

بِسْمِ اللَّهِ الرَّحْمَنِ الرَّحِيمِ



## The Maliki Argument for not Clasping the Hands in Salat

By  
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Questions have been asked about what appears to be a novel practice amongst Western Muslims of people praying with their hands at their sides instead of folding them over their chests as has been reported in sound traditions about the Prophet – may Allah bless him and grant him peace. It is common knowledge to Muslims everywhere that this was a practice of the virtuous Imam and erudite, Malik b. Anas – may Allah have mercy on him.

What has also become commonplace is to hear a rather unsupportable explanation of why he did it. That explanation is that Imam Malik only prayed with his arms at his sides because he was tortured and therefore unable to fold his arms on his chest.

This claim, after being unsupported by fact, history, or logic, is clearly contravened by the explicit statement of the Imam himself. And, we challenge such a claim to be verified by and in any of the traditionally relied upon books of Islamic history. One will find oneself hard-pressed to find any evidence substantiating this argument.

Then, logically speaking, it would seem to be quite unreasonable to surmise that Imam Malik didn't have the strength to place one of his hands over the other on his chest while

praying, but have enough strength to support his own body weight when pushing himself up from the position of prostration to the standing position, since it was his view that when rising from prostration one should lift his/her knees before the hands.

What this paper will prove is that Malik—may Allah have mercy on him—only prayed that way, because it is what he saw there to be stronger evidence for, in addition to it being supported by sound traditions related about the Prophet ﷺ.

It will also be shown that Malik was not alone in this regard, and that many of the well-known scholars from the *Tabi'in* (Students of the Prophet's Companions) also prayed that way. Then, we will bring out in the end that such a prayer is legally valid in all of the schools of Sunni law, and that ones prayer is not invalidated if one were to do so.

What people must understand about evidence is that it is not restricted to *Qur'an* and *Sunna*, nor has it ever been restricted to them. Consensus (Al-Ijma') is also proof. Legal Analogy (Al-Qiyas) is another proof. There are also things like the *Pre-Qur'anic sacred legislation* that hasn't been abrogated (Shar'u man qublana), and the statements and actions of the *Sahaba* (qawl wa 'amal al-Sahaba). There are also others that we chose not to mention, since this is not the place for such a discussion.

Were we to limit evidence to merely the *Qur'an and Sunna* of the Prophet – may Allah bless and grant him peace – a great many things that we deem to be forbidden or permissible today would not be able to be supported or justified.

The reason for writing this paper is so that the author or others will no longer have to go into great detail repeatedly in explaining and justifying this issue. The aim of this explanation is not to appease or convince those opposed to this practice. Rather, it is to console and put at ease those who do it. This way, if one desires to know the facts, it would be as simple as taking recourse to the current paper, and those like it wherever they exist. We ask Allah to benefit all by it. *Amin*.

## I. The Position of *Malik* (may Allah be pleased with him)

Ibn al-Qasim<sup>1</sup> says in *Al-Mudawwana*<sup>2</sup>:

“...Malik said about placing the right hand over the left during Salat. He said: “I don’t know (of) that in the obligatory (prayer).” And he used to dislike it. “However, in voluntary prayers (nawafil), when the standing is extended, there is no harm in that (for one who doesn’t) support himself by it.”...<sup>3</sup>

Malik’s statement, “*I don’t know of that in the obligatory prayer*”, seems to point to a clear reality to anyone who is acquainted with his method of deducing legal rulings. That reality is that, his statement indicates that he doesn’t know of any conclusive evidence that would be strong enough to consider placing the right hand over the left on the chest a *Sunna* act of the *obligatory* prayer.

The statement also indicates that the main reason that he disliked it was that people folded their hands on their chests as a means of holding themselves up in prayer. That wouldn’t be necessary, since it is disliked for Imams to make the standings too lengthy during obligatory prayers. As for the voluntary prayers, he didn’t dislike it then, due to the fact that much of what is not permissible in obligatory prayers is permissible in voluntary prayers.

