *fiqhi* (juristic) position to another. The debate is, indeed, about how to read Islamic sources, and how to relate Islamic precepts to contemporary society; and the transition is about the ability of contemporary Muslim scholars to truly reclaim the authority of independent judgment (*ijtihad*), and hence build on the knowledge and achievements of early scholarship to reach better grounded consensus (*ijma'*).

¹ See the full text of the fatwa at (http://www.fiqhcouncil.org/articles/Lunar_Calendar.html), accessed on November 5, 2006). FCNA has also produced a video in which FCNA chairman, Dr. Muzammil Siddiqui, discussed the basis of the fatwa. see <http://www.fiqhcouncil.org/articles/video.html>

FCNA's ruling in favor of using astronomical calculation for determining the beginning of the Muslim lunar month provoked a strong response, and the American Muslim community continues to be divided over this issue. Scholars on the two sides of the divide present arguments rooted in Islamic traditions, and often support their views by citing the same Qur'anic and Prophetic sources, or by referring to statements by early Muslim scholars.² It does not take much for an observer to realize that the division and disagreements are not about the sources themselves, but about the interpretations and rationalizations of those sources. The division is between scholars who place emphasis on the apparent meaning of the text (*Zahir*) and those who emphasize its intended meaning and purpose (*maqsid*).

The tendency to split over interpretations has always been part of the Muslim experience. It can be traced to the split between the companions over the interpretation of the Prophet's command to pray the *asr* prayer at Banu Qurayza:

حدثنا عبد الله بن محمد بن أسماء حدثنا جويرية بن أسماء عن نافع عن ابن عمر رضي الله عنهما قال قال النبي صلى الله عليه وسلم يوم الأحزاب لا يصلين أحد العصر إلا في بني قريظة فأدرك بعضهم العصر في الطريق فقال بعضهم لا نصلي حتى نأتيها وقال بعضهم بل نصلي لم يرد منا ذلك فذكر ذلك للنبي صلى الله عليه وسلم فلم يعنف واحدا منهم (حديث متفق عليه)

Bukhari reported on the authority of [Abdullah] Ibn Omar, may Allah be please with both, who said that the Prophet, Allah's mercy and peace be with him, said on the day of the [battle of] Alliances: "No one should pray *asr* except in the [territories] of Banu Qurayzah." Some were still on the road at the *asr* time and said: "we will not pray *asr* until we reach it [Banu Qurayzah]. Others said: "we will indeed pray; this is not what was intended." The Prophet, Allah's mercy and peace be with him, was informed about [the disagreement], and he did not rebuke any of them.³

Evidently, some of the Prophet's companions understood his statement literally and continued their journey until they reached the territory of Banu Qurayza, while others stopped on the way to pray *asr* on time. It was also reported that the Prophet approved the actions of both, signaling that differences in opinion are abound to arise, and that the *ijtihad* of one group does not invalidate that of another.

For centuries, moon sighting was a better and more reliable method for deciding the beginning of the Islamic lunar month. Today, with the advancement of the science of astronomy, and the improvement of computing tools, astronomical calculations provide a much superior method, and are more in keeping with the Islamic requirements. Islam requires that we base certain religious duties, including fasting Ramadan and performing Hajj, on the lunar calendar, but does not regard the act of deciding the beginning of the Islamic month a religious act *per se*. The movement of the moon belongs to the natural order and its determination can better be handled by astronomy, which can today provide very precise calculation, and is by far more reliable and certain than moon sighting.

Distinguishing Religious Obligations from the Natural Order

² In addition to the FCNA's statement on the Islamic Lunar Calendar, two elaborate papers are presented by two North American scholars on this issue. The first one was authored by Zulfiqar Ali Shah (http://www.isna.net/fileadmin/ temp /FIQH/Calculations-Final%202_2.pdf) and the other by Hamza Yusuf, *Cesarean Moon Births* (<http://www.zaytuna.org/articleDetails.asp?articleID=100>, accessed on November 8, 2006). Shaykh. Zulfiqar's paper argued for adopting astronomical calculation, while Shaykh Hamza's paper adopted the traditional position, which favors moon sighting.

³ The hadith was reported on the authority of Abdullah bin Omar in Sahih Bukhari, the book of maghazi (morales), no. 3804.