

Imam Criteria

1. Should be knowledgeable in the deen (Arabic Language, Memorization of Qur'an, Tafseer, Fiqh, Seerah, etc.) Knowledge of the deen should be the primary consideration, as we need a leader who will judge according to the book of Allah and the Sunnah of the Prophet (peace be upon him).

Narrated Abdullah bin Amr bin Al-As (may Allah be pleased with him): I heard Allah's Apostle (peace be upon him) saying, "Allah does not take away the knowledge, by taking it away from (the hearts of) the people, but takes it away by the death of religious learned men till when none of the (religious learned men) remains, people will take as their leaders ignorant persons who when consulted will give their verdict without knowledge. So they will go astray and they will lead the people astray." (Sahih Bukhari Vol. 1:100)

2. Should be practicing the deen in his daily life and with his family. Preferably have references from previous community to show his success as an Imam. Only a person with Iman and Taqwa can lead a Muslim community successfully.

"And this is a Book which We have revealed as a blessing; so follow it and be righteous, that you may receive mercy." (Surah Al-An'am : v. 155)

3. Should speak Arabic and English preferably. Arabic is the language of the Qur'an and English is the language spoken by most of our community. The Imam should be conversant in both but if a choice has to be made Arabic is preferred. The Imam can learn English in time. The Prophet and the Righteous Caliphs all had interpreters that helped them to speak with members of the Ummah who spoke other languages (for example Hebrew and Persian). However, Arabic is the language of the Qur'an and the Hadiths and therefore should be of the greatest importance. (This does not mean the Imam has to be Arab, rather he has to be knowledgeable in the Arabic language.)

"We have sent it down as an Arabic Qur'an in order that you may learn wisdom." (Surah Yusuf : v. 2)

4. Should not have ties to certain groups (i.e. Sufism etc.). Our society is too diverse and there are too many factitious groups that are vying for control. We should strive to choose an Imam who is aware of the different groups but practices the Qur'an and Sunnah without political, social, ethnic, or spiritual deviations that will lead our community off the path of Islam.

Narrated Abu-Nu'man bin Bashir (may Allah be pleased with him): I heard Allah's apostle (peace be upon him) saying, "Both legal and illegal things are evident but in between them are doubtful things and most of the people have no knowledge about them. So whoever saves himself from these suspicious things saves his religion and his honor.

And whoever indulges in these suspicious things is like a Shepard who grazes (his animals) near the Hima (private pasture) of someone else and at any moment he is liable to get in it. (O people!) Beware! Every king has a Hima and the Hima of Allah is His illegal (forbidden) things. Beware! There is a piece of flesh in the body if it becomes good the whole body becomes good but it gets spoilt the whole body gets spoilt and that is the heart.” (Sahih Bukhari Vol. 1: 49)

5. Should be well liked by the people and have a good speaking manner. We have a diverse community spanning various age, ethnic, and socio-economic sectors. The new Imam must have a way of dealing with the people that is honest, upright, open, encourages communication and understanding. The Imam must be someone that the people trust and in whom they can confide.

It is part of the mercy of Allah that thou dost deal gently with them. Wert thou severe or harsh hearted, they would have broken away from about thee: so pass over (their faults), and ask forgiveness for them, and consult them in affairs (of the moment). Then, when though hast taken a decision, put thy trust in Allah. For Allah loves those who put their trust (in Him).” (Surah Al-Imran, v. 159)

6. Should be dependable, active, and willing to carry on regular classes for men, women, and children. Currently these services are lacking and we need to be sure the new Imam will fill the gaps and support a robust educational program.

Umar bin Abdul Aziz wrote to Abu Bakr bin Hizm, “Look for the knowledge of Hadith and get it written, as I am afraid that religious knowledge will vanish and the religious learned men will pass away. Do not accept anything save the hadiths of the Prophet (peace be upon him). Circulate knowledge and teach the ignorant, for knowledge does not vanish except when it is kept secretly (to oneself).” (Introduction to Chapter 35 Sahih Bukhari Vol. 1)

Narrated Uthman bin Affan (may Allah be pleased with him): the Prophet (peace be upon him) said, “The most superior among you (Muslims) are those who learn the Qur’an and teach it.” (Sahih Bukhari Vol. 6:546)

7. Should have a vision for Islam in America. This will tell us much about his personality and socio-political ideology. Should be able to explain his vision in concrete terms and explain how he plans to achieve these goals as the Imam of our center. It is important that our new Imam signs on as a member of our community for the good of the community and Islam in America, not for benefits, pay, or prestige. The new Imam should have a clear intention to guide our community towards righteousness, without regard to his status or personal gain from the job.

Narrated Umar (bin Al-Khattab) (may Allah be pleased with him): Allah's Apostle (peace be upon him) said, "The reward of deeds depends upon the intention and every person will get the reward according to what he has intended. So whoever emigrated for Allah and his Apostle (peace be upon him), then his migration was for Allah and his Apostle (peace be upon him). And whoever emigrated for worldly benefits or for a woman to marry, his emigration was what he emigrated for." (Sahih Bukhari Vol. 1:51)

8. Degrees and affiliations should be used as references but not as a means of eliminating or selecting a candidate. The Prophet and many of his companions were not formerly schooled but they were far better leaders than many of the Imams we see during our time.

Narrated Anas bin Malik (may Allah be pleased with him): Allah's Apostle (peace be upon him) said, "You should listen to and obey your ruler even if he was an Ethiopian slave whose head looks like a raisin." (Sahih Bukhari Vol. 9:256)

Their Prophet said to them: "Allah hath appointed Talut as king over you." They said, "How can he exercise authority over us when we are better fitted than he to exercise authority, and he is not even gifted with wealth in abundance?" He said, "Allah hath chosen him above you, and hath gifted him abundantly with knowledge and bodily prowess. Allah granteth His authority to whom He pleaseth. Allah careth for all, and He knoweth all things." (Surah Baqarah : v. 247)

9. The Imam should be available to the people at the regular prayer times, for Jumah/Eid prayers, and on a daily basis for their needs. A schedule should be agreed to that is reasonable for both the Imam and the community with neither one suffering a loss at the advantage of the other.

"Oh you who believe! Stand out firmly for Allah, as witnesses to fair dealing, and let not the hatred of others to you make you swerve to wrong and depart from justice. Be just, that is next to piety, and fear Allah. For Allah is well acquainted with all that you do." (Surah Maida : v. 9)

10. Most importantly the new Imam should not be seeking the position out earnestly. If the Imam is seeking leadership out then this shows a lack of understanding the Qur'an and Sunnah of the Prophet (peace be upon him). This means we should not be requesting resumes but rather seeking out individuals in our own community or in others who have shown the knowledge and personal characteristics needed to lead such a large community.

Narrated Abdur-Rahman bin Samura: The Prophet (peace be upon him) said, "O Abdur-Rahman! Do not seek to be a ruler, for if you are given authority on your demand then you will be held responsible for it, but if you are given it without asking (for it), then you will be helped (by Allah) in it. If you ever take an oath to do something and later on you find that something else is better, then you should expiate your oath and do what is better." (Sahih Bukhari Vol. 9:260)

The Prophet (peace be upon him) indicated in another hadith that we should not hire those individuals for our jobs who earnestly desire it. (Sahih Bukhari)