*Now, where does the argument of the claimant stand in light of this decisive evidence?*

## II. Evidence from *Hadith*

As for the hadiths that indicate this, let us first start with the *hadith* of Abu Hamid Al-Sa’idi, because of its complete soundness and clear unequivocal indication of the Prophet praying with his hands by his sides.

Ibn Hajar says in *Fath Al-Bari*:

<sup>1</sup> He was one of the most famous and greatest of Malik’s students.

<sup>2</sup> Al-Tanukhi, Sahnun b. Sa’id. *Al-Mudawwana Al-Kubra*. Beirut: Dar al-Fikr, 1419/1998, 1/111.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid*.

“Bukhari, Abu Dawud, Tirmidhi, Ahmad, and Ibn Khuzayma reported it.”

And, the version of Abu Dawud contains the following addition that is a clear indication of the hands being released at the sides. Its wording is:

“Ahmad related to us—Abu ‘Asim Al-Dahhak b. Makhlad related to us (transfer); Musaddad related to us—Yahya related to us.”

And the chain of Ahmad reads:

Abd Al-Hamid informed us—that is, Ibn Ja’far—[who said] Muhammad b. ‘Amr b. ‘Ata informed me. He said,

“I heard Abu Hamid Al-Sa’idi say while in the company of ten of the companions of the Messenger of Allah ﷺ: “I am the most knowledgeable of you of the prayer of the Messenger of Allah ﷺ.” They said, “How so? For by Allah, you were neither the one who spent the most time with him, nor the eldest of us to him in companionship.” He said, “True indeed.” They said, “Show (us).” He said, “Whenever the Messenger of Allah – may Allah bless and grant him peace – would stand up to pray he would raise his hands until they were parallel with his shoulders, then say ‘Allahu Akbar’ until each bone became settled in its place straightly. Then, he would recite...”<sup>4</sup>

<sup>4</sup> The remainder of the hadith is,

“...Then, he would recite. Then, he’d say ‘*Allahu Akbar*’, and raise his hands until they were parallel with his shoulders. Then, he’d bow placing his palms upon his knees. Then, he’d straighten out [while bowing] without lowering his head or inclining. Then, he’d raise his head, and say: “Allah hears he who praises Him.” Then, he’d raise his hands until

And the natural place of the hands/arms of a person is at his/her sides. And it cannot be said that a person's arms are straight if they are folded on his/her chest.

Shaykh Muhktar Al-Dawdi<sup>5</sup> says,

“And if the Prophet ﷺ used to pray while placing the right over the left hand the ten companions would have rebuked him (i.e. Abu Hamid) for omitting it when he said: “...until each bone became settled in its place...” since peoples’ egos are disposed to a severe eagerness to point out the mistake of one’s challenger when competing. And amongst the ten companions was Sahl ibn Sa’d ؓ who said (in another hadith): “The people were ordered to place the right hand on the left forearm during Salat.” So, it becomes clear that the order in the hadith of Sahl ؓ came from one other than the Prophet ﷺ...and Sahl’s acknowledgement ؓ of the description of the prayer which the clasping of the hands (qabd) has been

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they were evenly parallel with his shoulders. Then, he’d say: “*Allahu Akbar*.” Then, he’d fall to the ground, and extend his arms away from his sides. Then, he’d raise his head, fold his left leg, and sit on it while spreading the toes of his feet when he fell prostrate, then he’d prostrate, and say: “*Allahu Akbar*.” Then, he’d sit up, bend his left leg, and sit on it until every bone returned to its place. Then, he’d do in the other units (rak’at) the like of that. And when he stood from the two units he said: “*Allahu Akbar*”, raised his hands until he made them parallel with his shoulders just as he gave the *takbir* at the beginning of the prayer. Then, he’d do that in the rest of his Salat, until the prostration containing (i.e. before) the *taslim* (i.e. the final Salaam) left out his left leg, and sat leaning to one side on his left [buttock].” They said: “You have spoken the truth. That is how he used to pray – may Allah bless and grant him peace.”

