
ISLAMIC HOLIDAYS IN THE ARAB WORLD

For a fifth of the world's population, Islam is both a religion and a complete way of life. One billion people from a vast range of races, nationalities and cultures across the globe are united by their common Islamic faith. Only about 20% live in the Arab world; and the world's largest Muslim community is in Indonesia. The Arabic word 'Islam' simply means 'submission', and derives from a word meaning 'peace'. In a religious context it means complete submission to the will of God. 'Allah' is the Arabic name for God, which is used by Arab Muslims, Christians, and Jews alike.

The 'Five Pillars' of Islam: They are the framework of the Muslim life: Shahada or declaration of faith, Salat or prayer –5 times a day-, Zakat or concern for the needy, Siyam or self-purification through fasting, and Hajj or pilgrimage to Makkah for those who are able.

The two major holidays in Islam are Eid Al-Fitr following the holy month of Ramadan, and Eid Al-Adha following the final rituals of the Hajj (pilgrimage to Makkah). The prophet Muhammad*'s birthday, Mawlud Al-Nabi, is celebrated according to local custom in some regions, and not in others.

RAMADAN and EID AL-FITR

Ramadan, the 9th month of the Islamic year*, is a month of spiritual and physical purification and self-discipline: of abstention from food, drink, and marital relations from before sunrise until sunset; of feeling a common bond with the poor; of piety and prayer. Adults in good health are required to fast (with some exceptions).

Eid Al-Fitr is the feast that marks the end of Ramadan fasting, expressing happiness in having completed the fast. At the beginning of the day each member of the family performs an act of charity for the poor. Once this is completed, the family is ready for a happy holiday. The early morning prayers are said and the day is celebrated with visiting family members and friends, making special foods, calling those who are far away, or sending letters and cards. Eid Al-Fitr includes new clothes for everyone, gifts for children from parents and relatives, plays, games, puppet shows and trips to amusement parks for children.

THE HAJJ and EID AL-ADHA

The Hajj is the annual pilgrimage to Makkah that begins in the 12th month of the Islamic year. It is an obligation to those Muslims who are physically and financially able to perform it. Pilgrims wear simple garments, which strip away distinctions of class and culture, so that all stand equal before God. The rites of the Hajj, which are of Abrahamic origin, include circling the Ka'Ba seven times, and going seven times between the mountains of Safa and Marwa as did Hagar (Abraham's wife and Ishmael's mother) during her search for water. Then the pilgrims stand together on the wide plain of Arafat and join in prayers for God's forgiveness, in what is often thought of as a preview of the last judgment.

Eid Al-Adha or Feast of the Sacrifice is celebrated at the 10th day of the Hajj. It commemorates Abraham's willingness to sacrifice his son Ishmael, in obedience to God. For those on the Hajj and for Muslims worldwide, the day begins with the sacrifice of a lamb in commemoration of the Angel Gabriel's substitution of a lamb as Abraham's sacrificial obligation. One third of the meat is given to the poor, with the remainder shared with neighbors and family members. This holiday is then celebrated in much the same way as Eid Al-Fitr: with good food, gifts for children and general merrymaking.

* The Muslim calendar (AH) began with the migration (Hijra) of the prophet Muhammad from Makkah to Medina in the year 622 AD. It is a lunar calendar with 354 or 355 days. It has 12 months; each is 29 or 30 days. The Islamic year is therefore 10 days shorter than the Gregorian year, and Islamic Holidays do not follow fixed dates on the Gregorian calendar.

*The information in this flier was compiled by Rima Houssami for educational use only
References: The Arab World Notebook. Edited by Audrey Shabbas and Ayad Al-Qazzaz, 1989.*

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