

ENGLISH

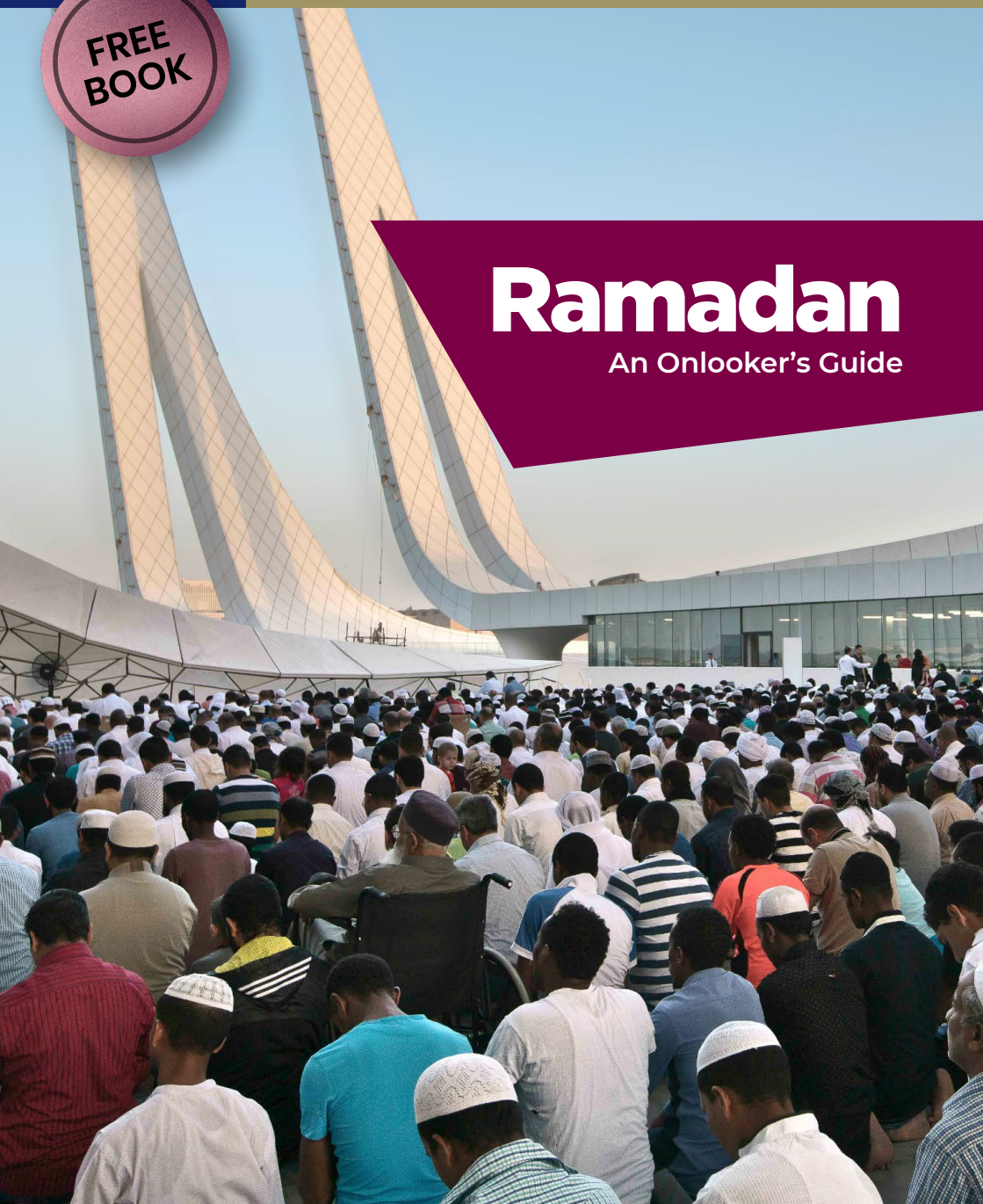
وزارة الأوقاف والشؤون الإسلامية
Ministry of Endowments and Islamic Affairs
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FREE
BOOK

Ramadan

An Onlooker's Guide



INTRODUCTION

The Muslim community is enlivened by the month of Ramadan wherever they are in the world, with a natural elevation in spirits, generosity and activity.

The month of Ramadan derives its name from the meaning of the Arabic noun *ramad*, which refers to '*the heat from the earth or stones caused by the intense heat of the sun*'. Scholars draw a similitude from the *ramad* and the burning or expiation of sins that the believer experiences during this month.

