

Civilizations Exchange & Cooperation Foundation



RAMADAN IN AMERICA

by

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A guide developed for the staff of AFS, as well to assist Muslim students and U.S. families hosting Cultural Exchange students from predominately Muslim countries.

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UNDERSTANDING ESSENTIAL COMPONENTS OF RAMADAN

What is Ramadan?

Ramadan is the name of the ninth month of the Islamic lunar calendar and is the most respected and blessed month of the Islamic year. **Ramadan** (month of fasting) is also one of the five pillars of Islam, in addition to the **Shahadah** (testimony), **Salat** (prayer), **Haji** (pilgrimage) and **Zakat** (almsgiving). It was during this month that the Muslim's holy book, the **Qur'an** (Koran), was revealed to Prophet Muhammad through Arch Angel Jibreel. Participating Muslims abstain from food, drink and intimate relations with their spouses from dawn until sunset. They also refrain from impure or immoral actions, thoughts and words. Fasting is meant to purify the soul, refocus one's attention on **Allah** (God), and teach the person patience, sacrifice and humility. Ramadan is a time to fast for the sake of **Allah** (God), to increase one's prayers and acts of charity, as well as to place greater attention on self-accountability and self-restraint. This intense introspection and reaffirmation of one's faith is similar to Lent in the Christian tradition.

During Ramadan, Muslims ask for forgiveness for past sins, pray for guidance and help in refraining from everyday sins. They are instructed to make peace with those who have wronged them, strengthen ties with family and friends, break bad habits and put their lives, thoughts, and feelings into proper perspective. All of these efforts are ways in which Muslims strengthen their relation with Allah.



As you can see, Ramadan is much more than not eating or drinking. During Ramadan, Muslims try to regain control over every part of the body. For example, the tongue must not be allowed to backbite and gossip. The eyes must not look at unlawful things. The hand must not take anything that does not belong to it. The ears must not listen to idle talk or obscene words. The feet must not go to places where there is no benefit. If you really understand the essence of Ramadan, every part of the body observes the fast.

The social aspect of Ramadan is felt throughout the month. People fast together and break the fast together. Families and friends invite one another for "Iftar and Suhur. Looking after the poor, the needy and the less fortunate is what defines the month of Ramadan. It is the month of giving and receiving.

The following verses in Chapter 2 of the Qur'an instruct Muslims on fasting:

Chapter 2, Verses 183-186

O you who believe! Fasting is prescribed to you as it was prescribed to those before you, that you may (learn) self-restraint,-

(Fasting) for a fixed number of days; but if any of you is ill, or on a journey, the prescribed number (Should be made up) from days later. For those who can do it (With hardship), is a ransom, the feeding of one that is indigent. But he that will give more, of his own free will, - it is better for him. And it is better for you that you fast, if you only knew.

Ramadan is the (month) in which was sent down the Qur'an, 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, but if anyone is ill, or on a journey, the prescribed period (Should be made up) by days later. Allah desires ease for you, and He does not desire for you difficulty. (He wants you) to complete the prescribed period, and to glorify Him in that He has guided you; and perchance you shall be grateful.

When My servants ask you concerning Me, I am indeed close (to them): I listen to the prayer of every suppliant when He calls on Me: Let them also, with a will, Listen to My call, and believe in Me: That they may walk in the right way.

When Does Ramadan Begin and End?

Ramadan is expected to begin in the U.S on or around August 1, 2011 and will finish on or around August 29, 2011. Keep in mind that the exact date differs from place to place based on the method followed to determine the birth of the new moon in the lunar calendar.

Exchange students may have some confusion about these dates since disputes arise every year about where and when the moon was sighted, and on which day Ramadan begins and ends. We suggest that students check with their local mosque and fast with their local community. You can go to the following site and enter your zip code to find a listing of mosques, and Islamic Centers in your local area in the United States – www.islamicfinder.com.

Where Can Muslims Get the Daily Prayer Times?

Muslims find it helpful to have a “prayer calendar” to inform them when to begin fasting, when to break their fast, and when to make their prayers. A prayer calendar can be obtained by going to www.islamicfinder.com and entering your zip code. Click on “**monthly prayer times**” on the right side of the page to get a prayer calendar.

How Will the Daily Life of Muslims Change During Ramadan?

