

Muslims begin longest Ramadan for 33 years

The Islamic holy month of Ramadan has begun. This year Muslims face arduous self-denial through long daylight hours. Why do so many people around the world still believe in fasting?



At sundown: The iftar feast traditionally starts with dates, followed by a full meal. © PA

For almost one in four people on earth, yesterday marked the beginning of the holiest month of the year. The world's **1.6 billion** Muslims have begun observing Ramadan.

Many Muslims traditionally go without food, drink and other pleasures in daylight hours during the ninth month of the Islamic calendar. It is also a time for extra prayers and charitable giving. This year, it falls in June — meaning those taking part in the northern hemisphere face their longest fast for 33 years.

In the UK, the Ramadan fast began at 2:46am yesterday. In **late June** in Edinburgh, the iftar meal — which breaks the fast at sundown each day — will not be served until 10:04pm.

Muslims believe the Koran was revealed to Muhammad, Islam's prophet, during Ramadan. The month, which is based on the lunar calendar, moves by around 11 days each year. **Eid al-Fitr**, one of the two major Islamic holidays, falls at the end of it.

This year, London's new mayor, Sadiq Khan, will be taking part. 'It's a month of sacrifice,

reflection and humility,' Khan wrote yesterday. 'Anyone who knows me knows I'm miserable during Ramadan. What I usually miss most is the caffeine.'

He added that he wanted 'to show it is possible to be someone with western, liberal values and be a mainstream Muslim'.

The traditional Jewish calendar includes several fast days; the most commonly observed is **Yom Kippur**, when Jews fast for 25 hours. Christians often make sacrifices during **Lent**. Some Buddhists fast in the hope it will help them abandon all desire and achieve enlightenment.

But such customs have sometimes been controversial. This year, a proposal to move public exams to accommodate Ramadan in the UK sparked objections. Last year a court in India ruled some **Jains** should be allowed to fast to death, in line with the practice of **santhana**.

Fasting is also becoming increasingly secularised. Detox retreats in countries such as Thailand now promote fasting holidays for

health reasons. And in 2009, 39% of British Muslims told a **survey** that Ramadan was becoming 'too commercialised'.

So is fasting still worthwhile?

Life in the fast lane

Yes, say some. Fasting is a test of character, requiring discipline and sacrifice. As a spiritual experience, it gives people a chance to reflect on life's meaningful questions. The rich person who goes without food is no more powerful than the poor one. And if done well, it can have health benefits.

No, say others. Fasting alters the way our bodies function, bringing health risks and making us unproductive and inattentive. The basis for it is usually ritualistic, rather than scientific, and dates from times when we understood the world much less than we do now. We can do without it.

Q & A

Q: I'm not a Muslim. How does a group of people going without food or water for a month affect me?

A: Ramadan is a period of spiritual contemplation. This phenomenon may be relevant to you, even if only vaguely or

indirectly. It also reflects the human race's attachment to some very old traditions. You can learn a lot — positive and negative — about the species you belong to, both from the rituals themselves and from the fact they are still practised.

Q: I have Muslim friends. How will their lives be different this month?

A: If your friends are observing the Ramadan fast, they are likely to wake up very early to allow them to eat before sunrise. The fast has a different impact on those who take part, but many find the first few days, before the body adjusts to its new routine, the hardest.

YOU DECIDE

1. Would you take part in a fast?
2. Is it always necessary for our actions to be scientifically justifiable?

ACTIVITIES

1. Make a list of five things you would find hard to give up. Rank them in order of importance. Then try giving one of them up for a week and report back to your class on how you found the experience.
2. Prepare a one-minute talk to your class on the role of fasting within one of the world's major religions. What part does it play? How is it justified? Do you think it benefits the religion's followers?

SOME PEOPLE SAY...

'Total abstinence is itself an indulgence.'

WHAT DO YOU THINK?

WORD WATCH

1.6 billion – According to a Pew estimate in 2010. Approximately 23% of the global population.

Many – Ramadan is one of the five pillars of Islam, so healthy Muslims generally regard observance as an obligation. But under most interpretations of Islamic law there are exceptions for the ill, vulnerable, pregnant, elderly and very young.

Late June –

This year's longest day in the northern hemisphere is June 20th. The latest sunsets will be from June 22nd to 25th.

Eid al-Fitr – This translates as 'the festival of the breaking of the fast'. Muslims gather at mosques, hold family gatherings and visit friends.

Yom Kippur – The day of atonement, when Jews make amends for their sins.

Lent – This is based on the biblical story of Jesus's fasting for 40 days and nights in the

desert.

Jains – Jainism is an ancient Indian religion, followed by an estimated 4-6m people. It is an entirely pacifist religion which teaches that harmlessness is the path to liberation.

Santhana – A practice in which terminally ill or very old Jains purge their bodies to prepare for death.

Survey – Carried out by singlemuslim.com.

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