The Qur'an tells us that:

"The month of Ramadan [is that] in which was revealed the Qur'an, a guidance for the people and clear proofs of guidance and criterion..."

(QUR'AN 2:185)

It illustrates the month is founded on revelation and guidance, not simply fasting which is from the fruits and signs of guidance. Through this booklet, we aim to explore the importance of the month of Ramadan and to describe some of the acts, customs and cultures that can be found in this period of blessing.



THE MONTH OF REVELATION

Ramadan has a deep meaning for Muslims because of the link it has to the scriptures in Islam. Not only was the Qur'an revealed in this month so too were scriptures from earlier times.

In a saying of Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) we are told:

"...the Scrolls [of Abraham] were revealed in the first night of Ramadan, the Torah after 6 days of Ramadan, the Injeel [the Gospel of Jesus] after 13 days of Ramadan and the Qur'an after 24 days of Ramadan..."

(REPORTED BY AHMAD)

Muslims understand and appreciate the importance of this month to much of mankind, not just the Muslim community:



"The month of Ramadan [is that] in which was revealed the Qur'an, a guidance for the people and clear proofs of guidance and criterion..."

(QUR'AN 2:185)

We believe that, being the final revelation, the Qur'an is the only unchanged scripture extant today.

In the month of Ramadan it is common to find people devote more time to reading the Qur'an, memorising it and enjoying its recitation than at other times of the year.

There is a special prayer associated with the month where the community gathers to pray at night, it is commonly called *Taraweeh*. This prayer is longer than any of the usual, obligatory daily prayers and prayed after the night (*Isba*) prayer. It is not mandated but widely observed and typically results in a wider attendance than any of the daily prayers. It is not uncommon to complete an entire recitation of the Qur'an during this prayer over the course of the month.

THE ACT OF FASTING

One of the main acts associated with the month of Ramadan is fasting, but the idea of fasting is not one that is restricted to the Muslim community alone.

People from different walks of life fast for a variety of reasons; in some ways it may be typified as a diet. Most commonly we see fasting as an act of faith but in other examples it is used to make a political statement through “hunger-strike”, or observed due to some medical need, such as before a blood test or operation. It may also be practiced by some people taking part in ‘sponsored’ fasts, to gain empathy with those around them who are fasting, or to raise awareness of the plight of the world’s starving or simply to raise money for charity.

Fasting literally means to abstain from something for a period of time, and while a typical dictionary definition may link it to abstinence of food, for example, ‘...the act of willingly abstaining from some or all food, drink, for a period of time...’, its wider linguistic application is demonstrated historically in Islamic culture by Mary, the mother of Jesus (peace be upon them both), who undertook a vow of silence the day Jesus was born. This silence was a type of fasting from speech.

Many of the world’s religions advocate fasting and prescribe a method for it, closer inspection of which reveals different things to abstain from for different times and days.

In Islam, fasting is obliged in the month of Ramadan and the rules surrounding its performance have been clearly defined: the adult Muslim must refrain from all food, drink, and marital relations from dawn to sunset each day for the whole month.

It is common practice for the fasting person to wake before dawn, and to take a small meal known as Sahoor. This is because the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) said:

“Have Sahoor (pre-dawn meal), as indeed there is a blessing in it.”

(REPORTED BY BUKHARI AND MUSLIM)

This is the final nourishment until the time of sunset when many people gather together to break their fast, be they groups of men in the tents of Doha, families within houses, or the communities within the mosques worldwide. As the sun sets below the horizon, the practice is to rush to break the fast, for the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) said:

“...And the sun disappears, you should then break your fast.”

(REPORTED BY AT-TIRMITHI)

It is reported the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him):

“...used to break his fasting before performing (Maghreb) prayer with fresh dates; if there were no fresh dates, he would eat dry dates; and if there were no dry dates; he would take a few draughts of water.”

(REPORTED BY AT-TIRMITHI)

Because Allah points to the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) being the example to follow, we try to emulate the Prophet as much as possible. Therefore, even at the most sumptuous of banquets there will be small tubs of dates and bottles of water on the tables affording people the chance to break their fast in the manner of the Prophet (peace be upon him), before tucking into a huge meal.



THE SPIRIT OF FASTING

On a physical level, the abstinence of food, drink and marital relations are just some of the differences from a Muslim's daily routine.

The believer, during his fast, in order to draw closer to Allah, should engage in other worshipful acts with vigour; giving charity, praying extra prayers, feeding the poor and needy, reading the Qur'an and so on.

