

The Fatimi Ismaili Lunar Calendar: Origins, Development, & Religious Significance

By: Qazi Dr. Shaikh Abbas Borhany al-Waleed

PhD (USA), NDI, Shahadat al Aalamiyah (Al Hawzah, Najaf, Iraq), M.A, LLM (Shariah)

Musheer: Fed. Shariat Court of Pakistan

Member: Ulama Council of Pakistan

Chairman: The Guardian Pakistan

The Writer is an Attorney at Law and a Religious Scholar

Website: www.durrenajaf.com

Academia: <https://durrenajaf.academia.edu/QaziBorhany>

Contact for spiritual help: najafspiritualcenter@gmail.com

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Abstract: *This article advances a case for greater coherence and tolerance in global Muslim practice by examining the longstanding tension between empirical moon-sighting and calculated determination of the lunar month. Although modern astronomy can compute the Moon's position with precision, the visibility of the Hilal remains inherently uncertain, shaped by meteorological, atmospheric, and geographical variables. These ambiguities have sustained divergent approaches across the Muslim world: some communities rely exclusively on local sighting, others accept a universal sighting, while a number of juristic bodies continue to reject astronomical calculation outright. Against this backdrop, the article foregrounds the Ismaili lunar calendar as a doctrinally grounded and scientifically robust alternative. Rooted in Qur'an affirmations of regulated celestial order, the system dispenses with the requirement of physical sighting and embraces precise computation as an Islamic epistemic tool. Developed under the Fatimi Ismaili Imamah and implemented for more than two centuries across their dominions, this calendar continues to govern the religious life of Nizari and Tayyibi Ismailis. Drawing on Talim attributed to Amir al-Mumineen Ali b. Abi Talib (as) and elaborated by Imams such as Al-Imam Jafar al-Shadiq (as), it incorporates the doctrines of Qaran Saghir and Qaran Kabir within a 30-year cycle containing eleven intercalated Kabisah years, thereby eliminating the indeterminacy inherent in observational methods. Classical authorities-including Sayyiduna Hamid al-Din al-Kirmani, Sayyiduna al-Muayyad al-Shirazi and Sayyiduna Idris Imad al-Din-construct a theological rationale for computation anchored in the continuity of Prophetic authority through the Imams, the Qur'an notion of "counted days," and the principle that Rasulullah (S), guided by Wahy, would not be dependent on contingent empirical sighting. Their reasoning underscores that obligations such as Ramadan Siy'am require determinacy, a point reinforced by juristic considerations including the fixed quantum of Kaffarah. By synthesising textual exegesis, rational inquiry, and astronomical method, the Ismaili calendar emerges as a coherent and predictable system that preserves the integrity of religious timekeeping while aligning with the Qur'an's emphasis on order, knowledge, and ease-offering a model capable of fostering unity and mutual understanding across diverse Muslim communities.*

Keywords: *Ismaili lunar calendar; Fatimi Ismaili tradition; astronomical calculation; Kabisah cycle; crescent-sighting; Al Imam Jafar al-Shadiq; Amir al-Mumineen Ali ibn Abi Talib; Qur'an cosmology; ritual timekeeping.*

1. Introduction:

The Fatimi Ismaili lunar calendar, used by the Ismaili Muslims, reflects an effort to balance fidelity to Islamic tradition with the practical needs of a globally dispersed population. Like the broader Islamic calendar, it is rooted in lunar cycles, comprising twelve months that total 354 days in a common year and 355 days in a leap year. This preserves continuity with the principle of Qur'an that timekeeping for religious observances should follow the moon. However, unlike systems that rely on physical moon sighting, Ismaili Muslims follow a pre-calculated or tabular lunar calendar based on astronomical computation. From a practical perspective, the pre-calculated method offers significant advantages. By fixing dates in advance, it ensures uniform observance of major religious occasions such as Ramadan, Eid al-Fitr, Eid al-Adha, Eid al-Ghadir, Muharram and other commemorative events. In a community spread across multiple continents and time zones, this uniformity fosters cohesion and administrative clarity. It also eliminates the uncertainty and last-minute announcements that often accompany sighting-based systems, which can be affected by weather, geography, and conflicting testimonies. For Ismailis, which historically have emphasized intellectual engagement and adaptability, the adoption of a pre-determined lunar calendar can be viewed as consistent with a broader interpretive tradition that harmonizes Aqidah with reason. Ultimately, the Ismaili lunar calendar demonstrates how religious timekeeping evolves in response to social context. It preserves the lunar structure central to Islamic ritual life while employing scientific calculation to meet contemporary needs.

