

The Truth about the Number of Rak'ahs in Tarawih

In the Name of Allah, the Most Gracious, the Most Merciful.

In recent times there has been a growth in the number of lay people who, influenced by a certain ideology, claim that the *tarawih* consists of only eight *rak'ahs* rather than the established twenty *rak'ahs*. There is, therefore, a need to discuss the *tarawih* prayer, which is a special type of *salah* (ritual prayer) only offered in Ramadan.

The practice of performing *tarawih* in eight *rak'ahs* is in total contrast to the practice of the Ummah throughout the ages. Given the fact that *tarawih* is an emphasized *sunnah* (*sunnah muakkadah*), this issue should not be treated lightly. A staunch approach in opposition to this baseless view needs to be adopted, including highlighting the abhorrence of opposing the view of the majority (*jamhur*) and the sin of habitually abandoning an emphasized *sunnah*.

Ijma' of the Companions (may Allah be pleased with them)

The issue of the *tarawih* consisting of twenty *rak'ahs* is one that the Companions (*Sahabah*) agreed upon by *ijma'* (consensus). Hafiz Ibn 'Abd al-Barr stated, "The Companions had no dispute regarding this."^[1] 'Allamah Ibn Qudamah said, "The Companions made *ijma'* upon this in the era of Sayyiduna 'Umar (may Allah be pleased with him)" (*Al-Mughni*). Hafiz Abu Zur'ah Al-'Iraqi stated, "They (the *'ulama*) have considered the approval of the Companions [when Sayyiduna 'Umar did so] as *ijma'*."^[2] Mulla 'Ali al-Qari stated that that the Companions (may Allah be pleased with them) have made *ijma'* on the practice of twenty *rak'ahs*.^[3] Ibn Hajar al-Haytami and many others have also claimed *ijma'* of the Companions on this issue.^[4]

Furthermore, there exists no view in the four *madhhabs* (i.e. the Hanafi, Shafi'i, Maliki and Hanbali schools of Islamic

jurisprudence) that support the view that *tarawih* consists of eight *rak'ahs*. The Hanafis, Shafi'is and Hanbalis state *tarawih* consists of twenty *rak'ahs* while Imam Malik is of the view that it consists of thirty-six *rak'ahs*, and according to one report he considers it to consist of forty-one *rak'ahs*. According to another report he had also approved twenty *rak'ahs*. Some claim that Imam Malik also has a view supporting eleven *rak'ahs* but Mawlana Habib al-Rahman Al-A'zami has adequately refuted this claim in his book *Rak'ate Tarawih*.^[5]

From the above, we can deduce that almost all of the scholars of this Ummah held the opinion that *tarawih* does not consist of eight *rak'ahs* because throughout history all have adhered to one of the four *madhabs*, although there may have been certain individuals who renegaded in this regard. Mawlana Habib al-Rahman Al-A'zami said in this regard, "From after the era of Sayyiduna 'Umar (may Allah be pleased with him) up to the end of the 13th century, you will not find any mention of people performing only eight *rak'ahs* [in *tarawih*]"^[6] Mawlana has also proven that offering twenty *rak'ahs* has remained the practice of the Ummah up to the modern day.^[7]

The practice of the Companions and the Followers

Sayyiduna Sa'ib ibn Yazid reports that "the people would perform twenty *rak'ahs* in Ramadan during the era of Sayyiduna 'Umar (may Allah be pleased with him)"^[8] Others beside Sayyiduna Sa'ib ibn Yazid have also reported that the twenty *rak'ahs* were introduced by Sayyiduna 'Umar (may Allah be pleased with him) such as Sayyiduna Yazid ibn Ruman, Sayyiduna Yahya ibn Sa'id Al-Ansari, Sayyiduna Ubay ibn Ka'b and Sayyiduna Muhammad ibn Ka'b Al-Qurazhi.^[9]

The following *muhaddithin* (hadith scholars) have accepted these reports, i.e. the reports of twenty *rak'ahs* from Sayyiduna 'Umar (may Allah be pleased with him), to be authentic: Hafiz Ibn 'Abd al-Barr, Imam Al-Nawawi, Hafiz Al-'Iraqi, Imam Al-Subki, Imam Al-Suyuti and Mulla 'Ali al-Qari.