At the same time he should be extra mindful as to avoid sinful and inappropriate acts such as lying, engaging in vain talk, and wasting time watching movies or listening to music.

Essentially, the fasting person is assisted through his fasting to cultivate the type of behaviour expected of him year round, one which is pleasing to God (Allah). Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) said:

"If one does not eschew lies and false conduct, Allah has no need that he should abstain from his food and his drink."

(REPORTED BY BUKHARI)

To simply control the physical elements of fasting and to make no efforts in the spiritual area has little benefit, illustrated beautifully by Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) when he said:

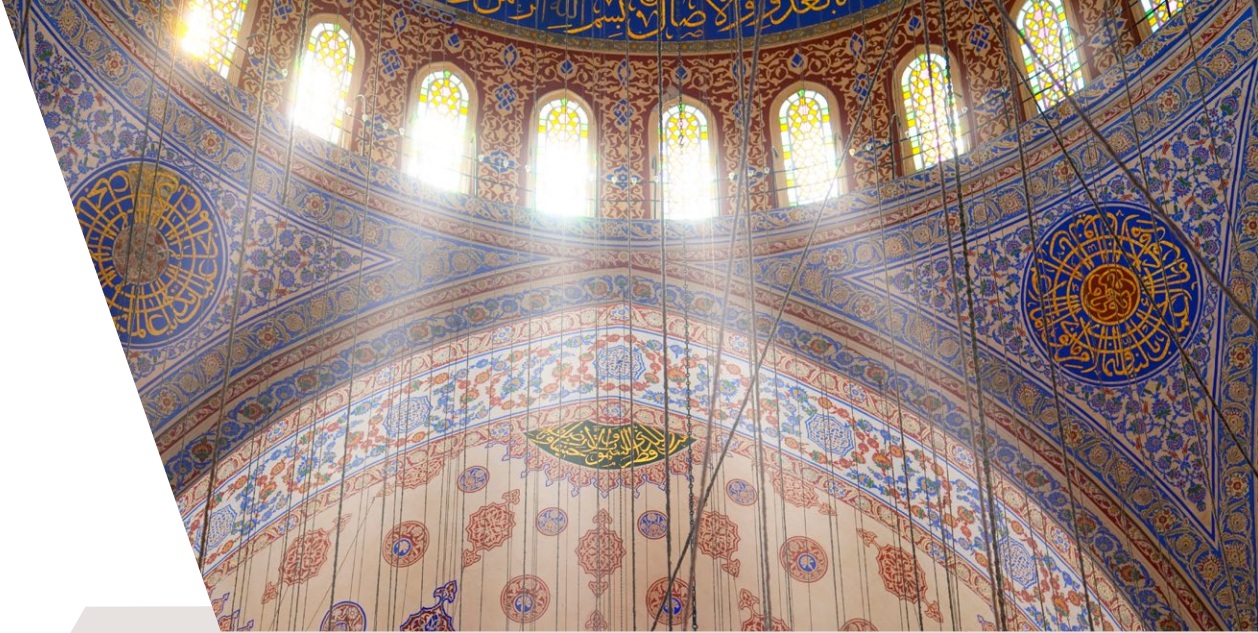
"There are people who fast and get nothing from their fast except hunger, and there are those who pray and get nothing from their prayer but a sleepless night."

(REPORTED BY IBN MAJAH)

Fasting is an act that is between the individual and Allah, no-one knows if you are actually fasting – it is easy to sneak away and have a drink or a snack in secret but Allah sees everything. Allah was quoted by Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) when he said:

"Every act of Adam's descendants is for themselves, except fasting. It is meant for Me alone, and I will give the reward for it."

(REPORTED BY BUKHARI AND MUSLIM)



WHY DO MUSLIMS FAST?

“O you who have believed, decreed upon you is fasting as it was decreed upon those before you that you may become righteous –”

(QUR'AN 2:183)

In Islam, we fast because of the direct commandment to do so, explained in the verse of the Qur'an above, hoping to draw closer to Allah. Although everyone who fasts will get some or all of the benefits of fasting, Muslims fast the month of Ramadan trying to increase in God-consciousness.

In many religions fasting is seen only as expiation for sin or atonement for sin, in Islam it is primarily to bring one closer to God. When Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) was asked “Which deed is best?” he said:

“Take to fasting, for there is nothing equal to it.”

(REPORTED BY NASAA'I)



He also quoted Allah in saying:

“Every act of Adam’s descendants is for themselves, except fasting. It is meant for Me alone, and I will give the reward for it.”

