

## The Islamic calendar

The Islamic calendar is the official calendar in Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, Yemen, and some other Middle Eastern countries, and is used privately by Muslims everywhere. The Islamic Calendar is lunar. It is mathematically calculated to comply with the moon changes as observed from a fixed point on the globe. It is based on a Synodic Period of 29 days+12 Hrs.+44'+2.9"=1 Lunar Month = 29.5305891204 days. There are 354 days in a year, which is divided into 12 Lunar Months. The fractional part in the Lunar Month makes it necessary to introduce an intercalated day, whenever the cumulative fraction of time becomes  $\geq 1$ , totalling the number of days in that year to 355 days. Since the year in the Islamic calendar is shorter than a solar year, the months drift with respect to the seasons, in a cycle 32.5 years long

## Islamic Holidays

The Islamic calendar began in the year CE 622, marking the Prophet Muhammad's emigration from Makkah to Madinah. This event is known as the Hijra, and dates in the Muslim calendar are marked by the Latin notation "AH," for anno hegirae (the year of emigration). The calendar has twelve lunar months, which means that each month is equal to the number of days it takes the moon to orbit the earth. The months of the Islamic year are: Muharram, Safar, Rabi` al-Awwal, Rabi` al-Akhir, Jamadi al-Awwal, Jamadi al-Akhir, Rajab, Sha`ban, Ramadan, Shawwal, Dhu al-Qadah, and Dhu al-Hijjah.

Because a lunar month varies in length from 29 to 30 days, the Muslim year is about eleven days shorter than the 365-day Gregorian year, which is based on a solar calendar. Because the Islamic year is shorter, however, seasons will begin and end at different times from year to year, and Muslim holidays occur in different seasons over the years.

`Eid al-Adha ("festival of the sacrifice") commemorates Abraham's submission to God's will, represented by his willingness to sacrifice his son Isma`il (Ishmael) at God's request. According to the Qur'an, as well as the Bible and the Torah, just as Abraham was about to lower his knife, God mercifully replaced the boy (Isma`il in the Qur'an, Isaac in the Bible and Torah) with a sheep to be sacrificed in his place. Abraham had stood the ultimate test of faith, and this holiday celebrates his piety. `Eid al-Adha begins on the tenth day of Dhu al-Hijjah, which is the twelfth month in the Islamic calendar. It marks the end of the yearly pilgrimage to Makkah. It is the custom on `Eid al-Adha to sacrifice a sheep, as Abraham did in place of Isma`il. Many Muslim families divide the meat into thirds, keeping one-third for themselves, giving one-third to their relatives and friends, and donating one-third to the poor. `Eid festivities include giving gifts—usually money—to children. Muslim families spend the holiday visiting neighbors and friends, exchanging greetings and salutations of peace.

`Eid al-Fitr ("festival of breaking the fast") is celebrated on the first day of Shawwal. `Eid al-Fitr marks the end of Ramadan—the ninth month of the Islamic calendar, during which Muslims fast every day from sunrise to sunset. The purpose of the fast is to encourage people to feel grateful for all of the blessings they have received—even food, which is often taken for granted—and to help them feel compassion for those

who are less fortunate. The fast includes all food and drink, and Muslims must also abstain from smoking, swearing, and impure thoughts and actions. When the sun sets every day, Muslims traditionally break their fasts with dates and apricot nectar or milk. They then pray the salaah al-maghrib—the fourth prayer of the day—before sitting down to a sumptuous dinner, called the iftaar. The `Eid marks the end of this period of fasting and is celebrated by three days of festivities during which family and friends gather together. By custom, new clothes are often purchased and worn in celebration of the `Eid. Many Muslims also commemorate the `Eid by paying zakaat (“alms,” a gift of money or food for the poor), one of the five pillars of Islam.

Mawlid al-Nabi (“birth of the Prophet”) is celebrated during the third month of the Islamic calendar— 12 Rabi` al-Awwal. In many Arab countries, the holiday is a joyous time when celebrations of music and dancing continue late into the night. In Saudi Arabia and among the very pious, Mawlid al-Nabi is not observed, on the grounds that its celebration was an innovation, and not part of the established tradition handed down by early Muslims. In Egypt and some other countries, the birthdays of many other holy persons are celebrated as well, albeit to a lesser degree than the birth of the Prophet.

`Ashura is a Shi`a holiday that marks the tenth day of the month of Muharram—the first month of the Islamic calendar. The Shi`a commemorate what they consider as the martyrdom in CE 680 of Sayyid Hussain, grandson of the Prophet Muhammad. Hussain was killed in the city of Kufah by the armies of Caliph Yazid Ibn Mu`awiya, whom the Shi`a believe took power illegitimately. Considered by the Shi`a to be the legitimate caliph, Hussain embarked on a trip from Makkah to Kufah when he learned that the Shi`a of Kufah would welcome him and proclaim him caliph of Baghdad. Yazid intercepted news of Hussain’s plan and sent his army to Karbala, west of the Euphrates, where they met and decapitated Hussain, his family, and followers. Hussain’s Shi`a partisans at Kufah regarded this event as a tragedy, and since then, Shi`a Muslims worldwide remember and venerate the martyrdom of Hussain. The first ten days of Muharram are characterized by a somber mood, as people contemplate the tragedy at Karbala. Passion plays are staged, replaying the fateful days of the massacre. During the tenth day, ta`azin (singular, ta`ziya), or special funerals, are arranged, and people visit mosques to pray for Hussain.

The Islamic New Year is celebrated on the first day of Muharram, the beginning of the Muslim year. Schools and businesses close in observance of the year, and the celebration—which is not as extravagant as the secular New Year—consists of gathering for dinner with family and friends.

Lailat al-Mi`raaj is the “Night of the Ascension” of the Prophet, observed on the 27th day of the month of Rajab, the seventh month of the Muslim calendar. Muslims believe that following a miraculous night journey from Makkah to Jerusalem in the company of the angel Gabriel (Jibreel in Arabic), Muhammad climbed a staircase of gold and silver steps to the seven heavens, where he met Adam, Jesus, Moses, and other prophets. Although Muslims are not obliged to observe Lailat al-Mi`raaj, it is a public holiday in Jordan, Oman, the United Arab Emirates, and Yemen, and many Muslims spend the day fasting and reciting verses from the Qur’an.

