

Is There No *Arafat* Except The One In *Arafat*?

By Abdullah bin Hamid Ali

Besides the normal dispute over when Ramadan begins and ends, there is the dispute every year over whether or not the correct day of *Arafat* is the one being observed by those making the pilgrimage to Mecca. A considerable number of Muslims follow the assumption that Islam demands from every Muslim in the world to adjust their local calendars to make them conform to the Saudi Arabian Islamic calendar, since, naturally, there can be only one day of *Arafat*. Consequently, even if your local calendar reads that the day of *Arafat* is one day after the day it is observed in Saudi Arabia, the reward for fasting this special day for non-pilgrims—as encouraged by our beloved Messenger—may Allah grant him mercy and peace—is directly connected with when the pilgrims are in the plains of *Arafat*. If this is so, anyone fasting on the day after the day the pilgrims leave *Arafat* would be fasting on the day of 'Id, something that has been prohibited by the Prophet—may Allah grant him mercy and peace.

Where does such an understanding come from? The Qur'an? No! The Sunnah? No! Rather, this is merely a popular understanding adopted by a large number of Muslims in both the Muslim world and in western countries where Muslims reside. This is so, in spite of the fact that no sound evidence can be found to substantiate this understanding, not in the Qur'an, not in the Sunnah, and not in the fiqh of any of the Four Schools. Furthermore, despite the fact that the 'Id celebration was initiated by the Prophet—may Allah grant him mercy and peace—in the second year after his migration to Medina and celebrated thereafter until he made the Hajj pilgrimage in the 10th year, there is no sign found in reports indicating that he attempted to find out when the day of 'Arafat was in Mecca in order to make his 'Id celebration in Medina coincide with the 'Id celebration in Mecca. Some ignorant Muslims today have even begun to accuse other Muslims who fast according to their local established calendars that contradict Saudi Arabia's or the practice of the Kingdom to be innovators and dissenters from the mainstream. In light of this new phenomenon, I find it necessary to make a personal statement on this matter backed by the Islamic sources and a few authoritative statements of our scholars. In doing so, I deem it necessary to first speak about the lawfulness or unlawfulness of fasting the day of *Arafat* for both those performing Hajj and those who are not.

Fasting the Day of *Arafat*

In trying to bring greater clarity to this matter, I think that it is important to first speak about fasting the day of *Arafat*. Umm al-Fadl bint al-Harith reports, “Some people among us disputed with one another on the Day of *Arafat* about whether or not the Messenger of Allah—may Allah grant him mercy and peace—was fasting. Some of them said: “He is fasting.” Others said: “He is not fasting.” So I sent to him a goblet of milk while he was stationed on his camel in *Arafat* and he drunk from it.”¹

Nawwawi says,

“The view of Shafi'i, Malik, Abu Hanifah, and the overwhelming majority of the scholars is that it is recommended for the one performing the pilgrimage (Hajj) *not* to fast on the Day of 'Arafat while in 'Arafat. Ibn Mundhir ascribes that view to Abu Bakr, 'Umar, 'Uthman ibn 'Affan, and Ibn 'Umar. Thawri said: “But Ibn al-Zubayr and 'Aisha used to fast it (i.e. the Day of *Arafat* while in *Arafat*). This [second] view has also been ascribed to 'Umar ibn al-Khattab and 'Uthman ibn Abi al-'As. Ishaq (ibn Rahuwayh) also inclined toward it, and 'Ata used to fast it (while in Hajj) during the winter, but not during the summer. Qatadah said: “There is no harm in it as long as one does not lose the strength to supplicate [Allah]. The overwhelming majority presented as proof the fact that the Prophet—may Allah show him

¹ *Sahih Muslim*: Hadith #1123

mercy and peace—did not fast it, and that it is kinder to the pilgrim for maintaining the etiquettes of observing the standing [at ‘Arafat] and the more important rites [of the Hajj]. The others presented as proof the prophetic traditions that unrestrictedly mention that the fast of Arafat is expiation for two years [of sin]. The majority, however, applied *those reports* to those who are not there [in Arafat].”²

One of the alternate reports that Nawwawi is referring to is that the Prophet—may Allah grant him mercy and peace—said, “...For fasting the day of Arafat I anticipate from Allah to expiate [the sins of] the year before it and the year that comes after it...”³

Imam Muslim reports both hadiths in his *Sahih*. That being the case, we can clearly see why the scholars have differed about the ruling of fasting this day. That is, is it unlawful for only those who are on the pilgrimage to fast? Are we to give more preference to the first hadith over the second? Or are we to attempt to reconcile between the two sound narrations and conclude that the prohibition is merely indicative of mild discouragement?

