

URBAN MUSLIMS

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This is a special Ramadan and Eid edition of *Urban Muslims*. *Urban Muslims* is a newsletter created by MSA Northwest with the aim of becoming a resource and outlet for Muslim youth across the Northwest to reflect upon relevant issues that are affecting the Muslim society today.

We hope that everyone enjoyed a blessed month of Ramadan. Eid Mubarak and best wishes for a blessed Eid with peace and harmony among all!

- The *Urban Muslims* Editorial Team

Purifying the Heart by Areeba Soomro



Photo: Mosaab Zaki ©2012

At last the ninth month of the lunar calendar, Ramadan, has passed. As many Muslims are aware, Ramadan is the month in which the Holy Qur'an was revealed to Prophet Muhammad (pbuh). During this month Muslims are commanded to observe the fast and perform good deeds in order to get closer to Allah (swt). It is a time where the gates of heaven are open, the gates of hell are closed and the devils are chained which makes it a golden opportunity for the believers to practice spiritual

endurance and try to obtain Allah's divine guidance and mercy.

It is this blessed month where we as Muslims make special efforts to turn to our Creator with heavy hearts exhausted by the challenges and struggles that have befallen our paths.

During this month of fasting many of us make it our goal to do more good deeds, such as prayer, charity and

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My Second Ramadan by Kate Bridges-Lyman

At age 21, a college student taking summer classes, secretly Muslim for 8 months, having barely broken into the Seattle Muslim community I began my first Ramadan. I had heard about as much as the average curious non-Muslim: nothing passes through the lips from Fajr (before dawn prayer) to Maghrib (after sunset prayer), not even water or gossip. The details were not

as clear. What exactly was I supposed to do all day? What should I be eating for *suhoor* (meal before starting the fast) and *iftar* (meal after breaking the fast)? I was still not able to wake up for fajr every day and in my grogginess I made the classic beginner mistake: salty *suhoor*. Much like a zombie, I emerged

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Purifying the Heart (continued from Page 1)

reciting the Qur'an. However, it is important to realize that though these are all exceptional deeds to perform during Ramadan, we must prioritize what is necessary. Many of us go into Ramadan with the intention of doing good deeds, but many times these actions only last for the month. Once Ramadan passes by it becomes hard to keep up with the level of worship that we once attained during it. There are many reasons for this; one is made clear in a hadith from Ahmad an-Nasa'i:

Arfajah said "We were with `Utbah ibn Farqad while he was discussing Ramadan. A companion of the Prophet entered upon the scene. When `Utbah saw him, he became shy and stopped talking. The man [the companion] spoke about Ramadan, saying "I heard the Messenger of Allah say during Ramadan: "The gates of Hell are closed, the gates of Paradise are opened, and the devils are in chains. An angel calls out : 'O you who intend to do good deeds, have glad tidings. O you who intend to do evil, refrain, until Ramadan is completed.

As narrated by the hadith, the influence of *shaytan* is lessened considerably during the month of Ramadan. But as the month ends he is returned to his usual powers and repelling him becomes more difficult. Secondly, most of us use Ramadan as a time to do more good and neglect self-evaluation and reflection; this is what prevents us from getting the best out of Ramadan. We enter Ramadan with the intensity of a sprinter, trying to do every little thing. But we must remember that the race to be righteous lasts a lifetime, and sprinters can only manage short distances. So at the end we find ourselves spiritually out of breath.

Being the best Muslims we can be only through Ramadan, and letting our dedication slip for the rest of the year is of no benefit. As we know, Allah (swt) likes the deeds that are consistent as revealed in a hadith from *Sahih Bukhari* and *Muslim* "The most beloved of deeds to Allah are the most consistent of them, even if they are few."

So what should be made priority?

A man asked an Imam, "What should be priority in this month of Ramadan, to ask repentance and forgiveness or to do more good?" The Imam replied as so, "If you have a dirty stained cloth, the priority is to wash that stain and not to accessorize the cloth with decorations. If we accessorize the dirty cloth, though it may be decorated, every one still sees the dirty stain. So the priority is to get rid of that stain."

The dirty stain is referring to an impure heart. Our aim should be to get rid of the impurities in hearts and Ramadan is the time when Allah makes it easy. Therefore, before we abandon food and water, above all we must abandon our desires.

