82152 - How Many Rak`ahs Was Tarawih in Umar’s Time?

the question

What is narrated from `Umar (may Allah be pleased with him) is that he ordered that Tarawih prayer should be twenty Rak`ahs. Is that saheeh or da’eef? Or is there no basis for it?.

Summary of answer

During the time of `Umar ibn Al-Khattab, the Tarawih prayer was commonly performed in 20 Rak`ahs, with some narrations mentioning 21 or 23 including Witr. However, the number of Rak`ahs in Tarawih remains flexible, as there is no fixed limit in Islamic teachings.

Detailed answer

Praise be to Allah.

Reports on Umar ibn Al-Khattab’s Tarawih Prayer

The report that `Umar ibn Al-Khattab ordered that Tarawih prayer should be twenty Rak`ahs came from four of the Successors. These are their reports:

1. It was narrated that As-Sa’ib ibn Yazid said: `Umar ibn Al-Khattab (may Allah be pleased with him) gathered the people together in Ramadan to be led by Ubayy ibn Ka`b and Tamim Ad-Dari in praying twenty-one Rak`ahs, and they used to recite hundreds of verses, and they dispersed before dawn broke.

A number of narrators narrated it from As-Sa’ib, some of whom mentioned twenty Rak`ahs or twenty-one or twenty-three. They were:

- Muhammad ibn Yusuf, the son of the sister of As-Sa’ib, from As-Sa’ib, as was narrated by `Abd Ar-Razzaq in Al-Musannaf (4/260) from the report of Dawud ibn Qays and others.

- Yazid ibn Khusayfah. This was narrated by Ibn Al-Majd in Al-Musnad (1/413), and via him by Al-Bayhaqi in As-Sunan (2/496).
- Al-Harith ibn `Abd Ar-Rahman ibn Abu Dhubab. This was narrated by `Abd Ar-Razzaq in Al-Musannaf (4/261).

These reports are authentic reports narrated by trustworthy narrators from As-Sa'ib ibn Yazid. They mention twenty Rak`ahs at the time of `Umar ibn Al-Khattab (may Allah be pleased with him). The extra amount mentioned – twenty-one or twenty-three, refers to Tarawih plus Witr.

1. It was narrated that Yazid ibn Ruman said: At the time of `Umar ibn Al-Khattab the people used to pray twenty-three Rak`ahs of Qiyam in Ramadan .

This was narrated from him by Malik in Al-Muwatta' (1/115). An-Nawawi said in Al-Majmu` (4/33): It is Mursal, because Yazid ibn Ruman did not live at the same time as `Umar. (End quote)

1. It was narrated from Yahya ibn Sa`id Al-Qattan that `Umar ibn Al-Khattab (may Allah be pleased with him) ordered a man to lead them in twenty Rak`ahs of prayer. This was narrated by Ibn Abu Shaybah in Al-Musannaf (2/163) from Waki` from Malik. But Yahya ibn Sa`id did not live at the same time as `Umar.
2. It was narrated that `Abd Al-`Aziz ibn Rafi` said: Ubayy ibn Ka'b used to lead the people in praying twenty Rak`ahs during Ramadan in Madinah, and he would pray Witr with three Rak`ahs.

This was narrated by Ibn Abu Shaybah in Al-Musannaf (2/163).

From all these reports it is clear that twenty Rak`ahs was the way that Tarawih was usually done at the time of `Umar ibn Al-Khattab (may Allah be pleased with him). A matter such as Tarawih prayer is something that is well known among all people, and is transmitted from one generation to another.

The report of Yazid ibn Ruman and Yahya Al-Qattan is to be taken into account even if they did not live at the same time as `Umar, because undoubtedly they learned it from a number of people

who had been alive at the time of `Umar, and this is something that does not need and chain of narration, rather all the people of Madinah are its chain of narration.

Imam At-Tirmidhi (may Allah have mercy on him) said in his Sunan (3/169):

Most of the scholars are of the view that what is narrated from `Umar, `Ali and other companions of the Prophet (peace and blessings of Allah be upon him) is twenty Rak`ahs. This is the view of Ath-Thawri, Ibn Al-Mubarak and Ash-Shafi`i.

