

MY RAMADAN

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Last year, our Middle East Editor, who is not a Muslim, decided to observe the holiest time of the Islamic year.

Ramadan is the ninth, and most sacred, month in the Islamic calendar, during which strict fasting is observed from dawn to sunset. Very strict.

As a rebuttal to this fast-paced, instant-gratification world of ours, I decided on a whim to join the 1.8 billion Muslims around the world last year for this religious observance. The beginning and end of Ramadan is determined by crescent moon sightings. It is considered a time of deep spiritual connection, reflection and community, and I was curious about what this experience felt like for my Muslim friends.

I had no idea what I was about to get myself into, or that I'd be relinquishing my daily intake of coffee and chocolate, rather abruptly. For the past few years that I have been [residing in the United Arab Emirates](#), I didn't know much about Ramadan, beyond it being *that time of the year when I had to hide to eat*. In a Muslim country, it is prohibited to eat or drink in public during Ramadan, regardless of who you are, so this makes for a rather interesting cultural initiation.

With great determination I announced to my Muslim friends that I was about to embark on this journey with them. This was met with multiple emojis: rolling on the floor laughing, crying tears of laughter and — after the amusement died down — more welcoming hugging and grinning faces. In fact they were thrilled, and answered all of my curious questions eagerly and without judgment. They put up with my complaining (“I'm tired”, “I'm hungry”, “We only have six more hours until we can eat”), and basically cheered me on to not give up, as I battled my way through the gruelling first days of headaches, hunger, thirst and tiredness as my body adjusted.

My first day gave way to a mild panic that steadily increased until I was convinced they had some kind of super power or secret that helped them get through. I was so far out of my depth I almost caved... but was saved with words of encouragement from my friends. They said it would get easier and I believed them. I put sticky notes all over my fridge and kitchen cupboards (*do not eat, do not open*) after realizing, pre-Ramadan, that I would eat without thinking.

With this self-imposed immersion, I began to understand Ramadan. I planned better and took greater control of my mind. I eventually succumbed and started to enjoy it. When heading off to the office kitchen, I asked a colleague to make me pretend cups of tea and I'd scold her for making it with too much milk, or using the wrong cup. It didn't matter that I would slide halfway down my chair throughout the day due to fatigue; because I knew there were probably millions of others doing the same thing. Feeling uncomfortable and weird felt strangely comfortable.

I had created five alarms – not for the five daily prayers (that was additional and a time where a friend suggested I take a moment to reflect). This was just to ensure I would wake up each morning, eat, go back to sleep for a couple of hours then wake again for work. The first of my two meals a day was

Suhoor, at around 3.30am – muesli, yoghurt, banana or berries with a pint of water. I'd try to maximise my input and fuel myself for the day. Standing on my balcony I would look out to the distant mosques and wait for the first call to prayer (for *Fajr*), a mesmerising and hauntingly beautiful sound that would carry across the empty morning sky.

Each day as sunset approached, you could see and feel an increased pace in activity as people sprung to life, scrambling to their respective meeting places or mosques in anticipation of breaking their fast. In true Ramadan tradition, an offering of dates are passed around, along with water. When at home, I'd keep an eager ear out for those first notes calling out "Allahu Akbar...", and microseconds later would bite into my favorite: a sumptuous, glossy medjool date – or two... Relishing the sticky, caramel-like taste. Its intense richness would thankfully stop me from further sugar overload.

My enquiries to visit mosques were welcomed with invitations to join Iftars (the nightly meal gatherings after breaking the daily fast which happens straight after *Maghrib*, the sunset prayer). Family, friends and colleagues join each evening – in homes, restaurants, outside mosques, lining entire pavements on streets, and extravagant private gatherings in hotels across the UAE. We are informed about the benefits of fasting for our health, however I feel the daily indulgences at endless Iftars seemed to make that a bit redundant. It's such an important time – aside from prayer – where all gatherings are centered around food, so it can be difficult to find a balance. I enforced my willpower and resisted the ubiquitous temptations for the most part.

Host to the single biggest Iftar in the UAE, the majestic Sheikh Zayed Grand Mosque in Abu Dhabi welcomed an astounding average of 30,000 people per evening. Year-on-year they provide impressive catering of generous Iftar boxes including the staple, chicken biryani, fruit, dates, salad, juice, laban and water, and the subsequent set-up and pack-down service in record timing each day. One could easily predict the number of dinner guests would have edged closer to a million this year, if it had not been thwarted by the coronavirus stopping global events in their tracks.

Seeing it is a magnificent spiritual experience unto itself. The iconic mosque has become renowned for being a leading platform of tolerance, and was one of the venues Pope Francis visited during his historical visit to the United Arab Emirates last year.

Another impressive cultural experience during Ramadan was the Sheikh Mohammed bin Rashid Al Maktoum Centre for Cultural Understanding, where expat guests are welcomed by Emiratis, and all sit together on Bedouin-style carpets to learn about the local culture under their motto 'Open doors. Open minds'. Moeen, our gracious host, guided guests through the traditional customs and rituals. No questions were off-limits and he expertly entertained everyone throughout the evening. We savoured dishes of meat, rice and vegetables that were laid out before us and it was the first time I tried *lugaimat*, a dessert of sweet dumplings drenched in a delectable date sauce.