Imam al-Bayhaqi has narrated from several chains that Sayyiduna ‘Ali (may Allah be pleased with him) also maintained the practice of twenty *rak’ahs* in *tarawih*.^[10] This has also been reported as the practice of Sayyiduna ‘Abdullah ibn Mas’ud (may Allah be pleased with him),^[11] Sayyiduna ‘Abd al-Rahman ibn Abi Bakr (may Allah be pleased with him),^[12] Sayyiduna Ubay ibn Ka’b (may Allah be pleased with him),^[13] Shutayr ibn Shakl,^[14] Ibn Abi Mulaykah,^[15] Harith Al-Hamdani,^[16] ‘Ali ibn Rabi’ah,^[17] Abu ‘l-Bukhtari,^[18] Sayyid al-Tabi’in Sa’id ibn Jubayr,^[19] ‘Ata (he said: “I found the people performing twenty-three *rak’ahs* including *witr*.”),^[20] Sa’id ibn Abi ‘l-Hasan,^[21] ‘Imran Al-’Abdi^[22] and Suwayd ibn Ghaflah.^[23]

The practice of the Messenger of Allah (Allah bless him and give him peace)

In a narration it is stated that the Messenger of Allah (Allah bless him and give him peace) performed twenty *rak’ahs* in *tarawih*.^[24] The chain of this narration is weak. However, it is a well established principle in the sciences of Hadith and Fiqh that if a hadith possesses a weak chain but is supported by the general practice of the Ummah in the era of the Companions and the Followers (*Tabi’in*) then that hadith will be considered authentic.^[25]

Mawlana Habib al-Rahman Al-A’zimi has mentioned that this albeit weak narration is supported by the following points: (1) The fact that the general practice of the Muslims in the era of Sayyiduna ‘Umar (may Allah be pleased with him) conformed to it, (2) this remained the practice even in the era of Sayyiduna ‘Ali (may Allah be pleased with him), (3) all of the four *madhhabs* concur with it and (4) the fact that the entire Ummah has been practicing upon it till this day. These are sufficient reasons to strengthen this narration and raise it to the level of authenticity. (*Rak’ate Tarawih*, pg. 60)

Interestingly, Imam Ibn Abi Shaybah, under the chapter of “The number of *rak’ahs* to be performed in Ramadan”, first quotes the practice of twenty *rak’ahs* from ten different Companions and Followers (*Tabi’i*) and thereafter cites the narration of

twenty *rak'ahs* from the Messenger of Allah (Allah bless him and give him peace).^[26] This probably means he was alluding to the strength of this narration.

Twenty rak'ahs were established by Sayyiduna 'Umar

Those who prefer eight *rak'ahs* generally contest the fact that Sayyiduna 'Umar (may Allah be pleased with him) was the one who introduced the twenty *rak'ahs* and that it was in fact only eight *rak'ahs* that he had established. This claim is easily refutable in light of the quotations mentioned earlier. Furthermore, Imam Tirmidhi has stated the following in his *Sunan*: “And most of the *'ulama* have chosen twenty *rak'ahs* as has been reported from Sayyiduna 'Ali (may Allah be pleased with him) and Sayyiduna 'Umar (may Allah be pleased with him) and other Companions besides these two.”^[27]

The fact that Imam Tirmidhi did not even mention eight *rak'ahs* from Sayyiduna 'Umar (may Allah be pleased with him) or anyone else is a clear indication as to which is the proper view. Moreover, some *'ulama* have reconciled this by stating that Sayyiduna 'Umar had probably first introduced eight *rak'ahs* which thereafter became twenty. This then became the constant practice in his era as well as in the era of those who came after him.^[28]

On the other hand, Mawlana Habib al-Rahman Al-A'zimi and others have challenged the narration of eight *rak'ahs* from Sayyiduna 'Umar (may Allah be pleased with him). Mawlana has classified it as weak due to *idtirab* (i.e., diverse conflict between the narrators). (*Rak'ate Tarawih*, pgs. 7-8)

