

Tarāwīh Q&A

In just a few days we'll be welcoming the blessed month of Ramadān; the month of the Qur'ān, worship, fasting, forgiveness, mercy, charity, generosity and supplication. It's an opportunity for us to refocus, renew our faith and strengthen our relationship with Allah ﷻ. We're going to be spending our days fasting and our nights praying. There's a certain sense of energy and excitement we can see and feel in our mosques.

One of the special acts of worship we engage in this month is tarāwīh prayer. This extra prayer offers us the opportunity to have all our previous sins forgiven. There are some differences of opinion regarding the details of tarāwīh which have, unfortunately, led to arguments, debates and unnecessary division. I thought it would be a good idea to answer a few commonly asked questions regarding these details in preparation for this month so that we can focus on what's important.

1) Do I have to pray tarāwīh?

In the absolute most technical sense, no you don't *have* to pray tarāwīh because it's not an obligation. However, by not praying you will be depriving yourself of unimaginable blessings, rewards, mercy and forgiveness. According to some scholars if a person were to intentionally miss tarāwīh every single night out of laziness and aversion then they could potentially be sinful.

Jurists from all four schools of thought agree that tarāwīh prayer is a *Sunnah* for both men and women. According to the Hanafis, Hanbalis and some Mālikis it's an emphasized *Sunnah*. The Prophet ﷺ established it as a practice and encouraged his companions to do so as well. 'Abd Al-Rahmān ibn 'Awf narrated that the Prophet ﷺ said, "Allah has made fasting the month of Ramadān obligatory upon you and I have made standing in prayer during its nights a practice."¹ Abu Hurairah narrated that the Prophet ﷺ would encourage his companions to stand in prayer at night without commanding them to do so. He would say, "Whoever stands in

¹ Al-Nasā'i, k. *al-siyām*

prayer at night during Ramadān with faith and expecting reward, his previous sins will be forgiven.”² The commentators on this narration mention that it’s referring to tarāwīh prayer.

The Prophet ﷺ himself led his companions in tarāwīh for a few nights and then left it out of fear of it becoming an obligation upon them. ‘Aisha narrated, “The Prophet ﷺ prayed in the masjid and many people prayed with him. The next day he did the same and more people prayed with him. Then the people gathered on the third night but the Prophet ﷺ didn’t come out to pray. In the morning he said, ‘I saw what you did and nothing prevented me from coming out to you except that I feared that this prayer would be made obligatory upon you.’ And that happened in the month of Ramadan.”³ From other narrations we learn that the Prophet ﷺ led his companions in tarāwīh prayer on the 23rd, 25th and 27th nights of Ramadān.

In summary, you should definitely make a habit of praying tarāwīh as it’s an established *Sunnah* from the Prophet ﷺ and a source of blessings, reward and forgiveness.

2) How many units of prayer is tarāwīh? Is it 8 or 20? Does it matter?

This has been a hotly debated topic amongst scholars especially in recent times. At the beginning of this discussion it’s important to understand that there are no authentic narrations from the Prophet ﷺ that explicitly mention how many units he performed when he led his companions in tarāwīh. There is an extremely weak report from ibn ‘Abbas (ra) that the Prophet ﷺ prayed 20 units, but since it’s extremely weak it can’t be used as a proof. What we do know for sure is that he prayed it in congregation for a few nights and then stopped out of fear that it may become obligatory upon us. After that the prayer continued to be performed individually or in small groups until the time of ‘Umar (ra).

‘Umar (ra) started the practice of praying together in a large congregation behind one imām. ‘Abd Al-Rahmān ibn ‘Abd Al-Qāri narrated: “One night during Ramadan I went with ‘Umar (ra) to the masjid and people were praying in different groups. Some were praying by themselves and others were praying in small groups. ‘Umar (ra) said, ‘I think it would be better

² Al-Bukhāri, k. *al-īmān*, b. *tatawu’ qiyām ramadān min al-īmān*

³ Bukhāri, k. *al-tahajjud*, b. *tahrīd al-nabiy ﷺ ‘ala salah al-layl wa al-nawāfil min ghayri ijāb*

if I gathered them under one imām.’ So he appointed Ubay ibn Ka’b as the imām for prayer. I went out with him on another night and all the people were praying behind him and he said, ‘What a good new way this is.’”⁴

Just as clarification this isn’t something that ‘Umar (ra) came up with by himself. Rather he had some sort of proof or evidence for doing so. Once Abu Yūsuf (r) asked his teacher Imām Abu Hanīfa (r) about tarāwīh and ‘Umar’s decision. He replied, “Tarāwīh is a Sunnah Mu’akkadah and ‘Umar (ra) didn’t make this up himself and he was not an innovator. He only enjoined it based upon some proof he had from the time of the Prophet ﷺ. ‘Umar (ra) established this practice and gathered the people behind Ubay ibn Ka’b (ra) while there were a number of Companions still present from both the Muhājirūn and the Ansār and none of them objected. Rather they helped and assisted.”