<sup>5</sup> He is one of the scholars of Mauritania, author of *Mashru’iyat al-Sadl fi al-Salat* (The Legitimacy of Drooping the Hands in Salaat).

omitted from is proof that the order in the aforementioned hadith is not from the Prophet ﷺ.”

As for the hadiths that mention the Prophet praying with his hands folded on his chest or under his navel, they refer to the voluntary prayers.

Nawawi says:

“...And about Malik is also (the report mentioning) the favorableness of placing (the hands on the chest) in the voluntary (prayers), and the (favorableness) of leaving (them by the sides) during the obligatory (prayers). And this is what his followers from Basra gave more weight to...”<sup>6</sup>

Muhammad Al-Khadr Al-Shinqiti<sup>7</sup> said,

“And of the hadiths indicating the release (of the hands at the sides) is every hadith in which the prayer of the Prophet – may Allah bless and grant him peace – is described wherein he covered (i.e. in the hadith) the mention of the recommended acts (*mustahabbat*) of prayer without mentioning the clasping (of the hand).<sup>8</sup> That’s because leaving (the hands hanging) is the original position as is not a secret. And clasping (the hands) is an

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<sup>6</sup> Al-Nawawi, Yahya b. Sharaf. *Sahih Muslim bi Sharh Al-Nawawi*, Beirut: Dar al-Fikr, 1995, 4/96. Hadith # 401.

<sup>7</sup> He is Muhammad Al-Khadr b. Shaykh ‘Abd Allah b. Mayabi Al-Jakani Al-Shinqiti. He was one of the most remarkable and outstanding scholars of Mauritania who appeared in the first half of the fourteenth century after the *Hijra*. He died in the 1984/1405.

<sup>8</sup> These hadiths are many. Unfortunately, we won’t bother to mention them here in an attempt to avoid prolixity. What we will do instead is mention where they can be found. Those narrated on the authority of Ibn ‘Umar can be found in *Muwatta*, *Sahih Al-Bukhari* and *Muslim*. As for those from Abu Hurayra, check the six renowned collections with the exception of Ibn Majah. From ‘Ali, you can look in Ahmad’s *Musnad*, Abu Dawud, Tirmidhi, Nasa’i, and Ibn Majah. As for Abu Qalaba, refer to Bukhari and Muslim. And refer to Abu Dawud for those found on the authority of Salim Al-Barrad.

added description. So, when it is not mentioned, the situation is to remain according to the original state, which is the release of the hands (*irsal*). Also because silence about the description (of something) at the time clarification is required is indicative of limitation (to what is without the addition)...”<sup>9</sup>

So, with regard to hadith evidence, there is more that can be mentioned, although what has already passed should be sufficient enough evidence to establish that the Prophet did in fact pray while leaving his arms at his sides.

### III. Evidence from the Traditions of the *Sahaba* and *Tabi'in*

In the *Musannaf*<sup>10</sup> of Ibn Abi Shayba, the following can be found:

1. Abu Bakr [b. Abi Shayba) declared: Hushaym declared to us about Hasan [Al-Basari]—about Yunus [who declared] about Ibrahim [Al-Nakha'i] that they (Hasan and Ibrahim) used to release their hands [at their sides] during prayer.
2. ‘Affan declared to us: Yazid b. Ibrahim declared to us. He said: “I heard ‘Amr b. Dinar say: “[‘Abd Allah] b. al-Zubayr (the grandson of Abu Bakr Al-Siddiq), whenever he prayed, he used to release his hands [at his sides].”
3. Ibn ‘Ulaya declared to us: On the authority of Ibn ‘Awn about Ibn Sirin that he was asked about the man who holds his right hand with his left. He said: “That was merely done because of the Romans’ [influence].”
4. ‘Umar b. Harun declared to us: On the authority of ‘Abd Allah b. Yazid. He said: “I never saw [Sa’id] b. Al-Musayyab (the most knowledgeable of the Tabi’in) clasping his right hand in

the prayer. He used to release them [at his sides].”

