

CRS Reports & Analysis

Muslim Holidays: Fact Sheet

October 31, 2017 (R45003)

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Introduction

Islam is one of the three major Abrahamic faiths, alongside Judaism and Christianity. Islam, considered by the Pew Research Center to be the world's fastest growing religion, has approximately 1.8 billion followers worldwide, of whom some 3.35 million live in the United States.¹ Muslims annually observe two major holidays: Eid al-Fitr and Eid al-Adha. This fact sheet describes the two holidays' significance and American Muslims' observance of them, and addresses the ways the holidays have been recognized by elected officials. The fact sheet also briefly describes two other widely celebrated Muslim holidays.

This fact sheet is designed to assist congressional offices with work related to Islamic holidays. It contains sample speeches and remarks from the *Congressional Record*, presidential proclamations and remarks, and selected historical and cultural resources. This is part of a series of Congressional Research Service fact sheets on religious holidays in the United States.

Dates of Holidays

As Islamic dates are based on the lunar calendar, they are traditionally determined by sightings of the new moon by the naked eye. This practice is seen as a religious requirement by some Muslims. Because of this traditional reliance on lunar observation, dates are referred to as approximate until the new moon is actually sighted.² As a result of technological advances and a better understanding of astronomy, some Muslims are becoming more accepting of astronomical predictions to predetermine dates.

Major Holidays and Observances

Muslims have been celebrating Eid (Muslim festival) holidays for the past 1,400 years. In general, Muslims observe two key holidays: Eid al-Fitr and Eid al-Adha. The dates for these two holidays are determined by tradition according to the Islamic or Hijra calendar, which is based on the lunar year.³ The dates for Muslim holidays change every year. Following the Hijra or lunar calendar, the holidays move forward approximately 11 days each year on the Gregorian calendar.

Eid al-Fitr (Festival of the Breaking of the Fast)

This Eid is often celebrated for one day each year at the end of the approximately 30-day month called Ramadan, during which time many Muslim adults fast from sunrise to sunset and give charity to the poor and needy. Fasting for Ramadan is one of the five pillars of Islam. During Ramadan some read the Qur'an from cover to cover.⁴

Eid al-Adha (Festival of the Sacrifice)

Depending on the country, Eid al-Adha is celebrated from 4 to 12 days at the end of the Hajj (pilgrimage, the fifth pillar of Islam)⁵ to Mecca and Medina. Annually nearly 2 million Muslims participate in the Hajj from approximately the 10th

to the 13th of the month of Dhu al-Hijjah, the last month in the Islamic calendar. Eid al-Adha commemorates the dream in which God appeared to Ibrahim (known as Abraham to Christians) and asked him to sacrifice his son Ishmael as an act of obedience. In the Judeo-Christian tradition, this son is believed to be Isaac. According to religious tradition, God intervened and requested that a sheep be sacrificed in Ishmael's place. Although both Eid holidays are important, Muslims generally consider Eid al-Adha the holiest festival on the Islamic calendar.⁶

Nature of Eid Celebrations

For the Eid holidays, often homes are decorated and, after communal prayers, Muslims wear their finest clothes. Muslims in the United States may sacrifice an animal or purchase an animal that was sacrificed according to halal standards in observance of Eid. The meat may be given, along with other gifts, to family, friends, neighbors, and the less fortunate. This is known as zakat, a religious obligation for Muslims, and it is the third of the five pillars of Islam. In Arabic, zakat means charity, purification, growth, and blessing. Paying zakat is meant to remind Muslims to be appreciative of the blessings that Allah has bestowed upon them and to help empower those who have less.⁷

At the completion of both Eids, people may say "Eid mubarak" to one another. This is an Arabic salutation meaning blessed Eid or blessed celebration. Muslims often wish each other Eid mubarak after performing the Eid al-Adha prayer and may also hug each other three times.⁸

Other Muslim Celebrations

Ashura

For Shi'a Muslims, Ashura commemorates the murder and subsequent martyrdom of Husayn, grandson of the Prophet Muhammad, on the 10th day of the Islamic lunar month of Muharram. It is generally observed through wearing black clothing, engaging in lamentation (and sometimes self-flagellation), and fasting.⁹

Mawlid

Mawlid celebrates the birthday of the Prophet Muhammad. Its legitimacy has been a topic of intense debate within the Muslim world, but it is recognized by most denominations of Islam and is a national holiday in most Muslim-majority countries, with the exception of Saudi Arabia and Qatar. Mawlid is celebrated during Rabi' al-awwal, the third month in the Islamic calendar.¹⁰ American Muslims are divided on whether Mawlid should be celebrated. Those who do celebrate it may engage in fasting, communal meals, special prayers, or outdoor celebrations.¹¹

Official Recognition

Official government observance of Muslim holidays is determined at the local level. For example, some school districts close on the two Muslim Eid holidays. In 2015, New York City became the first large metropolis in America to recognize the two Eids as official holidays and closed its public schools in observance of Eid al-Fitr and Eid al-Adha. Municipalities in Michigan, New Jersey, and Massachusetts also made similar moves.¹²

In 2001, for the first time in American history, the U.S. Postal Service issued a U.S. postage stamp commemorating both Eids.¹³

Congressional Recognition

Over the years, some Members of Congress have recognized the significance of the two Eid holidays and the contribution of Muslim Americans to the country and to their communities.