Ramadan has a special place in the hearts of Muslims. To those who practice other faith traditions, fasting for 29 or 30 consecutive days from dawn to sunset, putting forth extra effort to read the Qur’an each day, offering additional prayers and increasing one’s acts of charity and kindness, may seem close to impossible to incorporate into an already busy lifestyle. This is why, in countries with large Muslim populations, schools decrease the amount of homework given during Ramadan and markets close down in the evening to enable people to perform Taraweeh prayers and enjoy the *Iftar* (break the fast) meal - then these markets re-open for part of the night. Many Muslims shop, eat, and spend time with their friends and family during those hours. Families also eliminate unnecessary activities in their day to day schedules, keeping in mind that a fasting person does not have quite the same level of energy and is trying to re-direct their efforts toward growing spiritually and morally. A noticeable increase in spirituality can be felt throughout the entire community as they become a unified force striving together to please their Almighty Lord and Creator.

According to the well-known hadith (sayings of Prophet Mohammad), *“The person who observes Ramadan properly will have all their past sins forgiven.”*

According to another hadith, *“When Ramadan arrives; heaven's gates open, hell's gates close, and the demons are chained up”.*

When Can Muslims Eat?

The two meals in Ramadan are **Suhur** and **Iftar**.

1. **“Suhur” - This meal is eaten before beginning the fast at dawn.**

Muslims must wake up before dawn in the morning to prepare their “early breakfast” and pray. For households in which everyone is not fasting, the alarm and movements in the kitchen and bathroom may disturb those who are still sleeping. Students should do their best to be considerate, turn off their alarm clocks quickly, and move through the house as quietly as possible. For those who are not fasting, it helps to remember that this meal is very important for the health of a fasting person and a normal schedule will resume after one month. *(This meal can be as simple as eggs and toast, leftovers from dinner the night before, a sandwich or other nutritious foods. Eating a little protein will help since as it digests, it slowly releases energy as opposed to foods high in sugar that will give you an initial boost of energy, followed by a feeling of hunger and fatigue. Depending upon the type of food, it can also be prepared at night so it is ready for the student at dawn for convenience. Muslims should be encouraged to drink plenty of fluids (particularly water) throughout the night and just before starting the fast to avoid any hydration issues.)*

In addition to eating Suhur and praying **Fajr prayer** (first prayer of the day), many Muslims also choose to read Qur’an and make additional prayers.

2. **“Iftar” - This meal begins at sunset and breaks one’s fast.**

Traditionally dates, “a natural sweet” and water are used to break the fast. Fruits, soups and juices can also be used to break the fast. **Maghrib** (sunset prayer) is then offered, followed by a nutritious, high-protein meal.

(In many countries lentil, bean and other types of soups and dishes can be prepared in advance and offered as part of the meal.)



Muslims must wait until sunset before breaking their fast. For households in which everyone is not fasting, a little understanding exhibited by everyone will go a long way. For those who are not fasting, please do not get upset, if Muslims go to another room in the house until it is time to break their fast. Muslims, on the other hand, should understand that other members in the household are not required to wait until sunset to eat dinner. Although this schedule of different dinner meals may be a bit inconvenient, it is temporary.



The importance of drinking plenty of water and eating nutritious meals cannot be emphasized enough. Information and examples of good sources of protein are listed below. A nutritious Suhur and Iftar will help Muslims keep pace with life in America. The academic and extra-curricular calendars may not lighten up during Ramadan as they may in other countries around the world. If Muslims are engaged in sports during Ramadan, you may want to explain to your coach that you will be fasting. Ask, if you can observe the practices without engaging in them and you will make up for it once Ramadan is over.

Fasting in Alaska

It is understood that the commandment of fasting the month of Ramadan was revealed in the second year of the migration of Prophet Muhammad to Madina, which is approximately 300 miles north of his birth place, Makka, in what is known as Saudi Arabia today. That region is more centrally located on our planet compared to countries closer to the North and South Poles, which have extremely long days or nights depending upon the time of year.

In Alaska, for instance, the length of the day in August 2011 will be close to 20 hours. In this case, YES students could begin and end their fast according to the nearest “normal” city.

The following comparison is based on my research through www.islamicfinder.org to shed more light on the timings of the 5 daily prayers / and the typical day of fast. It will study two cities: Anchorage in Alaska and San Francisco in California.