5. Yayha b. Sa’id declared to us: On the authority of ‘Abd Allah b. Al-‘Izar. He said: “I used to accompany Sa’id b. Jubayr. So, he saw a man praying while placing one of his hands on the other. This one on this one and this one on this one. So, he went, separated them, and then returned [to me].”

And Imam Nawawi said in his *Majmu’*:<sup>11</sup>

“Layth b. Sa’d [said about the person who prays]: “He releases them (i.e. the hands). Then, if that (i.e. the prayer) is too long for him, he should place the right over the left.” And Awza’i said: “[One has] a choice between clasping and releasing (the hands).”

Shaykh Al-Khadr said,

“I say (that) the statement of Layth is unequivocal in indicating that clasping [the hands] is not in his view from the *Sunna*. However, it falls under the category of support [of one’s body weight]. And this is exactly the reason that Malik expressly considered it to be disliked, since it is a form of supporting (oneself). And Ibn Abi Shayba reported Ibn Sirin as saying when he was asked about the man who holds by his right hand his left hand: “That was merely because of the Romans.””<sup>12</sup>

Then Abu Dawud relates that Muhammad b. Jahada said about the matter of releasing the arms at ones sides:

“Then, I mentioned that to Hasan b. Abi Al-Hasan, and he said: “It is the prayer of Allah’s messenger ﷺ.”

<sup>9</sup> Al-Shinqiti, Muhammad al-Khadr b. ‘Abd Allah. *Ibram al-Naqd fima qila min Arjahiyat al-Qabd*. Beirut: Dar al-Basha’ir al-Islamiya. 1996.

<sup>10</sup> The *Musannaf* is one of the earliest hadith canons in Islamic history.

<sup>11</sup> This is one of the major source books on Shafi’i fiqh.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibram al-Naqd*, p.57.

Whoever does it does it. And whoever abandons it abandons it.”<sup>13</sup>

Al-Khadr says,

“And the scholars have said that Ibn al-Zubayr took the description of prayer from Abu Bakr Al-Siddiq. Al-Khatib reports in *Tarikh al-Baghdad* that Ahmad b. Hanbal ؓ said: “Abd Al-Razzaq related to me.” He said: “Verily, the people of Mecca say: “Ibn Jurayj took the description of prayer from ‘Ata. And ‘Ata took it from Ibn Al-Zubayr. And Ibn Al-Zubayr took it from Abu Bakr Al-Siddiq. And Abu Bakr took it from the Prophet ﷺ.” And this indicates that Abu Bakr used to release [his hands] in his prayer, because, Ibn Al-Zubayr took the description of prayer from him. And Ibn ‘Abbas (The Prophet’s cousin) testified that the Salat of Ibn Al-Zubayr is the Salat of the Prophet ﷺ in what Abu Dawud relates about Maymun Al-Makki that he saw ‘Abd Allah b. Al-Zubayr while leading them in prayer. He said afterwards, “Then, I went to Ibn ‘Abbas and said: “Verily, I have seen Ibn Al-Zubayr pray a prayer that I have never seen anyone pray.” Then I described to him this gesture, and he said: “If you’d like to look at the prayer of the Messenger of Allah ﷺ then copy the prayer of ‘Abd Allah b. Al-Zubayr.”

Al-Khadr says,

“And what is confirmed by scholars is that Ibn Al-Zubayr used to release [his hands] in his Salat. So, it is known by the testimony of Ibn ‘Abbas that his prayer is the prayer of the Prophet ﷺ, and that he used to release [his hands] in Salat...”<sup>14</sup>

And in the *Musannaf*<sup>15</sup> of ‘Abd Al-Razzaq Al-San’ani he says,

<sup>13</sup> Abu Dawud

<sup>14</sup> *Ibram al-Naqd*, p. 63.

<sup>15</sup> This *Musannaf* is also one of the earliest hadith canons in Islamic history.