Abu Dawud relates that Abu Hurayrah said, “The Messenger of Allah—may Allah grant him mercy and peace—forbade the fasting of the Day of Arafat while in Arafat.”⁴ Were it not for the weakness of this hadith, the matter would perhaps be resolved.

What we observe from this study is that the overwhelming majority of scholars have chosen to join between these reports and conclude that this prohibition against fasting the day of Arafat is directed against those who are performing the pilgrimage, not against those who are not.

Is It Unlawful for Pilgrims to Fast the Day of Arafat?

After becoming acquainted with the aforementioned prophetic traditions and observing the disagreement between the scholars regarding their proper interpretation, we now need to ask the question of whether or not this prohibition directed against those performing the Hajj is one that indicates that to fast this special day is a sin.

The commentator on the Sunan of Abu Dawud, Muhammad Sharaf b. Amir, relates concerning this prohibition of fasting the day of Arafat while in Arafat the following:

“Khattabi said: “This is a prohibition of recommendation, not a prohibition of obligation. The pilgrim is merely prohibited from doing that (fast) out of fear that he will become too weak to supplicate and entreat [God] while in that station. As for he who finds strength and fears no weakness, it is then more superior to fast that day, God-willing. He—may Allah grant him mercy and peace—said, “Fasting the day of Arafat expiates two years: one year before it and one year after it.” Scholars have differed about whether or not the pilgrim may fast the day of Arafat. It has been related that ‘Uthman b. Abi al-‘As and Ibn al-Zubayr used to fast it (while on Hajj). Ahmad b. Hanbal said: “If he has the strength to fast, he may fast. If he does not fast, that is a day wherein he is in need of strength.” Ishaq used to consider it recommended for pilgrims to fast it, and ‘Ata used to say: “I fast during the winter, but I do not fast during the summer.” Malik and Sufyan al-Thawri used to prefer that the pilgrim not fast, as did Shafi’i. [On the other hand] it has been related that Ibn ‘Umar—may Allah be pleased with them—said: “The Prophet—may Allah grant him mercy and peace—did not fast it, nor did Abu Bakr, ‘Umar, or ‘Uthman. And I do not fast it”...The apparent meaning of the hadith of Abu Hurayrah is that it is not permitted to fast in the plains of Arafat. However, conflict is removed from these hadiths by the fact that the fast of this day is recommended for everyone, but disliked (makruh) for the one who is a pilgrim in the plains of Arafat. The wisdom is that such a thing may perhaps lead one to become too weak to supplicate and make mention of God (dhikr) there on the day of Arafat as well as prevent him from fulfilling the [other] acts of

² *Sharh Sahih Muslim*: Volume 4

³ *Sahih Muslim*: #1162. The hadith is also reported by Abu Dawud, Tirmidhi, Nasa’i, and Ibn Majah.

⁴ Hadith #2440

Hajj. It has also been stated that the wisdom is that it is a day of 'Id for the people of the station of Arafat (mawqif) since they are gathered together in it..."⁵

Following the Sighting of Another Town

After knowing that only pilgrims have been discouraged from fasting the day of Arafat and that this discouragement is not intended to indicate sin were one to act contrary to this direction, we now need to answer the question of whether or not one town, country, or region is obliged to follow another for the religious holiday observances.