CITY	DAWN	SUNRISE	NOON	AFTERNOON	SUNSET	EVENING
Anchorage	4:13	6:07	2:04	6:11	09:59	11:53
San Francisco	5:07	6:25	1:15	5:01	8:03	9:22

YES Students Who Choose Not to Fast

If a student decides not to fast for a reason about which they feel strongly, then their choice is to be respected. People practice at different paces and the Qur’an clearly leaves each person free to choose.

Health Benefits and Sources of Protein

Eating enough protein is essential to maintain a healthy body. Along with carbohydrates, protein provides energy for the body which helps keep us from becoming fatigued. Another one of the benefits of protein is helping the body fight off illness and disease and keeping the immune system functioning properly. Also, if the body sustains an injury, such as a cut, protein helps with tissue repair.

The muscles in our bodies are partly made up of protein. One of the benefits of protein is maintaining healthy muscles. Protein also helps build skin, hair, nails and cartilage. Because the body does not store protein, it's important to eat healthy protein every day. **Fish, eggs, milk, cheese, chicken, beef, nuts, almonds, beans, whole grains and soy are a few key sources of protein.**

What Will Break the Fast of a Muslim?

Eating, drinking, smoking and marital relations during the day while fasting, will break the fast.

According to the Holy Quran in Chapter 2, verse 187:

....One may eat and drink at any time during the night "until you can plainly distinguish a white thread from a black thread by the daylight: then keep the fast until night....."

Muslims are also taught that the good / virtues acquired through the fast can be destroyed by five things: 1) telling a lie; 2) slander; 3) denouncing someone behind his back; 4) a false oath; and 5) greed and covetousness. These acts are considered offensive at all times, but are most offensive during the fast of Ramadan. Failing to fast without a legitimate excuse or openly flaunting such behavior during Ramadan is also considered a sin.

What Happens If Muslims Accidentally Eat or Drink?

A person, who is observing Ramadan, might accidentally take a bite of something or a drink. If this occurred, fasting is still valid, but one should spit out the liquid or food and immediately resume the fast.

Who is Exempt from Fasting?

The following people are exempt from fasting:

- **Elderly and ill** – *These individuals must feed one poor person each day in place of missing the fast;*
- **Women, who are pregnant, menstruating or nursing newborns and Muslims, who are traveling** – *These individuals must make up the days they miss at a later date prior to the beginning of the next Ramadan;*
- **Insane and children not at the age of puberty** – These individuals are completely exempt from the fast. However, many children enjoy participating and are encouraged to practice their fasting. They may fast from a meal, for part of a day, for one day on the weekend, from a particular food, etc. In this context, children can enjoy the feeling of participating in a "grown-up" activity and the special events of the family and community. However, modeling fasting behavior is important with developing confidence in their ability to fast.

Children commonly participate in Ramadan in other ways, aside from the daily fast. They may collect coins or money to donate to the needy, help cook meals for breaking the fast, or read Qur'an with the family in the evening.

NOTE: For those not feeling well, please consult with a doctor about the safety of fasting.

In Addition to Fasting, What are Important Elements of Ramadan?

Reflection & Purification of the Soul

Ramadan is a time of reflecting and worshiping God. Muslims are expected to put more effort into following the teachings of Islam. Purity of both thought and action is important. The fast is intended to raise one's awareness of how to grow closer to **Allah** (God), to redirect the heart away from worldly activities and cleanse the inner soul. Properly observing the fast is supposed to induce a comfortable feeling of peace and tranquility. It also allows Muslims to practice self-discipline, self-control, sacrifice, and sympathy for those who are less fortunate. It inspires one to be more generous and charitable.

Prayer and Reading the Qur'an

In addition to fasting, Muslims are encouraged to have a quality time with Almighty God by reading His holy book, the Qur'an. Some Muslims perform the recitation of the entire Qur'an during special prayers, called *Taraweeh*. During Ramadan extra prayers are performed each evening called "Taraweeh prayers." They can be prayed in congregation at the mosque or alone at home. The prayers are performed every night of the month and a whole section of the Qur'an, which is 1/30 of the Qur'an, is recited. Therefore the entire Qur'an would be completed at the end of the month.



The wife of the Prophet (saw) asked him the best supplication one could make to Allah in this blessed month, and the Prophet (saw) told her to say this prayer:



“O Allah, You, indeed, are the All-Forgiving. You love to Forgive; thus forgive me”.

(Students may be spending more time in his/her room performing Taraweeh prayers during this month.)