“I saw Ibn Jurayj praying while releasing his hands. And Awza’i said: “Whoso pleases does it. And whoso pleases leaves it.” And it is the view of ‘Ata.”<sup>16</sup>

#### IV. The Position of the Majority of Scholars

Most scholars hold the view that the normative, if not permanent, practice of the Prophet ﷺ was folding his arms while praying. This is the position taken by the other three schools, and is the opinion considered by many Malikiis to be the position having more evidence in support of it. However, the basis for this position is that it has been related about 18 *Sahaba* and 2 of the *Tabi’in* that the Prophet prayed with his hands clasped. However, there exists contention regarding the chain of transmission of each one of these narrations. For this reason, it is said of them that “it has been related about them”, which is a clear indication of weakness and indecisiveness.

Hadith scholars know it as “the wording indicative of sickness” (*sigat al-tamrid*). As for the one or two sound narrations, which are found in the collections of Bukhari and Muslim, they are not clear in their indications that the Prophet prayed with his hands clasped. For that reason, it is not possible to unequivocally conclude that he – may Allah grant him peace – prayed with his hands clasped. Rather, it is equally plausible, if not more reasonable, to conclude the opposite.

Al-Dawdi says,

“As for ascribing the [position of] clasping the hands (*qabd*) to the majority [of scholars], if the intended [ascription] is [an ascription to] the majority of the *Sahaba*, then this ascription is not true by any means, since it (i.e. clasping the hands) has not been found to be soundly established about the Prophet – may Allah grant him peace, nor one of his Rightly-Guided Successors. So, how could attributing it to the majority of the *Sahaba* and *Tabi’in* be true? As for what Tirmidhi relates from Samak b. Harb from Qabisa b. Hulb from his

<sup>16</sup> *Al-Musannaf*, 2/276.

father who said: “The Messenger of Allah used to lead us, and take his left with his right.” and declared it to be Hasan (of fair grading), then said, “Action is in accordance with this among the companions of the Prophet ﷺ, the successors (tabi’in), and those after them”; There is no doubt that he (Tirmidhi) depended upon the hadith of Hulb in attributing this action, since there is a distance (in time) between him, and between the *Sahaba* and *Tabi’in*. Also because, he didn’t mention any support for that other than the hadith of Hulb. And if it (the hadith) had been *Sahih* (sound), it would have resolved the dispute. However, it is one of the narrations of Samak and Qabisa. And it has already preceded that Samak is weak...and Qabisa is unknown (majhul). And only Samak narrates on his authority. And Tirmidhi’s choosing of this chain from [all] the different chains going back to the Prophet in this chapter is a proof that all chains of transmission fall in the center of ignominy. Just as it has already preceded about the Imams of the *Tabi’in* (Sa’id b. Al-Musayyab, Sa’id b. Jubayr, and Mujahid) what points to the contrary of what Tirmidhi attributed to the *Sahaba* and *Tabi’in*, while knowing that these know better the doings of the *Sahaba* in the matter than Tirmidhi and all from his generation. And if what is intended by “the majority” is the majority of those lesser than the Successors of the Successors (tabi’u al-tabi’in), the ascription to them is true. The statement of Nawawi in *Sharh Muslim* (4/114) indicates it. “The proof of the majority [of scholars after the Salaf] regarding the favorableness of placing the right on the left is the aforementioned hadith of Wa’il, and the hadith of Abu Hazim on the authority of Sahl.” So, this gives the feeling that the *Sahaba* and *Tabi’in* are outside of this majority, since they don’t present the aforementioned hadith of Sahl as evidence, because the one giving the order is unknown.

And if he had not been unknown, the Imams of the Salaf would not have differed regarding its ruling. (They also differed) because the hadith of Wa’il is weakened (ma’lul) due to a break in its chain, and the weakness of one of its narrators. So, the Salaf didn’t present it as evidence...”<sup>17</sup>

## V. The Statements of *other Scholars*

Ibn Rushd<sup>18</sup> says,

“Scholars have differed regarding placing the hands, one of them on the other during Salat. Malik considered that *makruh* (disliked) during the obligatory prayer, and permitted it during the voluntary prayers. Others considered this action to be from the one of the Sunnahs (recommended acts) of Salat. They are the majority (of those after the Salaf).