2. Origin of the Ismaili Lunar Calendar:

The basis of the Ismaili Lunar Calendar is the Qur'an: [1]

"The Sun and the Moon follow exactly computed courses".

This Ayah lays the foundation and establishes permissibility for calculation of the emergence of the new crescent from the Shariah standpoint, and refutes any claim which might be raised otherwise. Therefore all attempted Moon sightings would negate the findings of this Ayah and at the same time contradict the words of the Qur'an, explaining the orderly movement of the Moon and other celestial bodies. The calendar renders the moon sighting process useless since the former is made after accurate scientific research on the movements of the Moon. The precise laws made by Allah governing the Universe bear witness to Hikmah 'ilahiyyah and Adal, and also of His favours to His creatures.

It was the Bani Fatimah (as) who realized the need of the lunar calendar, and introduced it to the world when they established their vast empire spreading across Europe. This lunar calendar remained in practice officially for more than 225 years, in North Africa, Arabia and across the Atlantic Ocean. The same calendar is officially used by the Ismaili Nizaris and Ismaili Tayyibis (Dawoodis, Sulaiymanis, Alavis). The notably powerful dynasty of the Sumrah tribe of Sindh (Pakistan) followed Shi'i Fatimi Ismaili Lunar Calendar from 365(A.H) to 974 (A.H), more than 609 years, and without any alteration. As elites of Sindh, the Sumrah tribe handled the affairs of Al Daw'ah al-Hadiyah as A'amils of the Shia Fatimi Ismaili Imams in Sindh, whose jurisdiction extended from Karachi up to the Attock Fort. They followed Ismaili Aqidah till the era of 13th Al Da'i al-Mutlaq. Later on due to the lack of communication and mishandling of regional issues by

a few Indian Gujarati Ismaili Tayyibi officials, they were inclined towards the Talim of the Sufis and afterwards joined the Sunni Hanafi Aqidah. The Ismailis calculate their months according to this Lunar Calendar and don't bother with the sighting of the Moon for starting a New Year or a New Month. They have a scientific lunar calendar which originated from Amir al-Mumineen, Ali ibn Abi Talib (as), through the references of Moula Abi Abdillah Al Imam Jafar al-Sadiq (as). An authentic scientific chart of "Qaran Saghir" and "Qaran Kabir" [2] is attributed to Amir al-Mumineen Ali (as), who explained it to his Ash'ab.

3. Calculation of the Lunar Cycle: [3]

"On average, a lunar month (or lunation) comprises 29 days 12.73 hours, but it can sometimes be as short as 29 days 6½ hours, or as long as 29 days 20 hours. Fluctuations in length are cyclic. There is a fast cycle averaging about 412 days (which is just under 14 lunar months), and is associated with changes in the eccentricity, or shape of the lunar orbit. This rapid cycle is modified by a slower one whose mean wavelength is 8.85 years (equal to one complete revolution of the axis of the Moon's elliptical orbit). In addition, there are other oscillations, some causing variations extending over many hundred years - when it may not even make sense to look for an average wavelength. For instance, a longer than normal lunation tends to occur between October and March because of the faster movement by the Earth in its orbit around the Sun. In February and March, this delays the instant when the Moon appears to overtake the Sun. Also, the sun lies closer to a newborn crescent than it would if the Earth's speed was uniform - thus postponing the onset of the new Moon's visibility. In October and November, on the other hand, the sun's position on the ecliptic line is "behind schedule" - so the Moon overtakes it earlier. Occasionally, four consecutive lunations will span more than 119 days. Under these circumstances, it is possible to have four successive 30-day months. When that happens, the Moon only just becomes visible at the beginning of the first month in the sequence, and just fails to do so on the 29th of the 4th month. A predetermined calendar would certainly make it easier to plan events. Unfortunately, it is not always possible to predict that a newborn crescent will definitely be visible or invisible from a given location, because of the wide grey area separating the two categories. This uncertainty is caused by day to day fluctuations in atmospheric water vapour and dust content."