We should not only focus on increasing in good deeds and worship, but also on getting rid of the things in our life and ourselves that displease Allah (swt). This is what it means to purify the heart. The heart is the key to attaining closeness with Allah (swt) and should always be the priority. "Indeed there is a piece of flesh in the body that, if healthy, will cause the entire body to be healthy, and if it is corrupted, it will cause the entire body to be corrupted. Indeed it is the heart" (Bukhari and Muslim).

If we simply seek to do more good and avoid trying to purify ourselves, we would deny ourselves a great opportunity to become better in the sight of Allah (swt). A hadith in *Tirmidhi* reinforces this point,

Many a one who fasts obtains nothing from his fasting but thirst, and many a one who prays during the night obtains nothing from his night prayers but wakefulness.

So as we move forward let's pray that Allah (swt) gives all of us the strength to cleanse our heart, accepts all our efforts and helps us maintain that which we attain during Ramadan.

URBAN MUSLIMS editorial team

publisher

Kinza Zavary

senior editor

Atia Musazay

layout and design manager

Noor Ullah

photography

Mosaab Zaki

political contributor

Nuha Elkugia

editorial advisor

Samir Junejo

health & fitness

Mohammed Jamal

tech manager

Mary Najdzin

msanw coordinator

Ahmed Brown

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My Second Ramadan (Continued from Page 1)

from my apartment bedroom. My eyes squinting in the bright light, I made *wudhu* (ablution) to wake up. I stumbled to the kitchen to find something to eat. Why not string cheese? A little protein does the body good and no preparation required. Chugging as much water as I could until I felt sick, the fajr alarm app finally rang on my phone. My first ever fast had begun, with only 15 hours until Maghrib.

There is no god but Allah (swt), and Muhammad (pbuh) is His messenger. Check. Fasting from sunrise to sunset? Hmm not so much. For a new Muslim or a newly practicing Muslim, especially, the basics of Islam are a challenge. Even with the best case scenario, fervor of renewing one's relationship with God, realizing one's purpose of worshipping the Creator, finding peace from reading the Qur'an, and finding a community of relatively like-minded people, sometimes a new Muslim can feel discouraged about the practice of Islam. From 0 to 5 prayers a day is a start. Wearing *hijab* (headscarf and modest clothing) and throwing out all the cute but inappropriate clothes is a second step. Yet fasting the entire month of Ramadan feels like a leap.

For many converts, most of this conversion process is done with the intermittent help of well-meaning but slightly clueless friends rather than the constant guiding hand of a parent or local religious leader. The conversion process itself can often feel foreign, lonely and confusing, even for one who has very strong faith. While a convert may have faith in Allah (swt), learning to do *salah* (ritual prayer) from youtube videos or getting basic *fiqh* (Islamic religious law) advice from webshaykhs creates a kind of distant abstraction of Islam. Is Islam really practiced in the United States or only in far away places like Saudi Arabia? Are there Muslims who actually speak proper English or is everything in Arabic? The average



Kate enjoying a Ramadan iftar. Photo: Zakiya Qadir

Muslim is not always qualified to give instructions or she may not feel comfortable with Islam herself to begin teaching a new Muslim. But, especially in a place like the United States where Muslims are such a small minority, 0.6% of the population according to Wikipedia, community support is vital for a new Muslim, especially in the month of Ramadan.

Ramadan is a physically challenging month in which one is supposed to build up one's faith through worshipping God and coming to know the Qur'an more intimately: extra night-prayers, reading and memorizing Qur'an, reciting *duas* (invocations) every day. It is also a family holiday and great opportunity to connect with the Muslim community through social gatherings for iftars. There are many Muslims who are not with their families, however, and for many converts, they do not have Muslim families to share the joys and challenges of Ramadan. In my case last year every *suhoor* was eaten alone and many iftars passed in silence with little more than the company of my own thoughts.