The fact that the narration of eight *rak'ahs* was narrated by Imam Malik from Sayyiduna 'Umar (may Allah be pleased with him) and he (Imam Malik) still chose twenty, thirty-six or forty-one *rak'ahs* further weakens this narration.^[29] Another weakening factor for this narration is that there are no other references from the Companions and Followers which support this version of eight *rak'ahs*.^[30]

Sunnah of the rightly-guided caliphs

The fact that Sayyiduna ‘Umar (may Allah be pleased with him) approved of twenty *rak’ahs* and the other caliphs maintained this practice after him is sufficient to prove its importance. All of this is in light of the hadith in which the Prophet (Allah bless him and give him peace) said: “You must then follow my *sunnah* and that of the rightly-guided caliphs” (*Abu Dawud*). The ‘*ulamah* have ruled that the *sunnah* of the caliphs are also part of the emphasized *sunnah* in light of this particular hadith.^[31]

Hafiz Ibn Rajab Al-Hanbali said: “The directive in this hadith to follow the caliphs is as incumbent as following the Sunnah of the Messenger of Allah (Allah bless him and give him peace) himself.^[32] This becomes even more clear knowing that this was one of the last advices of the Messenger of Allah (Allah bless him and give him peace).

The significance of the practices of Sayyiduna ‘Umar

The *sunnah* (practice) of Sayyiduna ‘Umar (may Allah be pleased with him) enjoy an added significance and this is due to several narrations which support this:

(1) The Messenger of Allah (Allah bless him and give him peace) said: “Allah has placed truth upon ‘Umar’s tongue and heart.” (*Abu Dawud*)

(2) Sayyiduna ‘Ali (may Allah be pleased with him) would meticulously follow the practices of Sayyiduna ‘Umar (may Allah be pleased with him) and would say: “Indeed he (‘Umar) was always correct in his affairs.”

(3) Sayyiduna ‘Abullah ibn Mas’ud (may Allah be pleased with him) said while on oath: “The straight path is that which ‘Umar chose.”

(4) The caliph ‘Umar ibn ‘Abd al-’Aziz said in one of his addresses to the people: “Behold! Whatever the Messenger of Allah (Allah bless him and give him peace) and his two Companions (Abu

Bakr and ‘Umar) have implemented is a duty that we have to follow and adhere to in our religion.”^[33]

Imam Abu Hanifah (may Allah be pleased with him) said the following when asked concerning the *tarawih* and its introduction by Sayyiduna ‘Umar (may Allah be pleased with him): “*Tarawih* is an emphasized *sunnah*. Sayyiduna ‘Umar did not introduce it from his own intellect, neither was it an innovation from his side. He surely did so because of having some knowledge about it from Allah’s Messenger (Allah bless him and give him peace).”^[34]

‘Allamah Al-Mawsili, after quoting the above from Imam Abu Hanifah, stated: “He (Sayyiduna ‘Umar) did so in the presence of a large group of Companions (may Allah be pleased with them), among them were the likes of Sayyiduna ‘Uthman , Sayyiduna ‘Ali, Sayyiduna Ibn Mas’ud, Sayyiduna ‘Abbas, Sayyiduna Ibn ‘Abbas, Sayyiduna Talhah, Sayyiduna Zubayr , Sayyiduna Mu’adh, Sayyiduna Ubayy and others among the *muhajirun* (emigrants) and *ansar* (helpers). None of them objected to him, rather they assisted him and concurred with him.”^[35]

Tarawih of the Two Noble Sanctuaries

In the Two Noble Sanctuaries of the noble city of Makkah and the illuminated city of Madinah up to this day since the time of Sayyiduna ‘Umar (may Allah be pleased with him) twenty *rak’ahs* of *tarawih* has been performed in congregation. The Companions (may Allah be pleased with them), the Followers (i.e. those who came after the Companions), the Imams of Fiqh (Islamic jurisprudence) and the rest of the Ummah — with the exception of the so-called Ahl al-Hadith (or Salafis) of recent times — have been unanimous on performing twenty *rak’ahs*.^[36]