4. Few Logical Examples:

The Ismailis follow a pre-calculated calendar based on a cycle of 30 Muslim years (eleven of which contain 355 days instead of the more common 354, thus totaling 10631 days). The accumulated error in that calendar is about one hour per century. This, together with the cyclic variations in the behaviour of the lunar orbit, can bring the Ismaili dates two (or on rare occasions even three) days earlier than those governed strictly by the Crescent's visibility. In 1412 (A.H), for example, Ismailis Ramadan commenced on the morning of 4th March 1992, whereas throughout much of India and the Far East, Sawm did not start till 7th March. There are of course other ways in which a predetermined calendar might be constructed. Mathematical criteria could be laid down – and adopted, regardless of whether or not the crescent happens to be observed. Such guidelines might be based, for example, on the age of the New Moon at dusk

(suitably defined), or the lag between sunset and moonset, or the number of degrees separating the sun and moon as they descend. It is then essential to specify either the exact time at which the criteria are to be applied - or the precise location; for example, Makkah would probably be universally acceptable.

Qur'an says: [4]

"Allah enlightens the Sun and effulgent Moon and created stations for the Moon's movement so that you can keep the counting and record of years".

The Moon's rotation around the Earth is described in the Qur'an, and on the basis of it, the lunar calendar was designed. The 19th Al Da'i al-Fatimi, Sayyiduna Idris Imaduddin (d.872/1468, Shib'am, Yemen) discussed this: [5]

The Moon completes one rotation around the Earth in 29 ½ days and some minutes, and a single orbit is counted as one month. According to calculations, in the Lunar Calendar, a 30 day month is considered complete, and a 29 day month is called incomplete. The first month of Muharram is of 30 days and the second month is of 29 days, so according to this, the last month of Zilhajjah will be of 29 days. At the end of 12 months, some fraction is left between the movement of the Moon and 12 months, and as per calculation 11 leap years are set in every 30 years in the lunar calendar. That means a leap year will have 30 days instead of 29 days in the last month, which is Zilhajjah.

5. Shi'i Ismaili Point of View:

Shia Ismailis argue that Rasulullah (S) always observed Siy'am of Ramadan by specific calculations and commanded the Ummah to follow accordingly. A valuable reference of Maaz bin Kathir is available in "Majma al-Bahrayn" which has been transmitted by Huzaifah bin Mansur who asked Abi Abdullah Al Imam Jafar al-Sadiq (as) that he heard people:

Rasulullah (S) observed Ramadan some times for 29 days and other times for 30 days.

Abi Abdillah Al Imam Jafar al-Sadiq (as) strongly rejected this allegation and cleared immediately: [6]

"These people are telling lies; Rasulullah (S) has always observed 30 days Siy'am in the month of Ramadan. From the day Allah created the Sky and the Earth, Ramadan has never ended in 29 Naqis (incomplete) days".

As Muslims of the early era were not familiar with calculations at that time, the day on which everyone observed Sawm, and celebrated Eid, used to be announced. Once when Rasulullah (S) was leaving Madinah for the military expedition of "Ghazw'ah Tabuk", people left behind him questioned:

"We observed Sawm of Ramadan with you, and celebrated Eid with you, now that you are leaving, how should we observe it?"

Rasulullah(S) responded: [7]

"Observe Sawm of Ramadan by watching Him (Ali) and celebrate your Eid by watching Him (Ali) too."

