

The number of *Rak'āts* in *Salāh al-Tarāwīh*.

The aim of this short article is to prove conclusively an issue that has been agreed upon by our scholars for the last fourteen centuries; that Salāh al-Tarāwīh consists of twenty rak'āts. Prophetic narrations, reports and the opinions of our pious ancestors will be highlighted to prove this, and objections raised on the issue will also be answered.

To perform *salāh al-tarāwīh* in the sacred month of Ramadān has been declared *sunna mu'akkada* (stressed practice) by Imam Abu Hanīfa, Imam al-Shāfi'ī and Imam Ahmad (may Allah shower His mercy upon them). Imam Mālik has classified it as *mandūb* (preferred), though he too acknowledges its importance. To perform it in congregation is also a *sunna*, as this has been proven from the Prophet (peace and blessings of Allah be upon him).

The majority of the Companions, Imams and scholars of hadīth and *fiqh* assert that *salāh al-tarāwīh* consists of twenty *rak'āts*. This is proven from the following Prophetic traditions, reports and statements;

*Ibn Abbās (may Allah be pleased with him) reports that:

The Prophet (peace and blessings of Allah be upon him) would perform twenty *rak'āts* in Ramadān, excluding the *witr*.¹

*The actions of Umar (may Allah be pleased with him) later showed that the number of *rak'āts* is twenty in total when he gathered Muslims in his era in the mosque to perform this amount. Imam Mālik reports in his *Muwatta* from Yazīd ibn Rumān that:

The people in the era of Umar ibn al-Khattāb would stand in the month of Ramadān for twenty-three *rak'āts*.²

This figure of twenty-three is inclusive of the three *rak'āts* of *witr* too. Therefore this hadīth also supports the opinion of Imam Abu Hanīfa (may Allah be pleased with him) that *witr* consists of three *rak'āts* and not one.

*Imam Bayhaqī affirms this when he reports in *Ma'rifa* that Sā'ib ibn Yazīd said:

In the era of Umar (may Allah be pleased with him), we would perform twenty *rak'āts* and the *witr*.

¹ This hadith has been recorded by Ibn Abi Shayba, al-Tabarani (in *al-Mu'jam al-kabir*) and Imam Bayhaqī. Imam Bayhaqī added the words 'without congregation.'

² *Muwatta*. Imam Malik, Hadith no. 233. Book; the Call for Salah, Chapter; what has been mentioned regarding the establishing of prayer in Ramadan.

*Twenty *rak'āts* was also the opinion and practice of Alī (may Allah be pleased with him). Imam Bayhaqī reports from Abu Abd al-Rahmān that:

Alī ibn Abī Tālib (may Allah be pleased with him) called the reciters in the month of Ramadān. He ordered one of them to recite five *tarwihāts*³ as a total of twenty, and then Alī would lead the *witr* prayer.

*Imam al-Bukhārī and Imam Muslim both narrate in their *Sahīh* that:

The Prophet (peace and blessings of Allah be upon him) came out in the month of Ramadān on certain nights. They were three separate occasions; the third night, the fifth night and the twenty-seventh night. The people read their prayer with him. He would perform eight *rak'āts* with them, and they would read the remaining *rak'āts* in their homes...

From this authentic report, several points are deduced.

- Firstly, to perform *salāh al-tarāwīh* and to perform it in congregation is the *sunna* of the Messenger of Allah (peace and blessings of Allah be upon him).
- Secondly, the Prophet (peace and blessings of Allah be upon him) never read the full twenty *rak'āts* with them, and this continued during the time of the Companions.
- Thirdly, the Prophet (peace and blessings of Allah be upon him) never made a habit of performing *salāh al-tarāwīh* regularly. This – as we are informed in other narrations – is because the Prophet feared that if he did, it would become incumbent upon his followers.
- Fourthly, the number of *rak'āts* is not as some Muslims believe confined to eight. As the report clearly states, the Companions would complete the remaining *rak'āts* at home.

*Imam al-Tirmidhī writes:

And the men on knowledge have differed in the *rak'āts* of the *qiyām* of Ramadān (*salāh al-tarāwīh*). Some have seen forty-one *rak'āts* with the *witr*s, and this is the opinion of the people of Madīna...and the majority of the people of knowledge act upon what Umar, Alī (may Allah be pleased with him) and others have reported of twenty *rak'āts*. And this is the opinion of Thawrī, Ibn al-Mubārak and Imam al-Shāfi'ī.⁴

*There is further evidence to suggest that *salāh al-tarāwīh* is twenty *rak'āts*. We know that the Companions would recite approximately one *rukū* of the Qur'ān in every *rak'at* of *salāh al-tarāwīh* and would aim to finish the entire Qur'ān on the twenty-seventh night of Ramadān. If performing eight *rak'āts* was their practice, then they could only complete the entire Qur'ān if they were 216 *rukūs* in the Qur'ān. But the Qur'ān consists of about 540 *rukūs*.

³ The word *tarāwīh* and *tarwihāt* is the plural of *tarwīha*. In Arabic, this means 'rest', since Muslims are asked to rest after every four *rak'āts*.

⁴ *Sunan al-Tirmidhi*. Book of Sawm; Chapter; what has been mentioned regarding the qiyam of Ramadan. These are al-Tirmidhi's notes after mentioning hadith no. 743.

*From a grammatical perspective, *salāh al-tarāwīh* is twenty *rak'ats*. *Tarāwīh* (and *Tarwīhāt*) is the plural of *tarwīha*. *Tarwīha* means 'rest'; this is because after every four *rak'ats* Muslims rest for a moment. If *salāh al-tarāwīh* consisted of eight *rak'ats* then there would only be two 'rests', after four *rak'ats* and after eight *rak'ats*. This would then mean the name of the prayer would be *salāh al-tarwīhatayn* (the prayer of two rests), not *salāh al-tarāwīh* (the prayer of many rests). When we rightly assume *salāh al-tarāwīh* is twenty *rak'ats*, then this means there are five rests; and in Arabic the plural is used for three items or more.

Objection.

Imam al-Bukhārī reports in his *Sahīh* that that Aisha (may Allah be pleased with her) was asked about the Prayers of the Messenger in the month of Ramadān. She replied:

‘The Prophet did not exceed more than eleven *rak'ats* in and outside Ramadān...’⁵

This seemingly suggests that *salāh al-tarāwīh* is eight *rak'ats* (with the other three for *witr*).

The answer to this objection is that the hadīth is in fact about the *tahajjud* prayers of the Messenger, not *salāh al-tarāwīh*. The proof is in the text when Aisha said ‘in and outside Ramadān...’ *Salāh al-tarāwīh* is only recited in Ramadān, *tahajjud* can be performed throughout the year.

To conclude, to assume *salāh al-tarāwīh* as eight *rak'ats*, one has to ignore the practice of the Prophet, the actions of the Companions and the statements from our great Imams and scholars. Throughout the Muslim world – including in the Grand Mosques of Makka and Madina – Muslims have rightly performed twenty *rak'ats*. We pray to Allah Almighty that He continues to shower His guidance upon the Muslims in this matter, *Ameen*.

Dr. Hafiz Ather Hussain al-Azhari
@hafiz_ather

BA Principles of Theology, al-Azhar University, Cairo, Egypt.
MA Arabic and Islamic Studies, Dar al-Ulum Muhammadia Ghawsia, Bhera, Pakistan.
BA Political Science, MPhil Theology & PhD Theology, University of Birmingham.

⁵ *Sahih al-Bukhari*. Book; *Salah al-Tarawih*; Chapter; The superiority of standing in prayer in Ramadan. Hadith no. 1874.