Throughout the streets and into the deserts, Team Iftar, a group of volunteers, have for the past ten odd years given their time resolutely to serve an average of twenty thousand meals per day (they do this outside of Ramadan by the way, but the numbers are greater during Ramadan) to bedouins and labourers. They say their main motivation is just to help people – a religious instruction from Allah and the Prophet Muhammed. An act they will "carry out until their last breath".

The twenty-nine days disappeared rapidly. Before I knew it, I was receiving a message from a friend just as I arrived home from what was my last Iftar, with fifteen hundred laborers at a mosque in an industrial area of Dubai. "It's over. Well done! You have done it". I sat in a daze, not quite believing it myself. I felt proud to have taken on the challenge and reflected on how much it had changed me.

Ramadan then moved into the celebratory *Eid al-Fitr* (Festival of the Breaking of the Fast), which marks the end of the month of Ramadan and gifts are shared.

I was in awe of my friends who did this ritual every year, and I loved the passion and dedication they showed towards their faith. I felt enlightened and empowered with my newfound awareness and respect towards a culture I had lived in without really experiencing before – and proud to be living in a country whose year-long theme had been The Year of Tolerance. It spoke volumes and inspired the millions who reside in this peaceful country.

We are now faced with the surreal experience of enforced isolation around the world, and this Ramadan it's highly unlikely anyone will get to gather outside of their homes. If anything, it will pare this historic occasion right back to its roots but with a required online twist and an ask for the world to adapt for its own safety, as we figure our way through this time.

POST SCRIPT

Fasting is required throughout the whole of Ramadan with exceptions from pregnant or breastfeeding women, the elderly, young children, people with serious medical conditions or menstruating females. Missed fasts are usually made up afterward, dependent upon circumstances.

The Five Pillars of Islam are:

- 1** *Shahada* – an Islamic creed. Worship of God and acceptance of Muhammad as God's prophet.
- 2** *Daily prayers (Salat)* – 5 times a day in the direction of Mecca.
- 3** *Fasting during Ramadan (Sawm)*. This increases *taqwa*, an Islamic term for being conscious of God and general spiritual purity.
- 4** *Giving (Zakat)* – sharing with those less fortunate. Those who can afford it give 2.5% of their yearly earnings. Often Muslims pay this before offering Eid prayers.
- 5** *Pilgrimage to Mecca (Hajj)* – all Muslims who are able, are required to make a pilgrimage to Mecca at least once in their lifetime. This year the pilgrimage is up in the air due to the Coronavirus.

History shows many cancelled Hajj gatherings from years gone by, however since the formation of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (in 1932), this would be a first. Minister of Hajj and Umrah, Dr. Muhammad Saleh Benten, has urged Muslim's around the world to halt their planned pilgrimage, which is currently scheduled for between July 28th and August 2nd.

Massive expansions to infrastructure and transport — the Great Mosque of Mecca, a high speed train, Jeddah's King Abdulaziz Airport, hotels, malls and tent cities — have seen many billions of dollars invested into Saudi Arabia's religious tourism sector to oblige the ever-increasing number of visiting Muslims.

The gigantic infrastructures have been refined over the years, including cooled marble flooring, air-conditioned tents and water-spraying fans in the thousands.

A successful completion of Hajj and its religious re-enactments, claims transformation and a chance to emerge cleansed of all wrongdoings. Ego and status is stripped away with the wearing of *ihram*, a plain white ceremonial cloth for men and a plain white abaya for the ladies.

[EN] Mohed Altrad's personal insight

Prior to [lockdown](#), I read a book by Mohed Altrad, a widely respected and successful Syrian-born, French businessman and author, who had previously spent time living in the UAE. *Badawi* is a semi-autobiographical account of a young Bedouin who lived in the Syrian desert (and I won't spoil the rest). Having lived firsthand through intense struggles and hardships, I asked Mr Altrad his thoughts on how the pandemic would impact the region.

"The cancellation of the next hajj pilgrimage would obviously be bad news for all Muslims. To begin with, not the most important thing, the economy that has built up around the hajj will necessarily be affected by this decision. That an economy encounters difficulties is never a good thing because behind the figures there are men and women; it is therefore not a good thing but nor is it a drama in this case."

"Besides that, and much more importantly, there are those who have been preparing to do their hajj and who will not be able to do it. For them it is more dramatic. The hajj is a very heavy undertaking for the believer; it is a key moment in a life that requires long preparation, inner, spiritual, as well as material. So, yes, for them the cancellation of the hajj will have a strong impact."

"But consider that last year this pilgrimage brought nearly 2.5 million pilgrims from all over the world! And imagine the virus spreading through that crowd! As a Muslim, you are responsible for yourself and for others. We cannot ignore the situation. It is our duty to take sanitary measures so that an undertaking that is prescribed for life does not turn into behavior that could lead to death."