A popular understanding is that 3 of the 4 Sunni schools of law make it binding for all the Muslims to fast Ramadan and end the fast whenever one Muslim country has a verifiable sighting of the first lunar crescent (*hila*). By logical assumption, it would seem blatantly obvious to the average person that if Saudi Arabia—the place that hosts the Hajj pilgrimage—claims to have spotted the crescent, we are to adjust our calendars to theirs and follow them for the 'Id celebration and the fast of the day of Arafat. However, a closer look into the disagreement between the traditional schools on this matter bears out a, perhaps, uneasy reality to accept for many of us. That reality is that in all truth most scholars of the traditional schools do not make it binding for one region to follow another for neither Ramadan nor the 'Id of the Sacrifice unless the other town is near.⁶ In clarification of this mistaken presumption, Sharaf b. Amir states:

“Hafiz [Ibn Hajar al-‘Asqalani] states in *Al-Fath*: “The scholars have split to a number of views concerning that matter. [1] One view is that the people of every town have its own sighting. In the *Sahih* of Muslim there is something that bears testimony to that from the hadith of Ibn ‘Abbas. Ibn Mundhir ascribes this view to ‘Ikrimah, Salim, and Ishaq, and Tirmidhi ascribed it to the people of knowledge while abandoning mention of any other view concerning the matter. Mawardi also narrated it as a [sound] position of the Shafi’is; [2] The second view is the opposite of that first [view]. It is that whenever it is sighted in a town, the people of all other towns must adhere to it. It is the popular view among the Malikis, but Ibn ‘Abd Al-Barr narrated unanimous agreement to the contrary of this view. He said: “They unanimously agreed that the sighting is not to be observed with respect to towns that are at a distance from one another, like [the distance between] Khurasan and Andalus.” Qurtubi said: “Our shaykhs (Malikis) have said: “Whenever the sighting is clearly visible in a place and then it is transmitted to others by the testimony of two witnesses, they are obliged to fast.” Ibn Majishun said [however]: “Only the people of the town where the witnessing occurs are obliged [to fast] unless it is established by the Caliph (al-Imam al-‘Azam). In such a case, all the people are obliged [to fast], because all the towns with respect to him (the Caliph) are as one town, since his verdict is binding upon everyone.” Some of the Shafi’is said: “If the towns are in close proximity to one another, the ruling is one. And if they are at a distance from one another, then there are two views [in the Shafi’i School]. [1] One is that it is not obligatory in the view of most; and [2] the second is the view of Abu al-Tayyib and a [small] faction who chose the view that it is binding to follow. Baghawi also ascribed it to Shafi’i. And there are a number of views regarding the precise definition of what it means to be ‘at a distance from one another.’ [1] One view is that it is determined by the difference in moonrises (ikhtilaf al-matali’). The scholars of Iraq and Saydalani spoke in certain terms that it is the correct view. Nawwawi also considered it to be the correct view in *Al-Rawdah* and *Sharh al-Muhadhdhab*; [2] The second view is that it is determined by the distance of travel for shortening prayer (masafat al-qasr). The Imam and Baghawi spoke in certain terms that it is the correct view. Rafi’i also considered it to be the correct view in *Al-Saghir* as did Nawwawi in *Sharh Muslim*; [3] The third view is that it is determined by the difference of regions (ikhtilaf al-aqalim); [4] As for the fourth view, Sarkhasi narrated it and said: “It is binding upon every town where it is not imagined that it would be hidden from hind sight were it not for some obstruction [of our view], but [it is] not [binding upon] others; [5] The fifth is the view of the aforementioned Ibn al-Majishun.”⁷

⁵ *Awn al-Ma’bud ‘ala Sunan Abi Dawud*: pp. 1068-1069

⁶ In light of this view, this would mean that since Saudi Arabia is at an enormous distance from the United States, it is not binding on those in the United States to emulate the Saudis in their fast, breaking of the fast, or 'Id celebrations. The other view that demands that each region or locale rely upon an independent sighting precludes the emulation of Saudi Arabia in such instances even if the town is in proximity of the Kingdom.

⁷ *Awn al-Ma’bud*: p. 1032

Standing on Arafat on the Wrong Day

If it is not binding to follow Saudi Arabia for the 'Id of Sacrifice or for the reward of fasting the day of Arafat, then it would seem that we are saying that the pilgrims are on Arafat on the wrong day. If that is the case, how can their Hajj be valid or accepted, since it is well-established that Arafat is the most important day of the Hajj? This is the concern of many Muslims, and such a concern is valid. It is perhaps the main driving force behind the overwhelming desire of so many of us to adjust our calendars to Saudi Arabia's for the Hajj. Who wants to tell a pilgrim (Hajji) that his or her Hajj is invalid because they were on Arafat on the wrong day?