Representative Debbie Dingell, "Recognizing the Muslim holy month of Ramadan, commending a month of fasting and spiritual renewal, and extending best wishes to Muslims in the United States and across the globe for a joyous and meaningful observance of Eid al-Fitr" (June 27, 2017), H.Res. 416.

Representative Eddie Bernice Johnson, "Recognizing the commencement of Ramadan, the Muslim holy month of fasting and spiritual renewal, and commending Muslims in the United States and throughout the world for their faith" (May 26, 2017), H.Res. 371.

Representative Sheila Jackson Lee, "[Celebration of Eid-al-Fitr Marking the End of the Holy Month of Ramadan](#)," Extensions of Remarks, *Congressional Record*, daily edition, vol. 162 (July 1, 2016), pp. E1015-E1016.

Representative Henry C. "Hank" Johnson Jr., "[In Honor of the Holy Month of Ramadan](#)," Extensions of Remarks, *Congressional Record*, daily edition, vol. 162 (June 9, 2016), p. E865.

Representative Lois Frankel, "[Honoring the American Muslim Alliance of Florida](#)," Extensions of Remarks, *Congressional Record*, daily edition, vol. 162 (April 12, 2016), p. E420.

Presidential Recognition

Although the two major Muslim holidays are not recognized as official federal holidays, recent Presidents have noted the importance of these holidays to Muslim Americans and to Muslims around the globe by making remarks or press statements. Examples include

[Statement from Donald J. Trump on Ramadan](#), May 2017.

[Statement from President Barack Obama on the Occasion of Eid al-Fitr](#), July 2016.

[President's Ramadan Message](#) (George W. Bush), October 2004.

[President William J. Clinton's Statement on the Observance of Ramadan](#), January 1995.

Historical and Cultural Resources

Numerous resources provide information on the history and culture of Muslim holidays, and on the Muslim-American experience in general. Some of these include the following:

Lisa Bramen, "[What to Eat for Eid ul-Fitr](#)," *Smithsonian Magazine* (September 17, 2009).

Photographs of 2017 Eid al-Fitr celebrations worldwide from [Al Jazeera](#), [the Guardian](#), and [National Public Radio](#).

Photographs of 2017 Eid al-Adha celebrations worldwide from *The New York Times*, [CNN](#), and the [BBC](#).

Pew Research Center, "[U.S. Muslims Concerned About Their Place in Society, but Continue to Believe in the American Dream](#)." Findings from a major 2017 study of Muslim-Americans.

Pew Research Center, "[The Future of World Religions: Population Growth Projections, 2010-2050](#)."

[The Arab World](#). An illustrated guide to resources available at the Library of Congress.

[Middle Eastern Studies](#). Relevant online databases available at the Library of Congress.

[Religions: Islam](#). Selected resources from the BBC.

[Oxford Islamic Studies Online](#). Although this is a paid resource, some of the content is available for free. It is also available in CRS's La Follette Congressional Reading Room or any Library of Congress reading room.

Related CRS Reports

CRS Report R41990, [Federal Holidays: Evolution and Current Practices](#), by Jacob R. Straus.

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Acknowledgments

Hussein D. Hassan, CRS senior research librarian, provided original research for and wrote the first draft of this fact sheet.

Footnotes

1. Michael Lipka, "Muslims and Islam: Key Findings in the U.S. and Around the World," Pew Research Center, May 26, 2017, at <http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2017/05/26/muslims-and-islam-key-findings-in-the-u-s-and-around-the-world/>.
2. BBC, "Eid: How is the start of the Muslim festival determined?" (June 24, 2017), at <http://www.bbc.com/news/explainers-40394103>.
3. Economist Intelligence Unit, "Saudi Arabia: Basic Data," *EIU Country Reports* (October 18, 2017), at <http://country.eiu.com/saudi-arabia>.
4. I.A. Ibrahim, *A Brief Guide to Understanding Islam* (Houston: Dar-us-Salam Publications, 2017).
5. Ibid.
6. Blain Auer, "Eid al-Adha," in *Encyclopedia of Islam in the United States*, ed. Jocelyn Cesari (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 2007), pp. 209-210.
7. Ibid.
8. Aisha Stacey, "Ramadan Concludes ... What Happens Now?" at <http://www.islamreligion.com/articles/1777/ramadan-concludes-what-happens-now/>.
9. Sohail Shakeri, "Ashura," in *Encyclopedia of Islam in the United States*, ed. Jocelyn Cesari (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 2007), pp. 90-91.
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Gottfried Hagen, "Mawlid (Ottoman)," in *Muhammad in History, Thought, and Culture: An Encyclopedia of the Prophet of God*, ed. C. Fitzpatrick and A. Walker (Santa Barbara: ABC-CLIO, 2014).

11. Steve Kloehn, "Muslims Divided on Celebrating Prophet's Birthday," *Chicago Tribune*, June 25, 1999, p. 8.
12. Michael M. Grynbaum and Sharon Otterman, "New York City Adds 2 Muslim Holy Days to Public School Calendar," *The New York Times*, March 4, 2015.
13. Laurie Goodstein, "U.S. Muslims Push Stamp As Symbol of Acceptance," *The New York Times*, November 20, 2001, p. A12.