
CHRISTIAN HOLIDAYS IN THE ARAB WORLD

Christianity is the religion of two billions people throughout the world, and there are three major divisions within it: the Roman Catholic Church, the Protestant denominations, and the Eastern Rite churches. Most westerners are familiar with the first two, but are much less familiar with the Eastern Rite churches, which are predominant in the Arab World.

There are nearly 14 million Christians in the Arab World. They are the descendants of the very first believers. Christians make up 10% of the total Arab population, while the great majority is Muslim. Arab Christians, like Christians all over the world, celebrate Christmas and Easter. However, Easter has more significance than Christmas in the Arab World, and is called the Great Feast 'Al-Eid Al-Kabeer'.

CHRISTMAS

The Christmas tree came to the Middle East in the second half of the 19th century. And although up till then it had played no part in the traditional celebration of Christ's nativity in the Arab World, the German custom of decorating a tree for Christmas was enthusiastically adopted by many Arab Christians, and by some Muslims as well. For the Muslims, Jesus Christ is a revered prophet. To many children in the Middle East, Christmas has also come to mean Santa Claus (minus the reindeer), gifts piled under the Christmas tree, and stockings hung up near the bed in readiness for Santa's bounty. Basically, however, Christmas continues to be a time for worship and family reunions.

EASTER

Easter commemorates the Resurrection of Jesus from Death. The Feast culminates a 50-day period of fasting and spiritual renewing where Repentance and Forgiveness are its two central themes. During the last week of the fast, The Holy Week, the church relives the agonizing last days of the earthly life of Jesus. However, on the weekend before Easter, people commemorate the Lordship and Victory of Jesus over Death in a two-day celebration.

On the Saturday of Lazarus 'Sabt Al-Azar', children visit the neighborhood homes, and recite off a scroll the story of how Jesus raising Lazarus from death after his 4-day burial. Each time they receive an egg, which they add to their Easter egg basket. Palm Sunday "Ahed Al-Sha'aneen' commemorates the triumphant entry of Jesus into Jerusalem. The celebration is very festive. Children wearing their Sunday's best and carrying lit candles decorated with spring flowers walk in a joyous procession around the church. The following Friday, The Great and Holy Friday - The Good Friday, is the most solemn of all Christian holy days. The lamentations are sung during a Requiem Service around a decorated coffin, symbolizing the coffin of Jesus.

On the Saturday of the Light, before Easter Sunday, the eggs are dyed. At night, the Rush Service (Al-Hajma) is celebrated. At the end of the Service a red-dyed egg is given to each person. The egg is an Easter symbol that denotes Renewal of life.

The kitchens of the households during these days are very busy preparing the special Easter pastries. Women prepare and bake many trays of 'Ma'moul' and 'Ka'ak'. These pastries are made of semolina dough and stuffed with walnuts, dates, sugar, and spices.

On Easter Sunday, and coming back from church, families hold big feasts where lamb is usually served. The rest of the day is spent visiting family and friends, enjoying Easter pastries, and exchanging dyed eggs.

Families play 'Egg Cracking', where two players have equal chances of cracking the other's egg. The winner egg should have at least one of its ends un-cracked.

The festivities draw to an end on Monday following Easter, when the Resurrection Gospel is read in as many languages as present people can read, to emphasize the universal message of Repentance, Forgiveness, Sacrifice and Triumph that Jesus preached and practiced.

The information in this flier was compiled by Ghada Muhanna and Victor Nassar for educational use only

Alif Institute / Arab American Fund of Georgia, PO Box 29067, Atlanta, GA 30359 - www.alifinstitute.org
Arab American Women's Society of Georgia, PO Box 467152, Atlanta, GA 31146 - www.aawsg.org