[FR] L'éclairage et le point de vue personnel de Mohed Altrad

Avant le confinement, j'ai lu un ouvrage de Mohed Altrad, homme d'affaires et auteur français d'origine syrienne, prospère et largement respecté, qui avait auparavant vécu aux Émirats Arabes Unis. *Badawi* est un récit semi-autobiographique d'un jeune bédouin qui vivait dans le désert syrien (et je ne vous dévoilerai pas le reste de l'histoire). Mohed Altrad ayant tout d'abord vécu des périodes de difficultés intenses au début de sa vie, je lui ai demandé quelles étaient ses réflexions sur l'impact que la pandémie pourrait avoir sur la région.

« L'annulation du prochain hajj serait évidemment une mauvaise nouvelle pour tous les musulmans. Pour commencer par ce qui n'est pas le plus important, l'économie qui s'est construite autour du hajj sera nécessairement touchée par cette décision. Est-ce dramatique ? Qu'une économie rencontre des difficultés n'est jamais une bonne chose car derrière les chiffres il y a des hommes et des femmes ; ce n'est donc pas une bonne chose mais ce n'est pas un drame non plus dans ce cas précis. »

« A côté de cela, et beaucoup plus important, il y a ceux qui se préparaient à faire leur hajj et qui ne le pourront pas. Pour eux, c'est plus dramatique. Contrairement au jeûne pendant le mois de ramadan par exemple, le hajj est une démarche très lourde pour le croyant ; c'est un moment clef dans une vie qui exige de longs préparatifs, intérieurs, spirituels, aussi bien que matériels. Alors, oui, pour eux l'annulation du hajj aura un fort impact. »

« Mais songez que l'année dernière cette fête a vu défiler près de 2, 5 millions de pèlerins venus du monde entier ! Et imaginez que le virus se propage dans cette foule ! Lorsqu'on est musulman, on est responsable pour soi et pour les autres. On ne peut ignorer la situation. On se doit de prendre des mesures sanitaires afin qu'une démarche qui est ordonnée à la vie ne se transforme pas en un comportement fauteur de mort. »

PHOTOS by LEONI MILANO



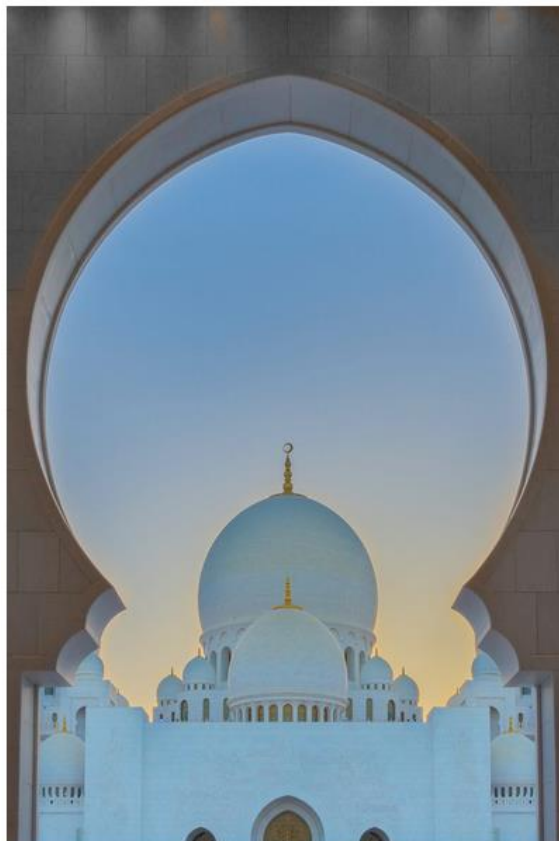
Canon firing ceremony at Sheikh Zayed Grand Mosque in Abu Dhabi



Nighttime board games at a cafe in Dubai's art precinct, Alserkal Avenue



A gathering of 1,500 laborers which Team Iftar volunteers fed



Blue hour at Sheikh Zayed Grand Mosque



Shoes outside an Iftar dining tent



Iftar at Sheikh Zayed Grand Mosque



A Pakistani man waits patiently for the Iftar call with his prayer beads



Dubai police during a canon firing at Madinat Jumeirah



A lavish private Ramadan setting at the Four Seasons Hotel in Abu Dhabi



A man preparing a simple Ramadan meal in his kitchen



Workers line up for beverages



Team Iftar preparing mass quantities of chicken biriyani



Top: Evening shisha preparation at Moroccan restaurant, Almaz by Momo
Sheikh Zayed Grand Mosque

Bottom:



Men gather nightly to play foosball in Al Fahidi, Dubai, a ritual that has continued for years



A man rushes in to make prayer time at a mosque in old Dubai



An imam calls for final prayer of the evening at Diwan Mosque in the Al Fahidi Historic District



Men slowly trickle in to a mosque in Abu Dhabi for Maghrib prayer on the first evening of Ramadan



Expats and Emiratis gather for Iftar at Sheikh Mohammed Centre for Cultural Understanding



Bread deliveries in the industrial district of Jebel Ali, Dubai



Evening Iftar for laborers in the streets of old Dubai



Years old friendship gatherings in the Al Fahidi district of Dubai