

al-Watan

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Witnesses of the Impossible

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The problem of the crescents still arouses a widespread discussion. Predominantly, the discussion arose about the beginning of the month Ramadân and its end. This time, it arose about the definition of the beginning of the month Dhû-l-hijja of the year 1425 AH. The cause was, as usual, that the Council of Justice referred to the testimony of people who witnessed that they saw the crescent by direct visual sighting, which was contradicting reality.

This time, the Council issued a communiqué in the beginning, declaring that those [people] whose testimony is usually accepted, did not witness a sighting of the crescent in the night to Tuesday. The exculpation was that it was covered [by clouds], thus the beginning of the month was declared to be on Wednesday. But [then] two witnesses appeared who saw it in that night, and this made the Council to publish another declaration, whereby Tuesday is the First of days of the month Dhû-l-hijja.

The declaration came all of a sudden for everyone, as the King `Abdu-l-`Azîz City for Science and Technology (KACST) had issued a statement that the crescent set before sunset on Monday in the whole Kingdom. That means, a sighting of the crescent after sunset on this day [was] impossible by the simple reason of its non-existence above the horizon.

Many people were worried when sighting the crescent high on Wednesday, and they suspected that the reason for its elevation was it being a Tuesday crescent. But the scientific explanation for this elevation is very simple: That [was so] because since its birth about 37 hours had passed. Maybe we should remember Shaykh al-Lahîdân, the chairman of the Council of Justice, who produced the crescent's elevation as an argument in the communiqué that he issued on 9/11/1425 AH, and this is what inspired on the people the false impression of a coherence between the crescent's elevation and the beginning of the month.

What directs the attention to the communiqué issued by the chairman of the High Council of Justice, and to the interview that the newspaper `Ukâz carried out with him, are the many expressions describing the two witnesses whom the Council refers to in its confirmation of the sighting in the night to Tuesday. They are described as “prudential men of sound mind” who are “belonging to upright, reliable, and knowledgeable people”, as being “men and not children or those to whom the state of the moon remains concealed, as they are ‘people of herding and camels’”.

This emphasis in the recommendation of the two witnesses possibly leads to the conclusion that it is an indication for the Council's awareness of the strength of the statement about the impossibility of a crescent sighting in this night. Hence, one had to revert to bringing forward comprehensive characteristics of the two witnesses, equivalent to the strength of that argument. This comprehensive description of the two witnesses involves their characterisation with everything possible, or else what is the relation of their being ‘people of herding and camels’ with the rightness of their testimony? As for the other sources, they give another image of the two witnesses. Because a reporter of the newspaper “al-Hayât” went to al-Rayn and tried to contact both of them, but he was informed that both of them didn't want to meet anybody “because of fear of envy, and because both were preparing for the Hajj”. And that there is a third reason, namely that it is forbidden for both of them to meet anybody, except on certain conditions. And the reporter referred to the descriptions of some people that both of them exhibit some characteristics not pointing out that both of them feature anything extraordinary.

Furthermore, a delegation of specialists in astronomy of the KACST went into this region and was successful in meeting the two witnesses. It found that both of them were in the high ages, and the age of each single one of them was exceeding 80. It is not my intention here to cast doubt on their personalities, or on their sincerity when reporting about what they took for a crescent. Rather I want to point out that one has to undertake the highest efforts for the confirmation and verification of their testimony.

It is also noticeable that the Council of Justice leaves the verbatim understanding, which we found in its understanding of the Hadîth: “Fast when you sight it, and break the fasting when you sight it, and when it is covered from you, complete the number of thirty days.” The pure text of this Hadîth associates a connection with Ramadân. But the Council now derives from it the need for a sighting to begin and end another month than Ramadân. Shaykh al-Lahîdân says: “The `Ibâda being connected with a completed month is only induced by the sighting of the crescent as to the beginning, and then by its sighting as to the ending. And also the execution of the Hajj in its time, of which Allâh wills its execution within, is not accomplished unless producing evidence for a confirmation of the crescent and its realisation.” It was expected that the Council adheres to taking the Hadîth literally and not to generalise it with regard to a definition of the beginning of the other months.

Shaykh al-Lahîdân’s communiqué and the interview of `Ukâz with him make clear that the Council is in connection with committees that are known for the confirmation of the crescents, and that it delegates judges with them, as he says: “... the committees that usually sight the crescent in their region were formed together with the judges in the courts. They went out to the investigation and their observation of a crescent sighting, and with them went out also some members of other national observatories. Later, they left their places, because they did not sight the crescent of Dhû-l-hijja in the night to Tuesday, as the crescent was covered from us.”