Ash-Shafi`i (may Allah have mercy on him) said: This is what I learned in our land, in Makkah they pray twenty Rak`ahs.

Ibn `Abd Al-Barr (may Allah have mercy on him) said in Al-Istidhkar (2/69):

Twenty Rak`ahs was narrated from `Ali, Shatir ibn Shakl, Ibn Abu Mulaykah, Al-Harith Al-Hamadani and Abu Al-Bakhtari. It is the view of the majority of scholars and it is the view of the Kufis, the Shafi`is and most of the jurists. It was narrated in authentic reports from Ubayy ibn Ka`b, and there was no difference of opinion among the Companions. `Ata' said: I grew up at a time when the people prayed twenty-three Rak`ahs including Witr. (See that in Musannaf Ibn Abu Shaybah, 2/163)

Ibn Taymiyah (may Allah have mercy on him) said in Majmu` Al-Fatawa (23/112):

It is proven that Ubayy ibn Ka`b used to lead the people in praying twenty Rak`ahs in Qiyam in Ramadan, and he used to pray Witr with three Rak`ahs. Many scholars think that this is the Sunnah, because he established that among the Muhajirin and Ansar and no one objected to that. Others regarded it as recommended to pray thirty-nine Rak`ahs, based on the fact that this was the practice of the people of Madinah in the past. (End quote)

With regard to what it says in the report of Imam Malik, Yahya Al-Qattan and others from Muhammad ibn Yusuf from As-Sa'ib ibn Yazid in Al-Muwatta' (1/115) and in Musannaf Ibn Abu Shaybah (2/162) "eleven Rak`ahs" – this is to be understood as referring to what was done at first, then it was reduced after that, then `Umar increased the number to twenty to make the recitation

in Qiyam easier for the people.

Ibn `Abd Al-Barr (may Allah have mercy on him) said in Al-Istidhkar (2/68):

It may be understood as meaning that at first Qiyam at the time of `Umar was eleven Rak`ahs, then he reduced the length of Qiyam for them and made it twenty-one Rak`ahs, to make the recitation lighter for them and so that they would bow and prostrate more. But it seems most likely to me that the report about eleven Rak`ahs is a mistake. And Allah knows best. (End quote)

Ibn Taymiyah (may Allah have mercy on him) said in Majmu` Al-Fatawa (23/113):

When Ubayy ibn Ka`b led them in praying Qiyam in a single congregation, he could not make them stand for too long, so he increased the number of Rak`ahs to make up for the long standing. So they doubled the number of Rak`ahs. He used to pray eleven or thirteen Rak`ahs of Qiyam Al-Layl, then it seems that after that the people of Madinah found it difficult to stand for so long during the recitation, so they increased the number of Rak`ahs until it reached thirty-nine. (End quote)

Flexibility in the Number of Tarawih Rak`ahs

Night prayers are broad in scope, and there is no set number. Whoever wants to pray eleven Rak`ahs may do so, and whoever wants to pray more or less than that may do so. The same applies to Tarawih prayers in Ramadan .

Ibn Taymiyah (may Allah have mercy on him) said in Majmu` Al-Fatawa (23/113):

One group said that it is proven in Al-Bukhari from `Aishah that the Prophet did not pray more than thirteen Rak`ahs in Ramadan or at any other time, and some people were uncertain about this report, because they thought that it contradicted the authentic Hadith and because of the practice of the Rightly-Guided Caliphs and the actions of the Muslims.

But the correct view is that all of that is good, as was stated by Imam Ahmad (may Allah have mercy on him). There is no set number of Rak`ahs for Qiyam during Ramadan, because the

Prophet (peace and blessings of Allah be upon him) did not set a number. (End quote)

Shaykh Ibn Baz (may Allah have mercy on him) said in Majmu` Al-Fatawa (11/322):

It is proven that `Umar (may Allah be pleased with him) told the one whom he appointed among the Companions to pray eleven Rak`ahs, and it is proven that they prayed twenty-three Rak`ahs based on his command. This indicates that the matter is broad in scope and that the matter was flexible according to the Companions. That is also indicated by the words of the Prophet (peace and blessings of Allah be upon him): “The night prayers are two by two.” (End quote)

And Allah knows best.