(REPORTED BY BUKHARI & MUSLIM)

There are also many worldly benefits to fasting. Anyone who fasts will feel the hunger that much of mankind feels on a daily basis, for there is a large proportion of the world living below the poverty line. This helps us to draw closer to humanity, develop empathy with others and cultivate an appreciation for that which we have been blessed with.

Fasting helps to train ourselves and promote self-control and discipline. It is a time when things ordinarily permitted, are prohibited. Being able to forego food, drink and marital relations helps us to gain control of our desires, appetites and lusts; one of the fruits of this is it becomes easier to feed someone who has a greater need than one's self, even if it means going hungry for a short time.

Many medical professionals describe the health benefits of fasting, from de-toxing the body, to helping with diabetes, cardiovascular disease and neck and back problems, and the one who practices fasting diligently will benefit from all of these.

HOW SHOULD ONLOOKERS TO THE MUSLIM COMMUNITY BEHAVE?

It may be observed that showing tolerance, respect and understanding towards others builds love between people, so when someone shows care, attention and enthusiasm it is often reciprocated.

In Qatar, care should be taken during the daytime by one who decides to eat, drink or smoke in public. It would show consideration for those fasting to not do in front of them what they may be struggling to refrain from. In the workplace, Ramadan guidelines are often explained, and places designated for lunch and refreshment. In public, most eateries are closed and in some cases it may be an offense to violate the spirit of Ramadan.



SHORTER WORKING HOURS

It is government policy in Qatar to mandate shorter working hours state-wide during Ramadan and this is manifested in different ways.

Generally, government offices will lose an hour from each working day although some may compensate for the reduced timings by offering late evening shifts. Private organisations typically run split shifts, with the night shift starting at 8 pm and finishing close to midnight and the afternoons are free.



SHOPPING!

In Qatar, many of the shops change working hours, especially restaurants which are typically closed during the daytime and open extended hours at night. Supermarkets that are usually open for most of the day close for an hour at the time of breaking the fast (*Iftar*). Many other retail outlets will simply be closed between 12 pm and 6 pm, opening for trade after the *Iftar*, and working late.

DRIVING AT IFTAR

The time of *Iftar* is one that is community inclusive, and families come together to break their fast as often as possible.

The ceremonial cannon of Qatar, fired each night from various locations during Ramadan to announce to the country that the fast is over and *Iftar* has begun, is very popular with young families and a common meeting place for the start of many *Iftar* gatherings. In their enthusiasm to arrive before the sun sets and motivated by a certain degree of hunger, people are often seen rushing around Doha at sunset. To accommodate the stragglers, many companies sponsor groups of people to distribute “*Iftar* packs” – offering dates, water and even a biscuit – at the traffic lights and interchanges.



DRESS & BEHAVIOUR

Due to the heightened religious sensitivity, the dedication to religious matters, focus upon the relationship with Allah, and the service provided to the community, we find that the Muslim community feels a greater connection to Islam.

The Muslim community becomes more religiously aware and sensitive during this month, so people should be even more careful as to how they dress in public, and how they behave publicly. Things that are taboo but have been overlooked at other times may not be overlooked during Ramadan.



QATARI TRADITIONS

The essence of Ramadan is the same the world over, but the flavour of Ramadan differs from country to country in accordance with local custom.

Here in Qatar there are many Ramadan traditions that have been handed down through the generations. We find Qatari traditions very much alive, with the month of Ramadan a daily celebration in one manner or another; this section describes a few of them.

“Daq Al-Harees”

This is an occasion celebrated while preparing for the month of Ramadan. “*Daq Al-Harees*” is a special day for grinding wheat. In large households, the family buys a large amount of wheat and invites a group of women skilled in grinding wheat to come and do the grinding. This is usually accompanied by the singing of traditional songs. The newly ground wheat would then be used throughout the month of Ramadan for preparing traditional meals.



Sharing the *Iftar*

Another Qatari tradition is the sending of food for *Iftar* to the neighbours. In the past one would see the streets fill up with children rushing around carrying dishes from house to house trying to reach their neighbours and family before sunset. Sometimes children would leave dishes at their neighbours, only to be given another to take back home. This Qatari tradition has its roots deep in the Islamic teachings.

The Ramadan Cannon

In the past the firing of a cannon used to signal the end of the fast at sunset. This was done so that even those away from the town would know it was time to break the fast. This tradition is still carried on ceremoniously and broadcast live on Qatar TV. Anyone wishing to pop along and see may do so at Souq Waqif or the State Mosque.

