

RAMADAN

Ramadan, ninth month of the Islamic lunar calendar, is the holy month of fasting for adult Muslims. According to the Qu'ran (Koran), the sacred scripture of Islam, God requires the fast of Ramadan so that believers "may cultivate piety." The month of Ramadan is particularly sacred to Muslims because the Qur'an was first revealed to Muhammed, the prophet of Islam, during this month.

II Start of Ramadan

In the pre-Islamic Arabic calendar, the month of Ramadan fell during the heat of summer. The word Ramadan means "scorcher" in Arabic. The early Arabic calendar, like the current Islamic calendar, was lunar. Because a lunar month has only 29 or 30 days, a year of 12 lunar months falls short of the 365 days in a solar calendar. In the pre-Islamic calendar, the lunar months kept their place in the seasons by the insertion of an extra month every two or three years. The Islamic calendar abolished this practice and fixed the Islamic year at 12 months totaling 354 days. As a result Ramadan occurs about 11 days earlier each year, and it rotates through the seasons in a cycle totaling about 33 years. In the year 2000 Ramadan began on November 27.

The appearance of the new moon signals the beginning of Ramadan. The end of Ramadan is signaled by the sighting of the new moon of the next month, Shawwal. The new moon must be reported by at least two trustworthy witnesses. Because of this requirement, neither the beginning nor the end of Ramadan can be determined in advance. Depending on the visibility of the new moon, Ramadan can begin on a different date in different parts of the world.

III Fasting

Fasting during Ramadan is the fourth of the five pillars of Islam, the essential religious duties of all adult Muslims. These pillars are described in the Qur'an. Fasting begins at Fajr, the first morning prayer about an hour and a half before the sun rises. It continues until sunset. Fasting consists of abstinence not only from food and drink but also from smoking and sexual relations.

A Who Is Required to Fast

All Muslims who have reached puberty and who are mentally and physically able to sustain fasting are obliged to fast during Ramadan. People who are sick or traveling, and pregnant or nursing women, are exempt from fasting, but they must later make up any missed days upon recovery or return, or after weaning. Women who are menstruating or bleeding after childbirth are not allowed to fast, but they too must make up missed days. The elderly and incurably sick need not fast, but they are expected to feed one poor person for every day of fasting they miss.

B The Significance of Fasting

Ramadan is a month of worship, and fasting is a means of fostering piety. Muslims celebrate the glory of Allah (God) during Ramadan and thank Him for revealing the Qur'an, which they consider a guide for humanity. Muslim thinkers emphasize the religious significance of fasting and its implications for self-purification and spiritual growth, rather than the outward observance of the many rules regarding the fast. Muhammad reportedly said, "He who does not abandon falsehood in word and action in accordance with fasting, God has no need that he should abandon his food and drink."

IV Before and After Fasting

Islamic practice, based on sayings of Muhammad, recommends that Muslims have a meal, called sahur (sahoor), shortly before dawn during Ramadan. After sunset they should hasten the breaking of the fast with another meal, iftar. People eat something small to break the fast and then proceed to Magrib prayer. Then after prayer people eat a regular nightly dinner. Many families make special foods during this month to honor the discipline of the fasting. Providing iftar to others, especially to the poor, is considered highly meritorious. Many Muslims have iftar in the neighborhood mosque and invite friends, relatives, and neighbors to join them.

V Prayer

Ramadan is a month marked by worship and charity. Muslims who belong to the Sunni group, the largest sect within Islam, perform special prayers in a mosque after the evening prayers. Over the course of the month, they recite the entire Qur'an. Caliph Umar I, whom the Sunnis proclaimed the second caliph (successor to Muhammad), introduced these prayers in the 7th century. Muslims who belong to the Shia sect do not recognize the caliphs as legitimate successors and do not perform these prayers. Shia Muslims instead pray individually, rather than in congregation, at night during Ramadan.

A I'tikaf

Muslims consider prayer and reciting of the Qur'an especially important during the last ten days of Ramadan. During this time many Muslims retreat to the mosque to pray in seclusion and draw closer to God, according to the practice of Muhammad. Some believers remain there day and night. The practice of seclusion in a mosque is known as i'tikaf.

B Laylat al-Qadr

A special night of prayer occurs on the night when the first revelation of the Qur'an took place. There is no agreement about its exact date, but Sunnis generally observe Laylat al-Qadr (Night of Power, or Decree) on the 27th night of Ramadan. The Qur'an describes the Laylat al-Qadr as "better than a thousand months," the night in which "angels and the Spirit descend, by the leave of their Lord, and it is peace till the rising of dawn." Pious Muslims spend the better part of this night praying and reciting the Qur'an.

VI End of Ramadan

A festival called Eid al-Fitr (Feast of Fast-Breaking) marks the end of Ramadan. It begins with the sighting of the new moon on the first day of Shawwal, the tenth month in the Islamic calendar, and generally lasts for three days. Muslims take part in communal prayers, either in a mosque or an open space outside, and everyone must offer charity to the poor. The celebration has an important social dimension as well. Cities and towns take on a festive look, and people wear their best clothes. Friends, relatives, and neighbors meet in mosques and on streets, or visit one another, exchanging gifts, congratulations and embracing each other.

Information provided by Ismail Poonawala, professor of Islamic Studies at University of California and Heather Laird.

Additional information available at
<http://www.colostate.edu/Orgs/MSA/events/holidays.html>