Children of the Shi'i Fatimi Ismaili Daw'ah argue that the meaning behind the word of Hadith "Ley Ruyati'hi" was Ali (as), as Rasulullah (S) had appointed him "Wali al-Amr" at Madinah in his absence on his seat, and in his place. Similarly, there is no doubt that Rasulullah (S) is the Sun

of Nubuawah while Ali (as) is the Moon of Wasayah (legatee). When the sun disappeared, the moon took its place. Pointing out this divine reality, the great Fatimi Ismaili Da'i and intellectual, Sayyiduna Al Muayyid al-Shirazi (d.470/1078, Qahirah, Misr) says in a verse available in his "Diw'an": [8]

*Wa yā qamaran ba'da zakhāsi sirāji;
munīran ba'da lid diyāji mubīrā.*

*"O moon that rises after the sun-
an radiant light that banishes the dark."*

The great Fatimi Ismaili philosopher and intellectual Da'i, Sayyiduna Ahmad Hamiduddin al-Kirmani (d. in between 411-427 A.H.), maintained: [9]

"Allah has created everything in pairs, so no one share and compete with Him. Qur'an says: "He is sacred who created everything in pairs."

In another Ayah this matter is clarified as follows: [10]

"We have created everything in pairs."

The learned writer of "Al Risalah al-Lazimah", Sayyiduna Hamiduddin al-Kirmani says:

It is a fact that we also find pairs in everything for e.g. diamond and gems, dryness and swamp, high lands and tropical area, similarly day and night, good and bad deeds, body and soul, emergence and disappearance, Duniya and A'akhirah, male and female - the chain is very long. Similarly, Rasulullah (S) has raised Shariah on the basis of pairs, for e.g. Salaat and Zak'at, Siy'am and Haj, Adh'an and Iqam'ah, Haj and Umrah, Safa and Marwa, Fard and Sunnah, Ruku and Sujud etc. In this manner there are two types of observation, which are adjoining with each other - physical and spiritual. Physical observation is linked with eyes that can observe colours and geometrical figures; on the other hand spiritual observation is linked with the mind and soul which can attain and observe those things, which physically are not possible. Attainment of these objects is beyond the physical power. Qur'an says: [11]

"Thus the heart did not lie whatever it saw and.....O' Mohammad! Did you not observe your Creator enlarge the shade (of the sky)".

And Qur'an says: [12]

"(O' Muhammad!) Did you not see what your Creator did with Ash'ab al-Feel'?"

We know that Rasulullah (S) was not present during the period of Ash'ab al-Feel [13] to have seen them. Hence, the meaning of observation is linked with 'ilm and Ma'arif'. For example, when we say that someone is blind by heart, it connotes that they are short-sighted and incapable of understanding.

Those who follow Qiyas know that sometimes the month of Ramadan is perfect and sometimes imperfect. They believe that the Siy'am of Ramadan is based on the sighting of the Moon and refer to the following Hadith as evidence: [14]

"People should do Sawm of Siy'am and celebrate their Eid by observing him. If clouds appear, then observe Siy'am for thirty days."

This Hadith is Daif (weak) and non-authentic. When Rasulullah (S) decided to join the expedition, prior to the month of Ramadan, some of his Ash'ab approached him and asked:

"O Rasulullah (S) we did our Siy'am by observing you and similarly celebrated Eid by watching you, so what should we do in your absence?"

Rasulullah (S) directed: [15]

"Observe Siy'am and celebrate your Eid by observing him".

Sayyiduna Al-Muayyid al-Shirazi explained this Hadith in Majlis 42 of "Al Majalis al-Muayyidiyah" as follows: [16]

This hadith explains that it was obligatory to observe Siy'am based on the Siy'am of Rasulullah (S). Similarly, it becomes obligatory to do so with his successor in his absence. Thus, this law attains permanence in other cases too when Rasul is absent or Imam is present. An argument in favour of beginning the month by sighting the Moon by one of the major wings is totally non-acceptable on both bases, religious as well as logical. A reason is that Rasulullah (S) always said that Jibrael regularly came and informed each and everything in the morning or evening. So the one to whom in the morning and evening the news of the heavens was disclosed, they did not have the need to search for the Moon in the sky. If Rasulullah (S) then came out in search of the Moon, it is a contradiction of his own declaration of Wahi, allowing the opponents of Wahi who may raise the question; O Rasulullah (S)! Why did you not ask about the Moon from Jibrael, so that you may be saved from this problem? "Ana Be'turuq'atis Sam'ae Aarafu Minkum Be 'turuq'aatil Ard" (I am more aware of the celestial routes than you are of the routes of the earth).

