



SINCE 1979

MOONSIGHTING IN NEW ZEALAND **ANSWERS TO SOME COMMON QUESTIONS**

Background

It is an immense Mercy and Blessing of Allah SWT that the Muslim Ummah in New Zealand is united in its celebration of the two Eids – with all of us following the same moonsighting information and celebrating on the same day, even if some might have reservations on a personal level.

Every year, we receive some questions on the process for the decision-making on the dates for the two Eids. Therefore, we would like to explain the process that we use and answer the frequently asked questions.

***NOTE:** We have avoided technical phrases and details. It is a brief summary that could be understood by all readers. There are many exceptions which could not be covered here.*

1. Moonsighting – What criteria do we use to determine the start of a new month?

There are two major schools of thought in relation to moonsighting:

- Calculation– under this school of thought, a new month is announced through calculation based on the birth of the moon.
- Actual sighting (Ru'yah) – under this school of thought, a new month is announced when someone actually sights the moon with the naked eye.

In New Zealand we have opted for the **actual** sighting of the new moon/crescent (*hilal*), based on our research and discussions with many scholars and religious bodies in other countries. Our process is backed and supported by scientific knowledge to ensure that it is indeed possible for someone to have sighted the moon with the naked eye. This provides a balance between the Sunnah of seeing the moon, complemented with a wider understanding provided by our scientific knowledge of the moon and its movements.

2. Who makes the decision?

The Hilal Committee of FIANZ is responsible for the decision making and announcing the sighting of the new moon in New Zealand. This Committee consists of our religious leaders (Ulema), a scientist, an engineer and a technology specialist.





SINCE 1979

Our process starts with us gathering data, from within New Zealand and overseas, and providing information on visibility to help anyone looking for the new moon. The information includes:

- ✓ When a new moon is born,
- ✓ Its position in the sky in relation to sun at sunset,
- ✓ The best time to sight given the season we are in and the times of sunset and moonset for different cities in New Zealand.

This knowledge provides information on *Imkaan-e-Ru'yah*, that is, it gives a good indication of whether or not it is possible to sight the new moon with the naked eye. If someone claims to have sighted the new moon, the Hilal Committee enquires about the time of sighting, position of the moon and other relevant information.

3. How does the Hilal Committee decide?

The Hilal Committee sends an advance notice to all the Local Associations advising the 29th day of the lunar month and requests that Muslims in their area make every effort to look for the new moon as this is the sunnah of our beloved Prophet (SAW). On that evening the FIANZ office is manned for receiving phone calls and the Chairman of the Ulema Board usually sits in one of the Masjids along with some members of the Hilal Committee. Other members of the Committee are also on standby, should a wider discussion be needed.

The most important visibility criteria for determining whether a new moon can be sighted are its angular displacement from the sun (elongation) and the height of the moon at sunset (altitude). The clearest indication of elongation probably comes from the time lag between the sunset and moonset, that is how long the moon is present on the horizon after the sun has set. For this reason, the age of the new moon at sunset is a commonly used criterion by most Muslims, but not as helpful to us during summer months because of the angle of the Earth in mid-summer and NZ's position, so the altitude of the moon can be very low.

Below are some possible scenarios; *the age of new moon being approximates rather than absolute numbers.*

- In cases where the new moon is **over 20 hours old** at sunset, it is quite likely to be visible, though dictated by several factors.

In most years the weather is conducive to sighting at least in some parts of New Zealand. The Hilal Committee makes a concerted effort to check with various centres and consult with Muslims, it also receives reports from throughout the country, all within a very





SINCE 1979

limited timeframe. If no sighting is reported from anywhere in New Zealand, the Committee looks towards Fiji, and if required the neighbouring Pacific countries like Vanuatu, Tonga, Western Samoa for their close alignment with New Zealand time zone. If sighting there is confirmed by the local Muslim organisation, the Hilal Committee accepts that information.

For a moon this old, in many cases there is a general sighting around the country and the Committee has an easy decision. However, it is known for a moon even 30 hours old not to be visible in some years. So, we take the numbers as estimations only which usually do come true, with some exceptions.

- If the new moon is **under 12 to 14 hours old**, it is not likely to be visible.

If a sighting is reported in such a case, it is viewed with great reservation and examined extensively by the Committee. It often turns out to be wrong information or the viewer confusing another object for the new moon. This is where the background information comes to assistance. Once again there is a record or two of new moon being sighted when only 9 or 10 hours old!