Ramadan is supposed to be a month of both intense individual spirituality and a month of great community building. These personal and communal aspects complement each other to provide relief from potential extremes in either

direction. For a new Muslim both extremes are incredibly easy traps to fall into. The intensity of individual spirituality is particularly seductive but it ends up being counterproductive when he or she cannot last the entire month of Ramadan. Conversely, if the physical and spiritual challenges were not enough, the challenge of the keeping up with seasoned Muslim friends can add to the exhaustion and exasperation of a new Muslim. Loneliness can arise from the idea that nobody else is truly challenged by Ramadan or the idea of feeling left behind. As an adult convert it should be no problem for me to start fasting on day 1, attend an *iftar* with strangers or alone at home, stay up for *taraweeh* (night prayers), prepare *suhoor* and eat alone, and repeat for 30 days, right? Far from it, moderate and thoughtful practice of the basic requirements is far more important than extra practices like *taraweeh*. Intimate *iftars* of replenishing healthy food with close friends are far more rewarding than grandiose feasts of foreign food with the entire local *masjid* (mosque). During my first Ramadan, I was blinded by the fanfare and the race towards Paradise.

But as Allah (swt) says in the Qur'an, "Verily with difficulty there is ease" (94:5-6). Thankfully I think I have learned from the hardships I faced last year and this year I feel more confident about Ramadan. I will spend the first half with my non-Muslim family (who thankfully now knows that I am Muslim and are incredibly supportive, all thanks and praises due to Allah) and the second half with my Muslim community at MSA-UW Allah-willing. I have found inspiring books and lectures to busy myself with, and I have challenged myself to just memorize one *sura* and morning *adhkar* (remembrances). This year my goal is simple moderation and health instead of worrying about keeping up with the rest of the Muslim community.

In writing this piece, my intention was not to complain but to highlight the challenges of converts during the month of Ramadan. I hope this can act as a wake-up call for Muslims to embrace their convert brothers and sisters, to re-integrate all those who may feel alienated by the Muslim community, and to encourage those who are facing extra challenges during this holy month. I hope that Muslims who have experience fasting can reach out to those who don't in order to make this a beneficial month to all Muslims Allah-willing.

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Ramadan in Bosnia by Ena Zukanovic



Sarajevo at night, decorated for the month of Ramadan.

Photo: Bosnia Travels

The Ramadan traditions in Bosnia have been deeply influenced by the Ottoman culture in its various dimensions of social and cultural practices. These practices persist even today.

Sarajevo, which was under Ottoman rule for 500 years, enjoys the peace, happiness, and unity of all Muslim brothers and sisters, colorfully keeping the Ottoman legacy alive still. Ramadan was always a time where brothers and sisters would unite with one another. Traditions associated with Ramadan like visiting friends, relatives, gathering together for *iftar*, praying *taraweeh* in historic mosques and reciting the Qur'an in congregation all relate back to the Ottoman culture.

During the month of Ramadan, mosques are especially decorated. In Sarajevo, the minarets of the mosques are decorated with green star and crescent Ottoman flags that can be seen all around the city, from the early morning sunrise to the late night darkness. The streets of Sarajevo are illuminated with lights and most of the shop windows are decorated. When people greet each other during the month of Ramadan, they say "*Ramazan, Serifin mubarek olsun*" (May you have a blessed month of Ramadan). Even though some individuals may not know what these phrases mean literally, the phrase is used often.

Iftars are special occasions in which people invite their relatives and friends to enjoy the beauty of traditional values together. On the first day of every Ramadan, women make traditional food such as *dolma*, *sarma*, *burek* and many more, while dozens of Ottoman dishes can be seen at *iftar* during the holy month.

One of the most interesting Ramadan sights on the streets of Sarajevo is when people get into long lines just before the breaking of the fast to buy *somon*, a traditional Ramadan bread considered a core element of *iftar* in Bosnia. While in line they chat and argue while waiting for their pastry all while slowing down traffic.

When the time to break the fast comes, the streets are quickly emptied. Those who have chosen to break their fast after performing prayers in the mosque eat dates in the mosque's yard afterward, where the fruit is ready and waiting for the congregation.

Bosnians take long walks with their families and friends after *taraweeh* on Bascarsija and Ferhadiye Street. Bascarsija, which features an Ottoman fountain as a famous landmark, is a center where people gather in cafes to chat into the late hours of the night. It is possible to find Turkish tea until morning in Moriga Han, where mostly Turks gather, while other cafes have already run out of Turkish tea.