After this Hadith is it logical to assume that Rasulullah (S) would look out for the emergence of the Moon after every 29 days when an ordinary astrologer is able to do so? It is also a fact that the condition of the Earth is different at different places. At some places the height of the land is very high i.e. in mountainous regions where sighting of the Moon becomes easy, while elsewhere it is so low that the appearance of Moon takes time. It is a fact that nothing was hidden from Rasulullah (S). If any knowledge was hidden from Rasulullah, (S) Nubuawah would have been incomplete. It is also incorrect and unacceptable that there should be a day in the month of Shab'an in which the Moon does not appear. A thinking individual cannot ignore this. Similarly Qur'an says: [17]

"So, Siy'am has been made Fard upon you similarly as it was Fard before you on others. May you become pious".

The Qur'an points out towards the Christians, among whom Siy'am, is based not on the sighting of the Moon but on the basis of calculation. The Qur'an informed precisely fixed period, and emphasizes that: [18]

"It is the counted days."

(The readers are requested to please study the above Ayah carefully)

Hence, the counted days are those which were surely calculated, and there is no need to search

for the Moon when the days are calculated. If there is the slightest doubt left that the month of Ramadan would be of 29 days and once of 30 days, the Qur'an would never have mentioned the specific words "Calculated Period" with great emphasis. Thus the meaning of the "Counted Period" is the perfect counted time. It means it is an equivalent of the statement of the one who has mentioned that this one is counted, and this one is weighed in gold. Another argument is that if a year is on six complete and six incomplete months, so it is compulsory that the base of year should be perfect without any lacuna. The first Muslim month Muharram is perfect in that it consists of 30 days while Safar is imperfect as it is 29 days. In this context, Rabi al-Awwal is perfect, while Rabi al-Aakhar incomplete. Jamadil Awwal is perfect while Jamadil Aakhar imperfect. Rajab and Ramadan are always perfect; hence, the famous Hadith: [19] "Shab'an will never be perfect and Ramadan will never be imperfect".

On the imperfection of Shab'an, "Laylat un-Nisf" the 15th night is evident, other than Rajab and Ramadan. The night of 15th Shab'an has a different position because it has 14 nights in the beginning, and 14 nights after it is counted. This law is not applicable to the month of Ramadan, because if the 15th night of Ramadan is declared as half of the month, then it is incorrect because 16 days remain in the month. If the 16th night of Ramadan is declared half of the month then it is also not correct because 16 is not the half of 30.

Kafarat of Ramadan Siy'am is evidence as well. Those who do not observe Siy'am without legal excuse, they must observe Siy'am of 2 months. This is the Kafarat of that sin. It is also double the days of Ramadan, which are 60 in number. If fasting is not possible then they must arrange food for 60 poor persons. If there was the slightest doubt in the counting of the days of Ramadan that is 29 days, then there must be provision available that one must arrange food as Kafarat for 60 or 58 deserving people. [20]

The 19th Al Da'i al-Fatimi, Sayyiduna Idris Imaduddin, deliberated in "Mudhezat al-Buht'an": [21] "It is clear that Ahadith and sayings of the Ahl al-Bayt (as) are not for 'unbound' but for those who are not aware of the calculations. This was the practice of Abi Abdillah Al Imam Jafar al-Sadiq (as). Those who followed him followed Rasulullah (S). Qur'an has clarified that "So, Siy'am is Fard upon you similarly as it was Fard before you on others".

Years and months can be calculated through the Kabisah calculation chart. According to the teaching of Imam Jafar al-Sadiq (as), ABJAD chart is used in Kabisah calculation. An account of "Man La Yahdaruh al-Faqih" [22] confirms a tradition of Abi Abdillah Al Imam Jafar al-Sadiq (as) explaining Kabisah formation. This chart was prepared according to the guidance of Qur'an and instructions of Ahl al-Bayt (as). Every student of Islam knows this Hadith: [23]

"I am leaving two everlasting precious things among you, one is Qur'an, and another is the Ahl al-Bayt".