It’s 20 Units!

Now having said that, the vast majority of scholars amongst the four schools of thought, the Hanafis, Shafis, Malikis and Hanbalis, are of the opinion that tarāwīh prayer is 20 units. There’s another opinion from Imām Mālik that states tarāwīh is 36 units. The reason behind this opinion is that it was the practice of the people of Makkah to perform tawāf after every four units of tarāwīh. Since the people of Madinah couldn’t perform tawāf they would pray an extra four units. Imām Nāfi’ (r) states, “I never found any one performing less than 39 units (the 3 extra being witr).” He lived in Madinah for most of his life and passed away in the year 117. Imām Shāfi’ī (r) also writes, “I observed the people performing 39 units in Madinah and 23 in Makkah.” So we see that the bare minimum amongst the four schools of thought is 20 units.

They base this off the narrations that mention ‘Umar (ra) gathered the people behind one imām upon 20 units. The scholars from all four schools claim that this counts as a consensus since none of the companions of that time opposed his decision. Imām Mālik (r) narrated from Yazīd ibn Rumān who said, “The people used to pray 23 units during the time of

⁴ Mālik, k. *al-salah fī ramadān*

‘Umar (ra).”⁵ Similarly, Sā’ib ibn Yazīd (ra) narrates that the people used to pray 20 units in the month of Ramadan during the time of ‘Umar (ra). Imām Al-Kāsāni the famous Hanafi jurist writes, “‘Umar (ra) gathered the companions of the Messenger of Allah ﷺ in the month of Ramadān behind Ubay ibn Ka’b (ra) and he led them in 20 units of prayer. No one objected so it’s understood to be a consensus of the companions upon this.”⁶ Several other scholars from across the four schools have similar statements.

No, it’s 8 units!

There is also a minority of scholars who are of the opinion that tarāwīh is 8 units. They base this position primarily on two narrations. The first is from Abu Salama who narrated that he asked ‘A’isha (ra) regarding the prayer of the Messenger ﷺ during Ramadān. She explained, “The Messenger of Allah ﷺ would not perform more than eleven units (8 for tarāwīh and 3 for witr), neither in Ramadān nor out of it. He would perform four units and don’t ask about their beauty and length, followed by another four, and don’t ask about their beauty and length, after which he would perform three [units] of witr.”⁷

The second is a narration that mentions ‘Umar (ra) gathered the companions upon 8 units, not 20, as mentioned above. Imām Mālik (r) narrated from Al-Sā’ib ibn Yāzīd who said, “‘Umar (ra) appointed Ubay ibn Ka’b and Tamīm Al-Dāri (ra) to lead the people in eleven units (8 for tarāwīh and 3 for witr). The reciter would recite for a long time so much so that we would lean on our staffs from having stood so long. And we would not leave until the approach of dawn.”⁸

There is other evidence as well as arguments used to prove the position of tarāwīh prayer being 8 units but the above is sufficient for the purpose of this article.

So who’s right?

⁵ Mālik, *k. al-salah fī ramadān*

⁶ Kāsāni, *badā’i al-sanā’i*

⁷ Bukhāri, *k. salah al-tarāwīh, b. fadl man qāma ramadān*

⁸ Mālik, *k. al-salah fī ramadān*

The proponents of both positions have their respective evidences, proofs, arguments and counter-arguments, which are beyond the scope of this article. Those who hold the opinion of 20 units have responses and counter-arguments to the evidence used by those who believe it's 8 units and vice-a-versa.

Based on the evidence and the strength of the arguments, I follow the opinion that tarāwīh prayer is 20 units; however, I do recognize that this is an issue in which there is a valid difference of opinion. This is an issue in which the jurists have disagreed upon based on their understanding of the various textual evidences. Even the Hanafi jurist Al-Kamāl ibn Al-Humām (r) famously disagreed with the position of his own school of thought and argued that 8 units of tarāwīh are Sunnah and the extra 12 are simply recommended.⁹ 'Allāmah Al-Suyūti (r) writes, "The scholars have differed on the number of units [in tarāwīh]. If it had been established through the practice of the Messenger of Allah ﷺ, they would not have differed."¹⁰ Similarly Ibn Taymiyyah (r) writes, "Whoever assumes there is a fixed number of units reported from the Messenger of Allah ﷺ concerning tarāwīh, and does not accept any greater or lesser number, has erred."¹¹

Conclusion

Both positions are valid and trained scholars reserve the right to hold the opinion they feel is stronger. The average person should follow the opinion of a local scholar or imām whose knowledge and piety they trust. This isn't an issue that should lead to heated arguments and feelings of ill-will before and during the blessed month of Ramadān. Without a doubt scholars can have academic discussions and passionate exchanges regarding the issue but it should never lead towards enmity or disunity. Rather what is important is that we should try our best to pray tarāwīh on a regular and consistent basis, whether we're praying 8 units, 20 units or something in between.

