

## The Ruling on Praying Jumu'a or other Prayers Through a Livestream Broadcast

In the name of Allah, the Compassionate, the Merciful. May Allah send prayers and salutations of peace upon our master Muhammad, and upon his Family and Companions entirely.

Due to the circumstances we are facing as a result of COVID-19 and the resultant social distancing mandate, the Masjid has instituted procedures to ensure that this obligation and symbol of Islam—the Friday congregational sermon and prayer—can continue unabated in the community while steps are taken to prevent the spread of the virus. As such, many of our elder community members have, unfortunately, been unable to attend the Masjid. In the interest of helping them and others maintain a vital and needed connection to the community, we have been livestreaming the Friday *khutbas*.

Shortly before Ramadan and again recently, I was asked about the Islamic ruling on praying Jumu'a or other prayers through the livestream broadcast. I answered informally when the need arose; however, for the purpose of clarity and with the intention of conveying the ruling for those who have asked, the following is a more detailed answer to that question.

The question of offering prayer behind an imam through a livestream is similar to earlier questions about praying behind an imam from one's home while hearing him pray through a microphone in a nearby mosque, or praying behind an imam through a radio, telephone, or other means of broadcast. Is such a prayer valid, and will it count as having offered the congregational prayer behind the imam?

There is no difference of opinion among the four Sunni legal schools (*madhabib*) that is **not allowed** for a person at a very far distance from the physical congregation to be apart of that congregation. Islamic jurists (*fuqaha'*) have differed whether short distances due to barriers, such as buildings, walls, rivers, or streets would be a valid excuse for creating large gaps in the rows of those praying behind an imam; however, none of them permitted a person to consider himself a part of the congregational prayer at further distances with no necessary obstructions. There is a near consensus on this point among the four Sunni legal schools past and present.

The Islamic jurists have maintained that the maximum distance between one row and the next is three hundred cubits (around five hundred feet). None of them, to my knowledge, has ever ruled that a person can follow the prayer of an imam when they are separated by possibly miles of buildings, streets, and barriers.

Furthermore, even those scholars who permitted praying behind an imam when separated by barriers noted that the one praying behind the imam must, in fact, be *behind him*. If an imam is leading prayer in the Masjid and the one praying behind him via livestream is one mile *in front of him*, he is not even “praying behind” the imam.

Additionally, praying “behind” an imam via livestream contradicts the objective of the Sacred Law (Shariah), which is for people to gather physically in one place during Jumu'a and congregational prayers. (It is also possible that the livestream cuts out or lags to such a degree that the person “praying behind” him will see the imam bowing or prostrating later than he actually did.)

The Jumu'a prayer is obligatory (*wajib*) upon adult males and optional for others. Those with medical conditions, or even a legitimate fear of falling ill, are excused from attending it. For those performing it, Jumu'a is a substitute for the Zuhr prayer. If a person is unable to join the Jumu'a prayer physically, he must pray four *rak'as* of Zuhr prayer.

Those unable to attend the Masjid physically for Jumu'a can listen to the livestreamed *khutba* for the sake of benefitting from the reminder and engaging in the remembrance of Allah and learning, though it will not count as a *khutba* for them. After the *khutba* is over they should pray four *rak'as* of Zuhr individually or in a small congregation in their home.

Allah and His Messenger know best.

—Abdul Aziz Suraqah