

ISLAM IN PERSPECTIVE

Edited By Adil Salahi

The sighting of the moon and the start of fasting

Q: According to reliable data concerning the birth of the new moon of Ramadan and Shawwal this year, it was clear that the new moon could not have been sighted anywhere in the Middle East on the evening of Dec. 8. Nor the new moon of Shawwal could have been sighted on the evening of Jan. 6. However it was announced in many Arab countries that Ramadan started on Dec. 9 based on sighting the moon the previous night, and it ended in Saudi Arabia and other countries on Jan. 7 based on eye sighting. May I ask how is this possible and why are not astronomical data taken into consideration in these matters?

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A: This is only one of many letters I have received on the subject of confirming the beginning and ending of the fasting month on the basis of the sighting of the new moon. Practically all these letters refer to the accuracy of the astronomical calculation of the birth of every new moon and the fact that this could be done well in advance. In fact it can be calculated many hundred years in advance. Hence the writers question the wisdom of sighting the new moon with the naked eye as the sole method of confirming the beginning and end of lunar months. Indeed the question is raised practically every year, because there is seldom a year when the sighting of the new moon is not subject to controversy.

Scholars differ markedly over the question of using any method to sight the new moon and confirm the beginning and end of any lunar month, particularly Ramadan. Those who have a good idea of the modern science of astronomy and the accuracy it achieves in calculating the position of stars and planets so much in advance have no qualms about relying on this science to determine the beginning of each lunar month. This is not new in Islamic scholarship. Leading scholars of older times, such as Imam As-Subki, acknowledged that knowledge gained through astronomical calculation is certain, while that gained through observation with the naked eye is assumed.

However, many scholars, particularly those who have the noble attitude of strict following of the Sunnah, maintain that it is necessary to sight the moon with our eyes, and not rely on astronomical calculation accurate as it may be. They cite in favor of their argument the Hadith: "We are an unlettered community, not versed in writing or arithmetic. Therefore, fast when you sight the new moon and end your fasting when you sight it (again)." They insist that such sighting is the only way of following the Prophet's instructions. Hence. When people come forward to testify that they have sighted the new moon, they have no option but to act on their testimony. A number of points may be raised in this connection. The first and most valid is that it is wrong to ignore completely the information gained through astronomical calculation in favor of sighting with the naked eye. Indeed, the two methods can easily be employed together, without fear of contradiction, particularly when we take into consideration what scholars like As-Subki have said. What the authorities concerned with issuing Islamic rulings, or fatwa, should do is to assign the task of sighting the moon to a number of committees, with three people in each committee, working in different areas of the country and sending information on the results of their mission directly to Dar Al-Ifta. If no committee is able to sight the moon in the area assigned to it, then no other testimony should be entertained. If the committees are briefed about the calculation of the birth of the new moon, they will be able to combine that knowledge with the results of their own missions. Thus we avoid any mistakes in the sighting and benefit by astronomical calculation. Our fasting would be more accurate than it is the case at present.

The Hadith quoted above has a clear indication that calculation has a clear role in the determination of the beginning and end of the month of Ramadan. The Prophet says, "We are an unlettered community, not versed in writing or arithmetic." He then explains how to determine the beginning and end of Ramadan. The Hadith specifies the condition of the Muslim community at the time of the Prophet. It does not make the state of being unlettered a permanent one which the Muslims must always maintain. In fact Islam encourages learning and makes it a duty of the Muslim community to acquire knowledge in every field. Therefore when the community is no longer unlettered, it should resort to the two areas which help it in its affairs, writing and arithmetic. When we know that astronomical calculation provides us with certain knowledge, it is not right from the Islamic point of view to ignore it in favor of the method which gives us only assumed knowledge.

What happened last Ramadan was that it was absolutely confirmed on the basis of astronomy that the new moon was impossible to sight anywhere in the Middle East, Asia, Africa and Europe on the evening of Jan. 6. Yet that evening it was declared that witnesses have testified to sighting it. and Ramadan was ended that night. Here we have a case of "assumed" knowledge contradicting "certain" knowledge. The first should have been tested thoroughly and rejected, like a court may reject the testimony of a witness after cross-examination. The point is that it is perfectly possible not to see something when it is present, but it is impossible to see something when it is not there. If the moon is not born yet, how can it be sighted? To end such cases of wrong testimony, the authorities concerned should play a more active part in the process and assign the task of sighting the moon to commissions as has been explained. This method is followed in some countries and it has proved to be far more reliable method than leaving the matter open for anyone to come forward to testify. After all we have no way of ascertaining that what such people say is correct. It remains the duty of the concerned authorities to employ the best available means to ensure the correct start and finish of one of the most important acts of worship in Islam.