In spite of this concern and the fact that we may believe that the Saudi regime has erred in its declaration of the start of the sacred month of Hajj, there is an agreed upon Islamic principle that we need not forget. That principle is that "Things done by mistake, forgetfulness, or by coercion are pardoned." This is expressed in unequivocal terms by our holy Prophet—may Allah grant him mercy and peace—when he says, "Verily Allah has overlooked for me against my Ummah mistakes, forgetfulness, and what they are compelled to do."

In the case of Hajj this means that since one is compelled to conform to what Saudis consider to be the day of Arafat, we are absolved of any guilt for performing one of the holy rites on the incorrect day. Furthermore, since our intention is to fulfill Allah's commandments, we will be rewarded for our intentions in spite of the mistake made by our governors. "Deeds are by intentions." This also means that if this mistake made by our governors is one that results from malice and full knowledge that it is a mistake, our governors will bear the brunt and burden of this sin, not us.

I lived in the country of Morocco for four years and witnessed for three years consecutively Morocco celebrate the 'Id of the Sacrifice (*Adha*) one day after it was observed in Saudi Arabia, but no one ever made a fuss about whether or not we should be celebrating 'Id on the same day as Saudi Arabia. As a matter of fact, the media in Morocco made it a regular practice to broadcast when the pilgrims were on Arafat and even announced that the 'Id would be observed in Mecca on a particular day, and that Morocco would observe it on the following day.

Fasting With The People

At times, it seems that it is only the Muslims living in western lands who attempt to live up to what they believe to be an ideal of following the claimed sightings of the first Muslim country. However, it is a fact that with the exception of a small number of Muslim countries, each country has an independent and national sighting that is followed. This is largely due to [1] the strict adherence to some traditional *fiqh* opinions, [2] the loss of trust and trustworthiness in the Muslim lands, and [3] the aim of maintaining the national unity of the people.

It would then seem a logical consequence for us living here in the West to strive for building a more solid community through looking inward for religious validation as opposed to outward. Looking outward has only led to greater disunity and distrust. In this regard, Shaykh Ahmad al-Mukhtar al-Shinqiti says,

"In recent times, it has happened often, especially in the lands that have not been accustomed to having judgments of the sacred law embrace them, like the lands of the African desert—that the people have differed much about fasting, breaking fasts, and the sacrifice. They did not know that it has been related from 'Aisha—may Allah be pleased with her—that she said: "The Messenger of Allah—may Allah grant him mercy and peace—said: "The discontinuance of the fast (*fitr*) is the day that the people discontinue the fast, and the sacrifice is the day the people sacrifice." Tirmidhi related it and said: "This is a sound hadith related of a singular origin (*hadith hasan gharib*). And some of the people of

knowledge explained this hadith saying that it means that the discontinuance of the fast and the commencement of the fast are to be done with the group (jama'ah) and the majority of the people..." And in it is proof that a person is to give consideration to being in conformity with the people⁸ in establishing [the worship]."⁹

After the clarity of these matters, I think that it would only be prudent of me to demand from those who scold people for not following Saudi Arabia to bring forth evidence from the Qur'an, Sunnah, or the statements of the scholars that validate their opinion. If they cannot, they need to leave the people to continue to do what they know to be in conformity with the teachings of our tradition.

"Therefore hold not yourselves purified: He knows best who it is that guards against evil." (53: 32)

⁸ The point of this passage is that regional sightings should be made the criterion for effacing disunity. The first part of the scholar's statement wherein he points out the fact that people have differed about the proper dates of observance due to not knowing the hadith of the Prophet that indicates that the fast and sacrifice celebration should be observed with the people in one's locale explains the rest of the citation. So, one should not allow himself to be confused that this means that we simply do what most of the people are doing even if it is impossible to sight the crescent on the night the claim is made. This is not the intent. The confusion that happened to those in the African desert was a direct result of attempting to follow a country or region outside of the African desert. So take note!

⁹ *Mawahib Al-Jalil min Adillati Khalil: 1/329*