The Shi’ah resemblance

Those who hold the view that the *tarawih* consists of eight *rak’ahs* hold the same belief as the Shi’ah in this regard. It is an accepted fact among the true scholars of Islam that for centuries the *tarawih* prayer was and is an additional prayer in

the month of Ramadan. The Shi'ahs reject the practice of praying *tarawih* altogether. Similarly, the Ahl al-Hadith sect (or the Salafis) also reject there is an additional prayer in Ramadan. They believe that the *tahajjud* prayer which is performed during the latter portion of the night throughout the year was merely brought forward (i.e. to the earlier portion of the night) in Ramadan. Thus, in essence, there is no additional prayer in Ramadan according to their understanding.

Furthermore, to believe that the twenty *rak'ahs* is an innovation of Sayyiduna 'Umar (may Allah be pleased with him) is to undermine the integrity of this great Companion and in fact all the Companions who were present in his time. Generally speaking, this is precisely what the aims of the Shi'ahs are since it is an act of virtue for them to undermine the integrity of the Companions.

Difference between tarawih and tahajjud

The claim is made that since the *tahajjud* prayer only consists of eight *rak'ahs* — which is also an incorrect claim as other hadiths suggest more *rak'ahs* — the same applies to *tarawih*. There are several differences between *tarawih* and *tahajjud*, some of which are as follows:

(1) *Tarawih* consists of twenty *rak'ahs* while *tahajjud* consists of only eight or maximum twelve.

(2) *Tarawih* is an emphasized *sunnah* while *tahajjud* is preferable (*mustahab*).

(3) *Tarawih* should be performed in congregation while *tahajjud* is performed individually only.

(4) *Tarawih* is only performed in the month of Ramadan while *tahajjud* is performed throughout the year.

(5) *Tarawih* is performed in the earlier part of the night while *tahajjud* is performed in the latter part of the night.

In addition to the above, there are several hadiths wherein the Messenger of Allah (Allah bless him and give him peace) has specifically encouraged *qiyam* (standing for prayers) in Ramadan:

(1) Sayyiduna Abu Hurayrah reported Allah's Messenger (Allah bless him and give him peace) as saying: "He who observed prayer at night during Ramadan, because of faith and seeking his reward [from Allah], his previous sins would be forgiven." (*Sahih al-Bukhari and Muslim*)

(2) The Messenger of Allah (Allah bless him and give him peace) said: "Allah has enjoined (*fard*) the fast of Ramadan, and standing for night prayers (i.e. *tarawih*) was made *sunnah* for you; so whoever fasts and stands for night prayers because of faith and seeking his reward [from Allah], he will be freed from his sins like on the day when his mother gave birth to him". (*Sunan al-Nasai; Al-Targhib, 2:105.*)

(3) Sayyiduna Abu Hurayrah reported that the Messenger of Allah (Allah bless him and give him peace) used to exhort [his Companions] to pray [at night] during Ramadan without commanding them to observe it as an obligatory act, and say: "He who observed the night prayer in Ramadan because of faith and seeking his reward (from Allah), all his previous sins would be forgiven". (*Sahih Muslim*)

The above-mentioned hadiths prove the fact that there is an additional prayer to be performed during the nights in the month of Ramadan. Furthermore, Allah's Messenger (Allah bless him and give him peace) said: "*Salah* is a good action, so the one who can perform it excessively should do so."^[37] Therefore, the more *salah* in this month the better.

Concluding remarks

It should also be borne in mind that the month of Ramadan is a month in which Muslims generally exert themselves in worship. Hence, this concept of performing twenty *rak'ahs* surely displays more exertion than eight. In fact, those who choose to perform

only eight *rak'ahs* should examine their souls, it should not be that laziness in worship leads them to opt for less *rak'ahs*.

Lastly, the general advice of the *'ulama* is that whatever a person inculcates during Ramadan will remain with him throughout the year that follows. Ramadan serves as an opportunity to recharge one's self if one is lacking spiritually and it also serves as a training platform for the believer. We abstain from the lawful (*halal*) during fasting in the day so that we can acquire the ability to shun the unlawful (*haram*) as well for the rest of the year.

