

The Muslim Holy Month of Ramadan

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A young Palestinian Muslim girl walks in an alley of Jerusalem's old city in August 2010 holding a traditional Ramadan lantern while celebrating with other children the announcing of the holy month of Ramadan. Millions of Muslims around the world mark the start of Ramadan with a month of intense prayer, dawn-to-dusk fasting and nightly feasts. AP Photo/Muhammed Muheisen

Ramadan is a holy month for Muslims, the followers of Islam. It is a time of fasting, prayer and to examine thoughts and feelings. Fasting is one of the five fundamental principles of Islam. Each day during Ramadan, Muslims do not eat or drink from sunrise to sunset. They are also supposed to avoid impure thoughts and bad behavior. Muslims break their daily fasts by sharing meals with family and friends, and the end of Ramadan is celebrated with a three-day festival known as Eid al-Fitr. The festival is one of Islam's major holidays.

Islam at a glance

Islam is the world's second-largest religion, after Christianity, with more than 1 billion followers. Islam originated in Arabia and has spread all over the world.

Countries with the largest Muslim populations include India, Indonesia, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Nigeria, Egypt, Turkey and Iran. There are an estimated 7 million Muslims in America. Islamic places of worship, called mosques, exist in all 50 states.

Muslims believe that around A.D. 610, a man named Muhammad (roughly A.D. 570-632) from the Arabian city of Mecca started receiving revelations from God, or Allah in Arabic, via the angel Gabriel. The revelations were collected into a 114-chapter holy book known as the Quran (or Koran). Muslims believe the book contains the exact words of God.

The Five Pillars of Islam

Muhammad is, according to Muslims, the final prophet in a line of prophets (including Adam, Abraham, Moses and Jesus) who were chosen by God to act as messengers and teach mankind. Jews, Muslims and Christians all believe in the same God, but they disagree about the prophets. Muslims believe there is one all-knowing God, and people can achieve salvation by following his commandments. In Arabic, Islam means “submission” or “surrender” (to God).

A series of formal acts of worship, known as the Five Pillars of Islam, are fundamental to the lives of Muslims. One pillar is shahada, or a declaration of faith. With this declaration, Muslims state “There is no God but Allah, and Muhammad is the messenger of Allah.” The other pillars are prayer (Muslims pray five times a day); zakat (charitable giving); fasting; and pilgrimage. A pilgrimage is a trip to a shrine or sacred place. Muslims are supposed to make a trip, or “hajj,” to the city of Mecca, Saudi Arabia, at least once in a lifetime if they are physically able and can afford it.

The Islamic calendar

Ramadan is the ninth month of the 12-month Islamic calendar, a lunar calendar that’s based on the phases of the moon. The lunar calendar falls short of the solar calendar by 11 days.

As a result, Ramadan doesn’t start on the same date each year. Instead, over time, it passes through all the seasons. Ramadan is celebrated as the month during which Muhammad received the initial revelations of what became the Quran.

Ramadan 2017 begins at sunset on May 26, and ends on June 25; in 2018, Ramadan will begin at sunset on May 15.

Ramadan practices

During Ramadan, Muslims fast from dawn to dusk each day. They are supposed to avoid eating, drinking any liquids, smoking and sexual activity, as well as unkind or impure thoughts and words, and immoral behavior.

Ramadan is a time to practice self-restraint and self-reflection. Fasting is seen as a way to cleanse the soul and have empathy for those in the world who are hungry and less fortunate. Muslims go to work and school and take care of their usual activities during Ramadan; however, some also read the entire Quran, say special prayers and attend mosques more frequently during this time.

All Muslims who have reached puberty and are in good health are required to fast. The sick and elderly, along with travelers, pregnant women and those who are nursing are exempt. However, they are supposed to make up for the missed fast days sometime in the future or help feed the poor.

The first predawn meal of the day during Ramadan is called “suhoor.” Each day’s fast is broken with a meal known as “iftar.” Traditionally, a date is eaten to break the fast. Iftars are often elaborate feasts celebrated with family and friends. The types of foods served vary according to culture.

Eid al-Fitr

The conclusion of Ramadan is marked with a major celebration known as Eid al-Fitr, the Feast of Fast-Breaking. It starts the day after Ramadan ends and lasts for three days.

Eid al-Fitr includes special prayers and meals with friends and relatives, and gifts are often exchanged.

In 1996, then-first lady Hillary Clinton hosted the first Eid al-Fitr dinner at the White House. President Bill Clinton continued the tradition throughout the rest of his time in office.

The next president, President George W. Bush, hosted an iftar at the White House in 2001 and continued the dinners every year of his two terms in power. President Barack Obama followed suit, hosting his first White House Ramadan dinner in August 2010.

Quiz

- 1 Which of the following sentences from the section "Ramadan practices" illustrates that Ramadan is a time for compassion?
 - (A) They are supposed to avoid eating, drinking any liquids, smoking and sexual activity, as well as unkind or impure thoughts and words, and immoral behavior.
 - (B) Fasting is seen as a way to cleanse the soul and have empathy for those in the world who are hungry and less fortunate.
 - (C) The sick and elderly, along with travelers, pregnant women and those who are nursing are exempt.
 - (D) Muslims go to work and school and take care of their usual activities during Ramadan; however, some also read the entire Quran, say special prayers and attend mosques more frequently during this time.

- 2 Which section of the article highlights how the United States adopted some Islamic practices?
 - (A) "Islam at a glance"
 - (B) "The Five Pillars of Islam"
 - (C) "Ramadan practices"
 - (D) "Eid al-Fitr"

- 3 What role does the section "The Islamic calendar" play in the article as a whole?
 - (A) It predicts that many will be confused about when Ramadan begins.
 - (B) It suggests that Ramadan's start date is completely unpredictable.
 - (C) It identifies how Ramadan's start date is determined.
 - (D) It compares the days of the lunar calendar with the days of the solar calendar.

- 4 How does the Introduction [paragraph 1] affect the overall structure of the article?
 - (A) It explains Ramadan's basic principles.
 - (B) It provides background information about Ramadan's origins.
 - (C) It gives critical information about what fasting is.
 - (D) It encourages readers to celebrate Ramadan.