The learned scholar of Ahl al-Bayt (as) explains that we cannot separate both from each other nor can we follow Qiyas and Rai, which creates clouds of doubt. In this book, a Hadith is quoted with the reference of one of the wives of Rasulullah (S), who said: [24]

"I never saw Rasulullah (S) that he ever observed an in-completed month of Siy'am of Ramadan".

6. Method of Kabisah Calculation:

The calendar contains 12 months that are based on the Qur'an. [25]. Hijrah calendar is a purely lunar calendar. It depends on the Moon's cycle around the Earth. That is how the Hijrah Calendars have been calculated and prepared. It has twelve lunar months. The average length of a lunar month is 29.53058 (solar) days. As per certain Hikmah, the Hijrah year will contain 29 or 30 day long months. Muharram starts with 30 days. The next month Safar has 29 days and so on and so forth. That means that the last month of the year Zilhajjah will have 29 days. The total length of the Hijrah year is usually 354 days. There is a small fractional difference between the Moon's cycle around the Earth in a year and the Hijrah calendar. To compensate for this difference, there are 11 Kabisah years in a cycle of 30 years. A Kabisah year is a year in which the month of Zilhajjah has 30 days instead of the usual 29 days.

According to the learned writer of "Risalah al-Bay'an", the following Nabavi instruction was issued at the time when Rasulullah (S) was leaving for an expedition and leaving the Muslim community: [26]

"Observe Sawm and celebrate Eid by watching him".

It contains a particular meaning (not related to the sighting of moon) which has significant importance. A person who was ignorant with the orders of Ramadan asked Rasulullah (S) that "we observed Siy'am with you and celebrated Eid with you. Now that you are leaving so how should we observe Siy'am?"

He answered: [27]

"Observe by watching him and celebrate by watching him".

The persons who asked this question were those who were considered to be simple men with true intentions. Therefore, Rasulullah (S) instructed them emphatically to follow his Ahl al-Bayt. This matter has been clarified in detail in "Da'aim al-Islam" of Sayyiduna Al Qadi al-Nauman (d.363/974 C.E. Qahirah, Misr). It is only for those, who are able to understand and solve the problem. Allah has fixed the Siy'am of Ramadan obligatory. The Qur'an informs: [28]

"Ramadan is the month in which Qur'an was descended, with Hidayah for people, and which differentiates and clarifies between truth and obscurity. Whoever achieves this month, it is obligatory upon him to observe Siy'am. If he is sick or in travel, he must complete it in other days. Allah likes ease for you, not hardship".

7. Concluding Remarks:

The period of Siy'am of Ramadan is of 30 days, neither more nor less. The Moon is entirely different in different places and periods. The reason of difference in periods is early and late, the first period will be different from the second, and second from third, and in this way this matter is continuous till the end of the year. In this manner, the differences in the Moon's width and

height differ, from cities to cities. This dispute was created due to the distance of the Moon when it ascends towards the sky and also when it descends into the skies. “The ‘Umm al-Qura Calendar’ [29] used by Saudi Arabia who claims it to be for civil purposes only, yet plays a major role in influencing the determination of the 29th day of the month in which the crescent is normally observed”. The Ismaili lunar calendar embodies a harmonisation of Shariah and reason. By privileging calculation over contingent crescent-sighting, it secures uniformity in Ibadah, accords with Qur’ani affirmations of celestial precision, and reflects the continuous interpretive authority of the Ahl al-Bayt (as). Its long historical application and minimal cumulative error underscore its reliability as a scientifically and theologically grounded system for determining sacred time.

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[27] *Hadith*

[28] *Al Qur'an,*

[29] Dr. Muhammad M. H. Khan, *"Crescent Sighting Using the Umm al-Qura Calendar in Saudi Arabia to determine Ramadan and Eid al-Fitr of 1422 (A.H) and its implementation for unity in different countries*

[30] My special thanks to my learned honorable friend, *Al Sayyid al-Allamah Hatim Zakiyuddin, 45th Da'i of the Ismaili Tayyibi Alavi Bohras, for granting permission to examine some valuable Yemeni manuscripts pertaining to the subject.*

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