The reason for their difference is that some established traditions (of the companions and successors) have come. The description of the Prophet’s prayer – may Allah grant him peace – has been related in them. And nowhere in them was it related that he placed his right over his left. It also has been confirmed that the people were commanded to do that (i.e. clasp their hands). That has also been mentioned as part of the description of his prayer – may Allah bless and grant him peace – in the hadith of Abu Hamid. And some people saw that the reports that have been confirmed necessitated an addition upon the reports not containing this addition, and that the addition must be followed. Others saw that the more worthy obligation was to follow the reports that don’t contain the addition, because they are more numerous, and since this (i.e. clasping of the hands) doesn’t benefit the actions of prayer. Rather,

<sup>17</sup> *Mashru’iyat al-Sadl*, p. 69.

<sup>18</sup> Ibn Rushd was a famous Muslim philosopher, magistrate, and jurist from Islamic Spain who died in the year 595 after the emigration (Hijra) from Mecca to Medina.

they fall under the category of seeking support (in remaining still and standing). Therefore, Malik permitted it in voluntary prayers, and did not permit it in the obligatory...”<sup>19</sup>

Ibn ‘Abd Al-Barr<sup>20</sup> says,

“...And placing the right of them over the left or releasing them (at the sides), all of that is a Sunna in Salat...”<sup>21</sup>

## VI. Summary and Conclusion

We know the validity of praying with our hands at our sides from the following:

1. It was the position held by our Imam Malik, and most of his disciples and Maliki historically.
2. The hadiths of the Prophet indicate that he prayed that way.
3. It was the opinion taken by the *Tabi’in*, the most knowledgeable of them being by unanimous consensus Sa’id b. Al-Musayyab.
4. It was the position of ‘Abd Allah ibn Az-Zubayr who learned from his grandfather, Abu Bakr Al-Siddiq who learned from the Prophet himself. In addition, it hasn’t been confirmed in any sound reports that any of the other *Sahaba* prayed while clasping their hands.

5. None of the *Imams* of the other *madhhabs* (legal schools) hold it to be an obligation to pray while clasping ones hands. They only consider it to be a Sunna. As for Malik, it is permitted without dislike during voluntary prayers when the standing is long. As for the obligatory prayers, he disliked it, although dislike does not mean that something is prohibited according the scholars.
6. Some Imams hold both folding the hands as well as leaving them at ones sides to be Sunnas that have been both related about the Prophet – may Allah grant him peace.

In the end, I’d like to say that it would be much more beneficial for those seeking to sow discord through this matter to address some of our more pressing issues like the divorce rate in the Muslim community, or things like, trying to help solve the problems of Muslims suffering from substance abuse and alcohol problems. Instead of policing peoples’ prayer when they’re not doing anything wrong, they should go looking for things, which are truly *haram* (unlawful) and try to find the proper Islamic solutions for them.

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<sup>19</sup> Al-Andalusi, Ibn Rushd. *Bidayat Al-Mujtahid wa Nihayat al-Muqtasid*. Beirut: Dar al-Kutub al-‘Ilmiya, 1997/1417, 1/192-193.

<sup>20</sup> Ibn ‘Abd Al-Barr was a great Maliki jurist and hadith scholar known as “The Great Hadith Retainer of the West” (Hafiz Al-Maghrib). He died in the year 468 after the *Hijra*, the same year that his counterpart Al-Khatib Al-Baghdadi, “The Great Hadith Retainer of the East” (Hafiz Al-Mashriq) passed away.

<sup>21</sup> Al-Namri, Abu ‘Umar Ibn ‘Abd al-Barr. *Al-Kafi fi Fiqh Ahl al-Madina al-Maliki*, Beirut: Dar al-Kutub al-‘Ilmiya, 1992/1413. p. 43