He explains this issue in detail with his words: “With the approach of the month, and especially the month with whose approach care has to be exercised, the courts become informed and the judges call upon the people of whom is known that they usually go after a sighting of the crescent and who are keen-eyed. A number of them goes out a short while before sunset, together with them are judges and delegates of the region or the administrative centre, they stay at the centre’s place for observation of the crescent, therefore this is a performed matter since a while.”

Shaykh al-Lahîdân confirms once more that the Council accepts what the observatories tell him since a long time. But what is said in his communiqué and his interview shows that the Council deals with the observatories [in a way] penetrated with much animosity and vilification. For he says about the astronomers’ opinion on the crescent’s elevation in the night to Wednesday: “It’s a pity that the ‘people of the calculation’, or as it is called, ‘the astronomy’, declare with this immense elevation that it sets before the sun on Tuesday” (sic, meant was “Monday”). I have to point out here that Shaykh al-Lahîdân himself said in the interview that the crescent’s elevation itself is no indication for the moon-age. When the newspaper’s reporter asked him about the possibility that the specialists in astronomy make mistakes when observing the crescent, he said: “We do not know this, but they are looking at the horizon, and they are looking in the booklets.” This reply gives the impression of a non-existing appreciation of Shaykh al-Lahîdân towards the astronomers, or possibly a non-existing knowledge about what they are doing. In fact, his description is nothing else than a judgement about their non-existing qualification.

Shaykh al-Lahîdân repeats his justification of the Council not relying upon the specialists in astronomy and their work in the observatories, as this results from [the fact] that those applied seldom at the courts to bear testimony of their crescent sighting. The question is now: As long as the High Council of Justice mandates some judges to go out with the committees, which try a sighting of the crescent with naked eyes – and this is often something whose results are false, wouldn’t it be best, if the Council is concerned about exactness and request for help from the astronomers, that it sends some judges to the KACST to obtain the statement of the astronomers at their places of observation? And it would be even possible for those judges to assure themselves about the sighting of the crescent by means of the available telescopes.

Shaykh al-Lahîdân finishes the interview that the newspaper `Ukâz made with him by his words: “I recommend for everyone taqwâ of Allâh, sincerity in the conversation, and the avoidance of meddling into issues that they are not concerned of. The Council of Justice considers imposing a penalty upon those who meddle into the writings about the crescent by claiming its sighting, or the contrary, because this excites a confusion among the people, in particular when they have no knowledge about this issue.” These words are alarming, as they support the worst arguments of the opponents of the official religious bodies of Sa`udi[-Arabia], because the religious opinions issued by these bodies are not based upon conviction, but upon a unified opinion, upon repudiation, enforcement, obligation, and a denied opportunity for the others to state their position in the discussed matter.

We have been for a long time the victims of such suspicions, but now the chairman of one of the biggest official institutions confirms them in complete directness. It is noticeable that Shaykh al-Lahîdân [uses] the expression “imposing a penalty”, instead of speaking about a court hearing here. This means that the Council of Justice, which is the last resort of justice and abatement for the people, except after their sure condemnation for what they were accused, possibly transgresses this noble duty by condemning to penalty without court hearing, when it is itself party in the proceeding.

The repetition of the statement that a certain matter doesn’t concern the citizens, which necessitates a denial of their right to talk about it, is an issue not permitted for him, because this would imply a monopoly for the truth, a paternalism over the Muslims, and a deprivation of their liberty to think and to express themselves on the matters that they regard as important for them.

As to the crime of which the chairman of the High Council of Justice wants those to be punished who write about it, this is “the confusion” for the people. But it is clear that those successive and contradictory communiqués that are not based upon scientific fundamentals are the source of the confusion.

In brief, what happened this year at the end of the month Ramadân, the non-existence of a testimony for the beginning of the month Dhû-l-qa`da, and the confusion and contradiction at the beginning of the month Dhû-l-hijja, demands from the state to take some actions to put an end to this situation, whose continuation is not tolerable, moreover as we have means in the Kingdom that allow us to reach exact and true decisions to define the beginning of the months and their ending, and this is what will liberate us from becoming victims of witnesses of the impossible.

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