Lailat-al-Qadr (the Night of Power)

Lailat-al-Qadr is a very special night and considered the most holy night of the year. This night signifies when the Qur'an was revealed to Prophet Muhammad, but is not exactly known on which night in Ramadan it will fall. Muslims believe it to have occurred on an odd-numbered night during the last 10 days of Ramadan, i.e. the night of the 21st, 23rd, 25th, 27th or 29th. The Qur'an equates the value of this night with the worship of a thousand months. Muslims try to spend this night performing extra worship including offering prayers for most of the night and reading Qur'an. This year, Lailat-al-Qadr is expected to fall on Friday, August 26, 2011.

Zakat al-Fitr (Charity of Breaking the Fast)

Before the day of Eid, during the last few days of Ramadan, Muslim families give *Zakat al-Fitr* (a set amount as a donation to the poor). This donation could be in the forms of foods like rice, barley, dates, rice, etc. to ensure that the needy have a holiday meal and participate in the celebration. It can be given in the form of money (equal to one meal of \$10.00).

(Exchange students will not need to worry about this since their parents will donate on behalf of their entire family.)

How do Muslims Celebrate the End of Ramadan?



Ramadan ends with a period of celebration called *Eid ul-Fitr*. “*The Festival of Breaking the Fast*” is the most spiritually fulfilling holiday for the Muslims around the world. They feel a tremendous sense of accomplishment and joy for completing the commandments of God during this intensive month of worship. These moments of happiness begin with the news of the “sighting of the moon” during the last night of Ramadan, which announces the beginning of the new month of Shawwal.



Muslims put on their best, usually new, clothes, gather early in the morning in outdoor locations or mosques to perform the Eid prayer. This consists of a sermon followed by a short congregational prayer of two rakaat only. It is an optional prayer as opposed to the compulsory five daily prayers. Following the prayer in the morning, people visit one another, exchange gifts and call family members.

Each country has a special type of food and sweets that are served during the Eid. The joy is similar to Christmas and other holidays in America. It is a 3 day celebration and includes new clothes for everyone, gifts for the children from the parents, relatives and close friends, as well as plays, games, puppet shows and trips to amusement parks. Community members also visit hospitals and other centers to distribute gift bags and Qur’ans to those who are ill or unable to celebrate with the community. In most Muslim countries, the entire 3-day period is an official government/school holiday.



Following the first day of Eid ul-Fitr, Muslims are encouraged to fast for the next six days known as *as-Sitta al-Bayḍ* (the white six).

Eid ul-Fitr is expected to be on or around **August 30, 2011**. Just as with the beginning of Ramadan, the exact dates are difficult to determine in advance, due to the nature of the lunar calendar. Estimates are based on the expected sighting of the crescent moon following a new moon.

What are the Benefits of Ramadan?

Ramadan is a period of fasting, reflection, devotion, generosity and sacrifice observed by Muslims around the world. While major holidays of other faiths have largely become commercialized events, Ramadan retains its intense spiritual meaning. Ramadan is by nature a time of sacrifice.

- Through fasting, a Muslim experiences hunger and thirst, and sympathizes with those in the world who have little to eat every day.
- Through increased devotion, Muslims feel closer to their Creator, and recognize that everything we have in this life is a blessing from Him.
- Through increased charity, Muslims develop feelings of generosity and good-will toward others. The Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) once said, "A man's wealth is never diminished by charity."
- Through self-control, a Muslim practices good manners, good speech, and good habits.
- Through changing routines, Muslims have a chance to establish healthier lifestyle habits -- particularly with regards to diet and smoking.
- Through family and community gatherings, Muslims strengthen the bonds of brotherhood and sisterhood in their own communities and throughout the world.

Ramadan is a very special time for Muslims, but the feelings and lessons we experience should stay with us throughout the year. In the Qur'an, Muslims are commanded to fast so that they may "learn self-restraint." This restraint and devotion is especially felt during Ramadan, but we all must strive to make the feelings and attitudes stay with us during our daily lives. That is the true goal and test of Ramadan.

How Can Host Families Support the Students During Ramadan?

