

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 Ramadhān has been declared *Sunna Mu'akkada* (stressed practice) by Imam Abū Hanīfa, Imam Shāfi'i and Imam Ahmad (may Allah shower His mercy upon them). Imam Mālik has classified it as *Mandub* (preferred), though he too acknowledges its importance. To perform it in congregation is also a *Sunna*, as this has been proven from the Prophet ﷺ.¹

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;

1. Ibn Abbās ؓ reports that:

‘The Prophet ﷺ would perform twenty Rak'āts in Ramadhān, excluding the Witr.’²

2. The actions of Umar ؓ 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 Ramadhān for twenty-three Rak'āts.’³

This figure of twenty-three is inclusive of the three Rak'āts of Witr too. Therefore this Hadīth also supports the opinion of Imam Abū Hanīfa (may Allah be pleased with him) that Witr consists of three Rak'āts and not one.

¹ Abu Huraira (may Allah be pleased with him) reports that the Messenger of Allah came once as some people were performing Salah in the corner of the mosque. He said, ‘who are these?’ It was said, ‘these are the people who do not know the Qur'an; Ubaiyy ibn Ka'b is performing Salah and they are reading with him.’ The Prophet (peace and blessings of Allah be upon him) said, ‘they have done correctly, and great is that what they have done.’ (Abu Daud, Ibn Khuzaima and al-Baihaqi; Cited in *al-Tasrih fi Salah al-Tarawih*. Sheikh al-Islam Dr. Muhammad Tahir al-Qadiri, p. 20. Minhaj al-Quran Publications, Lahore, 2006).

² This Hadith has been recorded by Ibn Abū Shaiba, Tabrani (in *al-Mujam al-Kabir*) and Imam Baihaqi. Imam Baihaqi added at words ‘without congregation.’

³ *Muwatta*. Imam Malik, Hadith no. 233. Book; the Call for Salah, Chapter; what has been mentioned regarding the establishing of prayer in Ramadhan.

3. Imam Abd al-Razzāq from Sā'ib ibn Yazīd that:

‘We used to conclude the [Tarāwīh] prayers in the era of Umar ؓ as the time of Fajr approached. The prayers in his era were twenty-three Rak'āts.’⁴

4. Twenty Rak'āts was also the opinion and practice of Alī ؓ. Imam Baihaqī reports from Abū Abd al-Rahmān that:

‘Alī ibn Abū Tālib ؓ called the reciters in the month of Ramadhān. He ordered one of them to recite five *Tarwīhāts*⁵ as a total of twenty, and then Alī would lead the Witr prayer.’

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

‘The Prophet ﷺ came out in the month of Ramadhān 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 ﷺ.
- Secondly, the Prophet ﷺ never read the full twenty Rak'āts with them, and this continued during the time of the Companions.
- Thirdly, the Prophet ﷺ 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.

6. Imam al-Tirmidhī writes:

‘And the men on knowledge have differed in the Rak'āts of the *Qiyām* of Ramadhān (*Salat al-Tarāwīh*). Some have seen forty-one Rak'āts with the Witr, 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 them) and others have reported of twenty Rak'āts. And this is the opinion of Thawrī, Ibn al-Mubārak and Imam al-Shāfi'ī.’⁶

*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

⁴ Cited in *al-Tasrih fi Salah al-Tarawih*. Sheikh al-Islam Dr. Muhammad Tahir al-Qadiri, p. 27. Minhaj al-Quran Publications, Lahore, 2006.

⁵ The word *Tarawih* and *Tarveehaat* is the plural of *Tarviha*. In Arabic, this means ‘rest’, since Muslims are asked to rest after every four Rak'āts.

⁶ *Sunan al-Tirmidhi*. Book of Sawm; Chapter; what has been mentioned regarding the Qiyam of Ramadhan. These are al-Tirmidhi's notes after mentioning Hadith no. 743.

twenty-seventh night of Ramadhān. 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.

7. From a lingual perspective, Salāh al-Tarāwīh is twenty Rak'āts. Tarāwīh (and Tarwīhāt) is the plural of Tarvīha. Tarvīha means 'rest'; this is because after every four Rak'āts Muslims rest for a moment. If Salāh al-Tarāwīh consisted of eight Rak'āts then there would only be two 'Tarvīhas', after four Rak'āts and after eight Rak'āts. This would then mean the name of the prayer would be Salāh al-Tarvīhatain (the prayer of two rests), not Salāh al-Tarāwīh (the prayer of many rests). When we rightly assume Salāh al-Tarāwīh is twenty Rak'āts, 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 Ramadhān. She replied:

‘The Prophet did not exceed more than eleven Rak'āts in and outside Ramadhān...’⁷

This seemingly suggests that Salāh al-Tarāwīh is eight Rak'āts (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 Ramadhan...’ Salāh al-Tarāwīh is only recited in Ramadhān, Tahajjud can be performed throughout the year.

Ibn Taymiyya agrees that Salāh al-Tarāwīh consists of twenty Rak'āts. He writes in *al-Fatāwa*:

‘It is proven that Ubaiyy ibn Ka'b would stand for twenty Rak'āts in Ramadhān and would perform three Witr. Many from the scholars see this as the Sunna, since it happened in the presence of the Muhājirs and Ansār, and none objected to it.’⁸

Also, Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahhāb al-Najdī was asked a question on this matter. He replied that the correct number is twenty Rak'āts, because this was the practice of Umar ؓ when he ordered Ubaiyy ibn Ka'b to lead the people in prayer.⁹

⁷ *Sahīh al-Bukhari*. Book; Salah al-Tarawih; Chapter; The superiority of standing in prayer in Ramadhan. Hadith no. 1874.

⁸ Cited in *al-Tasrih fi Salah al-Tarawih*. Sheikh al-Islam Dr. Muhammad Tahir al-Qadiri, p. 34. Minhaj al-Quran Publications, Lahore, 2006.

⁹ Cited in *al-Tasrih fi Salah al-Tarawih*. Sheikh al-Islam Dr. Muhammad Tahir al-Qadiri, p. 34. Minhaj al-Quran Publications, Lahore, 2006.

To conclude, to assume Salāh al-Tarāwīh as eight Rak'āts, 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 Mecca and Madina – Muslims have rightly performed twenty Rak'āts. We pray to Allah Almighty that He continues to shower His guidance upon the Muslims in this matter. Amīn.

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