

# Explaining Ramadhan to People Belonging to Other Faiths

Courtesy of the Council on American-Islamic Relations

## Who Must Fast?

Fasting is compulsory for those who are mentally and physically fit, past the age of puberty, in a settled situation (not traveling), and are sure fasting is unlikely to cause real physical or mental injury.

## Exemptions from Fasting (some exemptions are optional)

- Children under the age of puberty (Young children are encouraged to fast as much as they are able.)
- People who are mentally incapacitated or not responsible for their actions
- The elderly
- The sick
- Travelers who are on journeys of more than about fifty miles
- Pregnant women and nursing mothers
- Women who are menstruating
- Those who are temporarily unable to fast must make up the missed days at another time or feed the poor.

## Special Events

- Special prayers, called taraweeh, are performed after the daily nighttime prayer.
- Lailat ul-Qadr ("Night of Power" or "Night of Destiny") marks the anniversary of the night on which the Prophet Muhammad first began receiving revelations from God, through the angel Gabriel. Muslims believe Lailat ul-Qadr is one of the last odd-numbered nights of Ramadhan.

## Traditional Practices

- Breaking the daily fast with a drink of water and dates
- Reading the entire Quran during Ramadhan
- Social visits are encouraged.

## Eid ul-Fitr ("Festival of Fast-Breaking") Prayers at the End of Ramadhan

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- Eid begins with special morning prayers on the first day of Shawwal, the month following Ramadhan on the Islamic lunar calendar.
- It is forbidden to perform an optional fast during Eid because it is a time for relaxation.
- During Eid Muslims greet each other with the phrase "taqabbalallah ta'atakum," or "may God accept your deeds" and "Eid Mubarak" (eed-moo-bar-ak), meaning "blessed Eid."

## Ramadhan Questions and Answers

### **Q: How did the fast during Ramadhan become obligatory for Muslims?**

The revelations from God to the Prophet Muhammad that would eventually be compiled as the Quran began during Ramadhan in the year 610, but the fast of Ramadhan did not become a religious obligation for Muslims until the year 624. The obligation to fast is explained in the second chapter of the Quran: "O ye who believe! Fasting is prescribed to you as it was prescribed to those before you, that ye may (learn) self-restraint...Ramadhan is the (month) in which was sent down the Quran, as a guide to mankind, also clear (Signs) for guidance and judgment (between right and wrong). So every one of you who is present (at his home) during that month should spend it in fasting..." (Chapter 2, verses 183 and 185)

### **Q: What do Muslims believe they gain from fasting?**

One of the main benefits of Ramadhan are an increased compassion for those in need of the necessities of life, a sense of self-purification and reflection and a renewed focus on spirituality. Muslims also appreciate the feeling of togetherness shared by family and friends throughout the month. Perhaps the greatest practical benefit is the yearly lesson in self-restraint and discipline that can carry forward to other aspects of a Muslim's life such as work and education.

### **Q: Why does Ramadhan begin on a different day each year?**

Because Ramadhan is a lunar month, it begins about eleven days earlier each year. Throughout a Muslim's lifetime, Ramadhan will fall both during winter months, when the days are short, and summer months, when the days are long and the fast is more difficult. In this way, the difficulty of the fast is evenly distributed between Muslims living in the northern and southern hemispheres.

### **Q: What is Lailat ul-Qadr?**

Lailat ul-Qadr ("Night of Power") marks the anniversary of the night on which the Prophet Muhammad first began receiving revelations from God, through the angel

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Gabriel. An entire chapter in the Quran deals with this night: "We have indeed revealed this (Message) in the Night of Power: and what will explain to thee what the Night of Power is? The Night of Power is better than a thousand months. Therein come down the angels and the Spirit by God's permission, on every errand. Peace!...This until the rise of morn." (Chapter 97) Muslims believe Lailat ul-Qadr is one of the last odd-numbered nights of Ramadhan.

**Q: Is it difficult to perform the fast in America?**

In many ways, fasting in American society is easier than fasting in areas where the climate is extremely hot. This year at least, the number of daylight hours will be less than when Ramadhan occurs during the spring or summer. In Muslim countries, most people are observing the fast, so there are fewer temptations such as luncheon meetings, daytime celebrations and offers of food from friends. Many American Muslims would prefer a daytime work shift during Ramadhan so that they may break the fast with their families and attend evening prayers.

**Q: How can non-Muslim co-workers and friends help someone who is fasting?**

Employers, co-workers and teachers can help by understanding the significance of Ramadhan and by showing a willingness to make minor allowances for its physical demands. Special consideration can be given to such things as requests for vacation time, the need for flexible early morning or evening work schedules and lighter homework assignments. It is also very important that Muslim workers and students be given time to attend Eid prayers at the end of Ramadhan. Eid is as important to Muslims as Christmas and Yom Kippur are to Christians and Jews. A small token such as a card (there are Eid cards available from Muslim bookstores) or baked goods given to a Muslim co-worker during Eid ul-Fitr would also be greatly appreciated. Hospital workers should be aware that injections and oral medications might break the fast. Patients should be given the opportunity to decide whether or not their condition exempts them from fasting.

**Q: Do people normally lose weight during Ramadhan?**

Some people do lose weight, but others may not. It is recommended that meals eaten during Ramadhan be light, but most people can't resist sampling special sweets and foods associated with Ramadhan.