⁹ Ibn al-Humām, *fath al-qadīr*

¹⁰ Al-Suyūti, *Al-Masābīh*

¹¹ Ibn Taymiyyah, *Majmū' Al-Fatāwa*

If your local masjid prays 8 and you follow the opinion that it should be 20 don't create a scene, argue, dispute and start accusing the imām of being wrong or following a weak opinion. Simply pray the 8 and complete the remaining 12 on your own or go to another mosque that prays 20. Similarly, if you're local masjid prays 20 those who want to pray 8 can pray 8 and leave and those who want to pray 20 can stay and complete them. Unity and mutual love amongst the Muslim community is an obligation; whereas, praying tarāwīh is Sunnah.

Personally when it comes to communal issues I feel that the Imām and the leadership should try to avoid differences as much as possible and try to be all-inclusive. There's a famous saying that avoiding differences is recommended.¹² Our mosques can perhaps accommodate both by offering 20 units.

Another point to consider when discussing communal issues is that the Imām and leadership should give consideration to the practical realities of the community and decide based on what the community is able to do. Each masjid should choose what works best for their community, as long as what they're choosing is a valid recognized position. This sentiment was captured by Ibn Taymiyyah (r) when he wrote, "What is best differs according to the different conditions of the congregation. If they have the ability to stand for long periods of time, then it's better for them to pray 10 units and 3 after it as the Prophet ﷺ used to pray himself in Ramadān and outside of Ramadān. If they are unable to stand for a long period of time then 20 units is better. That is what most Muslims practice."¹³

3) Can I pray behind an Imām who reads from a copy of the mushaf during tarāwīh?

The answer is a resounding YES! According to the Shafis, Malikis and Hanbalis it is permissible for the Imām to recite from the mushaf while praying voluntary prayers, including tarāwīh. According to the Hanafis it is impermissible for the imām to recite from a copy of the mushaf and doing so will invalidate the prayer. However, the two students of Imām Abu Hanīfah (r), Abu Yūsuf and Muhammad (r), disagreed with their teacher and were of the opinion that it doesn't invalidate the prayer but is still disliked.

¹² الخروج عن الخلاف مستحب

¹³ Ibn Taymiyyah, *Majmu' al-fatāwa*

The issue of praying behind someone who follows a different school of thought has been discussed in great detail by the jurists of the past. They concluded that it is absolutely permissible for someone to pray behind an imām that follows a different school of thought or opinion than them that would lead to differences in the prayer. This permissibility is absolute without any dislike whatsoever. Why wouldn't it be when the Prophet ﷺ told us, "The Imām has been appointed so that he should be followed, so bow down when he bows down, and rise up when he rises up."¹⁴ During prayer what is given consideration is the opinion of the imām not the opinion of the follower. So if the imām is of the opinion that reading from the mushaf in tarāwīh doesn't invalidate the prayer then your prayer behind him will be perfectly valid. The same thing applies for witr, or praying behind a Shafi who bled and didn't make wudhu and a whole host of other issues.

Mowlāna Anwaw Shāh Al-Kashmīri (r) writes in his gloss on Tirmidhi, "The scholars of the past have unanimously agreed on the permissibility of praying behind someone of a different school of thought through their actions. They used to differ on secondary issues but would still pray behind one another without any objection."

This is an extremely important issue especially for the Muslim community in America which is extremely diverse. Our Mosques aren't monolithic. Our congregations are made up of Muslims from all over the world, immigrants, children of immigrants and locals who follow different schools of thought. Our Imāms and scholars are also from very diverse backgrounds. The imām may adhere to the Shafi school of thought but his congregation is made up of Hanafis, Malikis, Hanbalis, those who don't adhere to one school of thought and others who don't really care. Unity, cohesion, mutual love, respect and honor are far more important than a person's individual opinions.

4) Can I follow along in the mushaf while praying tarāwīh behind the Imām?

This is a very common practice seen in our Mosques. According to the Malikis, Shafis and Hanbalis it is permissible for the Imām to recite from the mushaf while leading a

¹⁴ Muslim, *k. al-salah, b. l'timām al-ma'mūm bi al-imām*

congregation in voluntary prayers, including tarāwīh, or for one praying voluntary prayers individually. I'm unaware of any discussions in classical books of jurisprudence regarding the permissibility of following along in the mushaf behind the imām.

The purpose of praying behind the imām is to listen to the Qur'ān not to recite it. Allah ﷻ tells us in Surah Al-'Arāf, "So when the Qur'an is recited, then listen to it and pay attention that you may receive mercy."¹⁵ Additionally excessive movement in prayer is something that is disliked.

¹⁵ 7:204