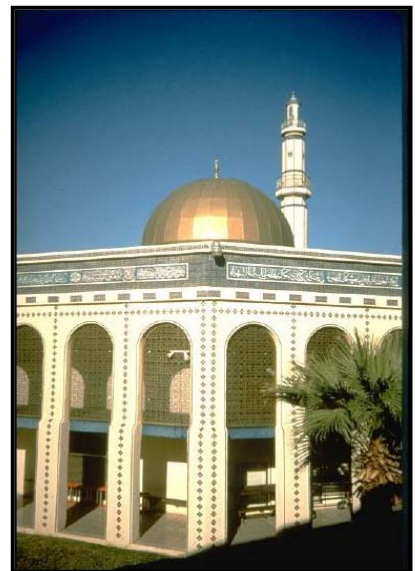
Host Families can support their students by:

1. Remembering there are varying levels of practice among Muslims. Some Muslims are very practicing, while others may choose not to fast or pray at all. You will find it helpful to engage

your student in some conversations shortly after they arrive so you can better understand them and the amount of time they may spend in worship. You will also want to share with them what a typical week for your family looks like and types of activities in which you are involved.

Although your knowledge of their culture may not be great, reassure them that you want to learn more about their country, culture and religion. Most important, stress that you are a support for them, if they should need anything. This dialogue will help ease the transition for both you and your student during the early stages of their stay in the US;

2. Asking your student to tell you what they normally do during Ramadan and what kinds of foods they eat;
3. Encouraging them to get up and eat a nutritious Suhur;
4. Making them feel comfortable to eat Iftar (after the family may have already eaten their dinner);
5. Understanding that your student might spend quite a bit of time in their room;
 - a. to avoid causing discomfort to other members in the household who want to eat and drink,
 - b. to read more Qur'an,
 - c. to rest since they will have lower energy levels,
 - d. to perform Taraweeh prayers following Iftar (evening meal),
 - e. to perform additional prayers in the morning before Suhur (early morning meal),
6. Taking them to a mosque for community Iftar and prayer once a week on the weekends (if there is a mosque in reasonable driving distance from your home). To find a mosque close to you, go to this website www.islamicfinder.com and enter your zip code ;
7. Asking the school administration, if they will permit the student to participant in the Eid ul-Fitr activities like community prayers and possible visits with friends (if you have a mosque near your home);
8. Arranging a special family dinner and invite a few of their friends (like a mini Thanksgiving, Bar-B-Que, or Picnic) and give them a small gift or card, if the mosque is far from your home;
9. Allowing the student to call their natural parents or family back home; and
10. Keeping the family dog out of the student's room.



11. Hanging a colorful banner in the house during the month that says “Ramadan Mubarak” or on the last day of Ramadan hang a banner that says “Eid Mubarak”. If you have younger children, they will have a great time helping to prepare the banner.

What are the Traditional Greetings?

Muslims observe two major holidays: **Eid ul-Fitr**, which takes place at the end of the annual month of fasting (**Ramadan**) and **Eid ul-Adha**, which takes place at the end of the annual pilgrimage to Mecca (**Hajj**). During these times, Muslims give thanks to Allah (God) for His bounty and mercy, celebrate the holy days, and wish each other well. While special words in any language are welcome, there are some traditional or common Arabic greetings that one may use:

Eid Mubarak!

Blessed Eid!

Eid Saeed!

Happy Eid!

Kul 'am wa enta bi-khair!

May every year find you doing well!

Taqabbala Allahu minna wa minkum.

May Allah accept from us and from you.

Reminder to Cultural Exchange Students about New Experiences

Communication is the KEY! Students need to be prepared for longer hours of fasting in August and early September. The pace of life in America is not altered or lightened during the month of Ramadan.

You will need to talk with your host family about:

- Ramadan and what you might need or want
- Practices during Ramadan in your country and your family traditions
- Special dishes prepared for Suhur and Iftar

You will need to be considerate of your host family by:

- Not spending too much time in your room - If you are tired or need to pray, let them know so they do not feel that you are uncomfortable and trying to avoid spending time with them.
- Not interrupting or making loud noises as you wake up early for Suhur, to read Qur'an and to pray Fajr since family members may still be sleeping
- Understanding, if your family cannot take you to the mosque often or at all since some towns have mosques close by and others do not have mosques at all

You will need to talk to your school administrator or principal:

- Explain to them about Ramadan and the impact fasting might have on your participation in sports
- Explain that you need to pray and ask for a quiet area in an office, classroom or library
- Obtain permission to wear a scarf, sweatpants and long sleeves under the gym uniform and sports uniform

Please keep in mind: Some schools (not all) allow students to participate in athletic activities during Ramadan and lighten the workout schedule for them temporarily.

For More Information, Contact CECF

If you have any additional questions, please feel free to contact Imam Mohamad Bashar Arafat at CECF.

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