The recitation of the Qur'an has been carried out during Ramadan for centuries, even during the Bosnian war. Following the afternoon prayer, people attend the Qur'an recitation (*mukabele*) in Gazi Husrev-Beg's Mosque. The mosques are most crowded on the Night of Power.

Some of the *madrasahs*, which were part of the old Ottoman educational system, are still present in Bosnia. Today, students who have taken courses in these *madrasahs* go to different parts of the country to serve people's religious needs during the holy month. They lead the *mukabele* and other communal prayers in villages and towns.

Firing the cannons is also an old tradition that has survived over the centuries in Sarajevo. The cannons in Zuta Tabya lie next to the Kovači cemetery and are used to mark the end of the fast each day. They are a living symbol of Ottoman architecture that has persisted.

Bosnia differs from other Muslim countries in that all of these traditions were kept alive despite the existence of a communist regime for almost a half-century. Thanks to Ramadan, many Muslims in Sarajevo preserved their religious identities against the heavy pressure of communism, while also renewing ties with their Ottoman past.

Ramadan in Malaysia by Azri Azmi



Left and Right: Traditional Malaysian feast being prepared for iftar.

Photo: ISB Reading

In Malaysia, Ramadan is like a festival. It is welcomed and celebrated as a holy month. It is the month when we encourage more good deeds and repentance. Aside from being productive during the day, many people spend the night at the mosque after *iftar* or pray at home with families.

During the month of Ramadan, we have what we call Ramadan markets. It is not unlike the farmer's market but with Malay delicacies and food for breaking fast. No time to cook for iftar? This is the place to go. I usually go there with my parents in the late afternoon. Sometimes, famous stalls will have long lines. Admittedly, the abundance of food does result in some going to waste. I guess when your stomach's empty, everything seems to be delicious. So there are occasional reminders about that.

While I was at boarding school, I would wake up for *suhoor* and see some of my friends waking up like me and others still sound

asleep. I would contemplate on going down to the dining hall but then just settle for two slices of bread with peanut butter spread and milk. It was usually enough to suffice.

Fasting in Ramadan is not hard, at least for me. My friends and I go about our daily activities like we always do. We study, play soccer, with some additional events, like group Qur'an recitals, and at some late afternoons lying around in the dormitory. We would have our *iftar* together in the dining hall and would select someone to recite the *dua*. The feast is usually delicious with the option of buying additional treat from the canteen, students or teachers. Then, we would go off to the musalla for Maghrib, Isha and *taraweeh*. After that, we would head to class to study on weekdays.

I wouldn't say that people look more pious in Ramadan, but at a glance, many do. In Ramadan, with the devil out of the way, many people – and I believe not only in Malaysia – set their minds to doing the most they can to benefit from the flowing *barakah*.

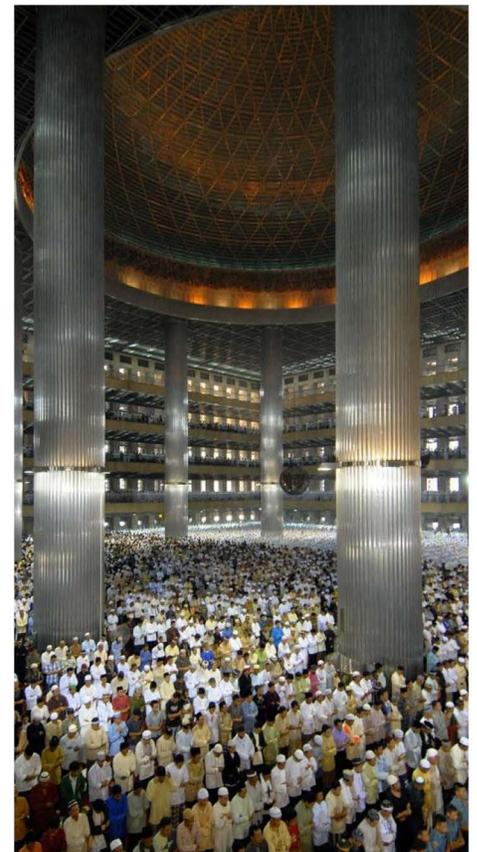


Mosques fill up in the evening, especially in the first week. The number decreases gradually in the last week as people go to their hometowns to spend the last days of Ramadan and Eid there. Aside from prayers, many people finish reciting the whole Qur'an in the month while others recite more of it than they'd usually do in other months.