On this note it is worth mentioning that the amount of obligatory *salahs* (including the *Witr*) that are performed daily are twenty. Therefore, one who sacrifices during the blessed month by offering these twenty *rak'ahs* of voluntary *salah* will — by the will of Allah — be punctual the rest of the year in that which is obligatory.

The masses should be cautioned against accepting such innovative views from people who claim to have knowledge but refuse to follow the way of the Companions and the Ummah in general. The issue of *tarawih* is one of many such erroneous views held by these deviant entities. In fact, the masses are advised against arguing with such people. They should rather refer them to the *'ulama*. And Allah knows best.

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1. See *Al-Istidhkar*, vol. 5, pg. 157. [[↔](#)]
 2. See *Tarh al-Tathrib*, part 3, pg. 97. [[↔](#)]
 3. See *Mirqat al-Mafatih*, vol. 3, pg. 194. [[↔](#)]
 4. See *Tuhfat al-Akhyar*. [[↔](#)]
 5. See *Rak'ate Tarawih*, pg. 86-87. [[↔](#)]
 6. *Ibid.*, pg. 6. [[↔](#)]
 7. *Ibid.*, pgs. 1-6. [[↔](#)]
 8. See *Sunan al-Kubra*, vol. 2, pg. 496; *Nasb al-Rayah*, vol. 2, pg. 154. [[↔](#)]
 9. See *Rak'ate Tarawih*, pgs. 63-68. [[↔](#)]

10. See *Sunan al-Kubra*, vol. 2, pgs. 494-495. [↩]
11. See *Rak'ate Tarawih*, pg. 66. [↩]
12. See *Fada'il Shahr Ramadan Ibn Abi Dunya*, pg. 54. [↩]
13. See *Musannaf Ibn Abi Shaybah*, vol. 2, pg. 285. [↩]
14. Ibid. [↩]
15. Ibid. [↩]
16. Ibid. [↩]
17. Ibid. [↩]
18. Ibid. [↩]
19. Ibid. [↩]
20. Ibid. [↩]
21. *Mukhtasar Qiyam al-Layl li 'l-Marwazi*, pg. 202. [↩]
22. Ibid. [↩]
23. *Sunan al-Kubra*, vol. 2, pg. 495. [↩]
24. *Musannaf Ibn Abi Shaybah*, vol. 2, pg. 286; *Bayhaqi*, vol. 2, pg. 496. [↩]
25. There are several examples of this, for further reading on this topic see Shaykh Isma'il ibn Muhammad Al-Ansari's refutation of the view of eight *rak'ahs*. [↩]
26. *Musannaf Ibn Abi Shaybah*, vol. 2, pg. 285-286. [↩]
27. *Sunan al-Tirmidhi*, vol. 1, pg. 99. [↩]
28. *Sunan al-Kubra*, vol. 2, pg. 496; a similar statement was made by 'Allamah Baji in *Sharh al-Muwatta*. [↩]
29. See *Ikhtilafe Ummat*, pg. 498. [↩]
30. Ibid. [↩]
31. See 'Allamah 'Abd al-Hayy Al-Lakhnawi's discussion on this in *Tuhfat al-Akhyar*. [↩]
32. See *Jami' al-'Ulum*, vol. 1, pg. 774. [↩]
33. Above quotes (1-4) were extracted from Hafiz Ibn Rajab Al-Hanbali's *Jami' al-'Ulum wa 'l-Hikam*, vol. 1, pgs. 776-777. [↩]
34. *Radd al-Muhtar*, vol. 2, pg. 493, Dar al-Kutb al-Ilmiyyah ed. [↩]
35. See *Al-Ikhtiyar*, vol. 1, pg. 95. [↩]
36. Shaykh 'Atiyyah Salim, a renowned scholar from the Arab lands, has written a book proving that the practice of performing twenty *rak'ahs* in *tarawih* in the masjid of the

Messenger of Allah (Allah bless him and give him peace) has been taking place for over 1000 years! [↔]

37. *Al-Tabarani* from the narration of Abu Hurayrah; also see *Majma al-Zawa'id*, 2:249. [↔]

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