- The real problem comes when the new moon is **between 14 to 20 hours old** and other conditions are positive for sighting,

In such instances, the sighting is only in limited areas, or even a single location in New Zealand or Fiji. This necessitates detailed investigation and interview of claimants and sometimes a vigorous discussion within the committee. Although some individuals may have different views, the decision made by the Hilal Committee is accepted by the New Zealand ummah without dissension, *Alhamdu Lillah*, as it is backed by experts from various disciplines.

4. Why the long delay in announcement?

One criticism often faced by the Hilal Committee is why it often takes so long to make and announce the decision? Very simple! Individuals get information from a single source from Fiji or within New Zealand who is often a relative or a friend. They pass on the information, it spreads within minutes and becomes an old story, especially in today's age of social media. But then they are not answerable or liable for any harm/damage to the community. The Hilal Committee is! The Committee must verify the sighting to their





SINCE 1979

satisfaction or wait to hear from another organisation like Fiji Muslim League who must verify themselves first. This takes time and often there are unavoidable delays like someone's phone being busy for 5 minutes! It is the firm intent of the Hilal Committee though to announce the decision by *Ishaa salat* time. AND this is one of the practical reasons why the Hilal Committee restricts to receiving information ONLY from the same time zone.

5. Why don't we accept sighting of countries other than South Pacific?

A fair question, but then which one? Australia, Malaysia, Saudi Arabia? With Muslims from 35 odd countries praying in Hamilton masjid for example, everyone has their favourite! In addition to religious considerations, there are obvious practical difficulties. Even if we follow our close neighbour Australia, it will be past midnight before Muslims in Perth announce sighting of the new moon. How many Muslims would like to hear the decision at that hour?

So, the Hilal Committee limits its enquiries only to countries in South Pacific which are in the same or similar time zone. Experience tells us that if the new moon is likely to be sighted in New Zealand, these other countries would have a similar probability and are very likely to sight it there. The reasons become more obvious in the section below.

6. Why do we normally celebrate a day after other countries?

Yes, we usually do and the reason is simple. We are dependent on the system designed and controlled by Allah SWT. Both the sun and moon arise in the East and travel slowly toward West, every day.

New Zealand is the first one to see the sun in the world (although Fiji wouldn't agree), so we should also be the first one to see the moon. This is true for almost every day of the moon cycle, but not the first day. This is because the visibility of the new moon (crescent) is governed by the time of its birth or for practical purposes, its age at sunset.

For example, if the new moon was born early to mid-morning New Zealand time, it may be 10 -14 hours old at sun set/*Maghrib* time here, which means it would probably not be visible within our time zone. However, by the time *Maghrib* is prayed in Perth or Malaysia (West of us), the new moon could be 16 – 20 hours old there and likely to be visible with naked eyes. It goes without saying that every other country west of Malaysia, all the way to Europe and beyond, should be able to see this crescent, *in most years*. Thus, only we in the South Pacific, including Australia's Eastern states, would miss sighting the crescent on that day while the rest of the world would see it. So, we would be one day behind most of the world, which is the case in most years.





SINCE 1979

The above scenario is understandable as we are some 12 hours ahead of Middle East or UK. If they celebrate Eid on a Monday, it will be Tuesday in New Zealand as we would have prayed *Maghrib* (and the date would have changed) by the time they pray Eid. The International Date Line is a man-made barrier, so we would usually celebrate within the same 24-hour period as the rest.

7. So why do we sometimes celebrate on the same day as other countries?

While it is true that in most years, we would sight the new crescent one day after most countries, we can and do sight it in some years on the same day. This could happen if the new moon is born in the late afternoon New Zealand time (or close to our *Maghrib* time). In this case we would definitely not sight it here on that day. But it is possible that none of the countries from here to Europe may not sight it either if the position of the moon or the sky conditions are not conducive to sighting, because the moon is only 12-13 hours old at their *Maghrib* time. So, this crescent would be visible in all these countries only the next day - that is the day after it was born New Zealand time. In this case we would be the first in the world to see the crescent because we are the first to pray *Maghrib* in the world. AND we would be the first in the world to pray Eid because we are the first to pray *Fajr* salat. Rare, but it has happened more than once in the last 40 years!

We hope that this answers some of the questions about the process we use for announcing the dates of the two Eids in New Zealand and why different situations may occur in relation to other parts of the world.

If there are other questions, please email them at info@fianz.com and we will endeavour to answer as many as we can next time, Inshaa Allah.

Hilal Committee