The Ramadan *Sufra*

Iftar time is a special time when all the extended family meet to break the fast. Grandparents, aunts and uncles, along with grandchildren all gather at the grandfather's house for a communal meal. If the grandfather is deceased then it is usually the eldest son who takes his place. It is the custom for every household to bring a dish. In large Qatari homes the *majlis* is usually where the men have their *Iftar* and the doors are always open for any guest to drop in and share the meal without any prior notice. The Ramadan *Sufra* (table-spread) varies from home to home but it is never without the following essentials:

Tamr (dates) and *Laban* (buttermilk) to break the fast.

Al-Thareed: a meal that consists of layers of extremely thin flat bread called *Rugag* that has been saturated with a meat and vegetable broth, on which some ground cinnamon has been sprinkled, and seasoned with dried black lemons.

Al-Harees: a dish which consists of small pieces of meat, wheat, and water.

Al-Lugaimat: a Qatari donut that is made from flour, sugar and yeast. It is fried then dipped in sweet syrup.



Al Ghabga

Another Qatari tradition is the “*Ghabga*”. This is a meal that takes place after midnight and to which guests are invited to share *Sahoor*, the last meal a person takes before sunrise and the beginning of the fast. These meals are usually held in the first twenty days of Ramadan, for in the last ten days of Ramadan Muslims usually dedicate the latter parts of the night for prayer, reading the Qur'an and getting closer to Allah.

Al-Musab-bar

In the past a man called *Al-Musab-bar* used to wake people up for *Sahoor* and *Fajr* (dawn) prayer. *Al-Musab-bar* used to stroll around the streets wearing traditional clothes, beating a drum and singing traditional songs to wake the people. Children loved to follow him around, repeating and singing along with him: “*People! Wake up and remember Allah who never sleeps! Wake up and remember the Prophet. Eat your Sahoor and make your way to prayer.*”

THE NIGHT BEFORE EID

On the night of Eid people give *Zakat al-Fitr*. This is a compulsory charity given in the form of food to the poor so they too may eat and celebrate the day of Eid.

This consolidates the sense of community and brotherhood emphasised by Islam. It means that all the community, rich and poor can enjoy this festive time.

Eid al-Fitr

At the end of Ramadan is an Islamic celebration called *Eid al-Fitr*. This is a period of rejoicing and rewarding one's self and family for the discipline and hard work practiced throughout the month of Ramadan.

On the day of Eid, after the *Fajr* prayer, the whole family bathes, gets dressed up in their new clothes and goes to the Eid prayer at the local prayer ground. This brings the whole community together rather than dispersed among all the mosques. From the Qatari traditions on this day is for the men folk to visit the house of their relatives after the Eid prayer. It is normal to begin with the elderly, to pay one's respects on this day. Guests will be received in the *majlis*, where greetings will be exchanged and the "*Eid Gedou*" of sweets and refreshment offered.

Throughout the morning, groups of children will be seen going from house to house calling on neighbours and relatives to give them the Eid greetings. On saying "*Eidkum Mubarak ya ahl al*



bait" (A blessed Eid to you, O people of the house!) the children will be given small sums of money as Eid gifts. By noon time these kids will be sitting on corners of the street counting their money and comparing it with how much their friends got, then they will be filling the supermarkets and shops buying themselves treats. In the afternoon and evening it is the ladies turn to visit relatives and neighbours.

On the first day visits usually begin with the parents, grandparents, and elderly relatives and neighbours. The home of an elderly lady or gentleman is never empty of guests on the first three days of celebration.

Eid announces the end of Ramadan, the special month for all Muslims, the month of patience and self-control. Muslims say goodbye to this month wishing it didn't end, hoping the year will pass by to welcome the month again with all its beautiful meanings.

SUMMARY

The month of Ramadan is often thought of as the month of fasting, however, this is only a small part of the month.

The deeper meaning is to look at the individual growth of personality, the nearness to Allah, and the increase in good deeds. People will try to increase in giving charity, being hospitable to one another, and generally doing any extra act of kindness or goodness.

Talking to a Muslim who is fasting will reveal a sense of brotherhood, a sense of community, and a sense of the joy of the month of fasting. The whole period is a time of strengthening one's relationship with Allah and building ties amongst family and friends.

The traditions found within Qatar at this time should be explored and enjoyed, from visiting the sites of the Ramadan cannon, to seeking out a Ramadan *Sufra* to break your fast.





NOTES

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