I feel that Ramadan is the time when I feel at peace. With a lot of people around me reaching for Allah's mercy and pleasure in many ways, it gives myself encouragement to do the same and doing it together makes it more enjoyable. This year will be my first time of fasting in the United States. Though I know some things will be very different, I'm hoping for a great month full of blessings.

Fajr prayer in Malaysia.

Photo: Lail-AISahara.com



“When the month of Ramadan starts, the gates of the heaven are opened and the gates of Hell are closed and the devils are chained.” [Narrated by Bukhari]

Lessons from the Qur'an

The importance of Ramadan as mentioned in the Qur'an and Hadith:

"Ramadan is the month during which the Quran was revealed, providing guidance for the people, clear teachings, and the statute book. Those of you who witness this month shall fast therein. Those who are ill or raveling may substitute the same number of other days. GOD wishes for you convenience, not hardship, that you may fulfill your obligations, and to glorify GOD for guiding you, and to express your appreciation."
(2:185)

"Whoever fasts a day in the way of Allah, Allah places between him and the Fire a trench like that between heavens and the earth".
(Narrated by Tirmithi and Tabarani)

The Messenger of Allah, Muhammad , (peace be upon him) said, "Ramadan has come to you. (It is) a month of blessing, in which Allah covers you with blessing, for He sends down Mercy, decreases sins and answers prayers. In it, Allah looks at your competition (in good deeds), and boasts about you to His angels. So show Allah goodness from yourselves, for the unfortunate one is he who is deprived in (this month) of the mercy of Allah, the Mighty, the Exalted." [Narrated by Tabarani]

Ramadan Moments by Tariq Yusuf

Alhamdulillah, Ramadan is another chance Allah (swt) has given us to better ourselves. The fasting, Qur'an reading, and *iman* boosting are all significant parts of observing Ramadan. However, there are occasionally some funny moments that happen while observing this great month. Here are some that you may see coming to a masjid near you!

The Lunar Wars

Along with Ramadan comes the endless debate on which the day the month starts (and ends) on. Since the rise of instant communication, many communities often engage in debates on whether to use calculation or direct sighting to determine the days. Unfortunately this will continue to occur, so there's nothing much you can do about it.



The "Oh-my-gosh-you're-fasting-for-30-days-you're-gonna-die" Conversation



Unless you make *Itik'aaf* during the entire month, you're probably used to this by now. These conversations usually wind up into a nice 10 to 15 minute conversation on what Ramadan is, what fasting means and other miscellaneous topics on Islam. I've actually considered creating a hand-out that says "no I'm not fasting for 30 days straight" to pass to every person who asks me. Either way, these conversations are still good *dawah* opportunities.

The Iftar Eating Contest

OK, OK, I understand that after a long day of 14 hour fasting you're probably very hungry. But you don't want to be "that one muzzie" who takes three times the amount they can actually eat for *iftar*. The reality is that most of that food will go to waste because people pile up more than they can typically digest. So before you have that date with your date, think about your fellow Muslim who is just getting off school or work and shows up late to the masjid and try to take only what you need and leave some food for them. You get the reward for not wanting food and for ensuring that other fasting Muslims have food.



The 10-Hour Taraweeh



The sequel to the Iftar Eating Contest, the Ten-Hour *Taraweeh* is the marathon to finish a *Juz* per night in a mere eight (or 20) *raakat*. The foot aches, full stomach, and the smell of biryani burps from your neighbor make it hard to focus on your *salat*. I'll admit, it makes it very difficult to be able to focus on your prayer with all these factors, but remember that you're doing it for Allah and for the 2x reward.

So those are some of the funny Muslim moments you'll encounter this year. Whenever it gets rough, remember that you're doing it for Allah and He will make it easy.

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 *at a glance*

A PHOTO PRESENTATION OF EID UL-FITR 2012



Photo: Mosaab Zaki



Photo: Hibah Majid



Photo: Muhammad Sheikh



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Photo: Sonia Tariq



Photo: Sonia Tariq

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