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Muslim Holidays: Fact Sheet

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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 3.45 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 using 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 of Ramadan, during which many Muslim adults fast daily 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]

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[1] Besheer Mohamed, "New Estimates Show U.S. Muslim Population Continues to Grow," Pew Research Center, January 3, 2018, at https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2018/01/03/new-estimates-show-u-s-muslim-population-continues-to-grow/.

[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*, March 3, 2020, at http://country.eiu.com/saudi-arabia.

[4] I.A. Ibrahim, *A Brief Guide to Understanding Islam* (Houston: Dar-us-Salam Publications, 2017).

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 appreciate the blessings that Allah has bestowed upon them and 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

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[5] Ibrahim, *A Brief Guide to Understanding Islam*.

[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] Auer, "Eid al-Adha," in *Encyclopedia of Islam in the United States*.

[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.

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.[12] Municipalities in Maryland,[13] Massachusetts,[14] Michigan,[15] Minnesota,[16] New Jersey,[17] Pennsylvania,[18] Virginia,[19] and other states now have similar observances.

In 2001, for the first time in American history, the U.S. Postal Service issued a U.S. postage stamp commemorating both Eids. Since then, there have been subsequent issues of Eid stamps, with the last one issued in 2016.[20]

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 their communities.

Representative Sheila Jackson Lee, "Supporting H. Res. 1021, Recognizing the commencement of Ramadan, the Muslim holy month of fasting and spiritual renewal, and commending Muslims

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[10] 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] Donna St. George, "Students in Maryland School System to be Off on Muslim Holiday- and Lunar New Year," *Washington Post*, December 4, 2019, at https://www.washingtonpost.com/local/education/students-in-maryland-school-system-get-muslim-holiday-off--and-lunar-new-year/2019/12/03/1a400086-1613-11ea-8406-df3c54b3253e_story.html.

[14] Borck Parker, "Cambridge Public Schools Mark Islamic Holiday," *Boston Globe*, November 7, 2011, at https://www.bostonglobe.com/metro/2011/11/07/cambridge-public-schools-mark-islamic-holiday/BGyGm35kW70zi3wqnrpt6L/story.html.

[15] Lori Higgins, "Detroit Schools to Close for Muslim Holiday Eid al-Fitr for First Time," *Detroit Free Press*, April 20, 2019, at https://www.freep.com/story/news/education/2019/04/20/detroit-schools-close-muslim-holiday-eid-al-fitr/3522641002/.

[16] Becky Z. Dernbach, "For the First Time, some Minnesota School Districts Add Eid to the Calendar," *Minneapolis Star Tribune*, February 19, 2022, at https://www.startribune.com/for-the-first-time-some-minnesota-school-districts-add-eid-to-the-calendar/600148563/.

[17] Megan Burrow, "Teaneck Schools to Close for Muslim Holiday Eid Next Year," *NorthJersey.com*, June 10, 2018, at https://www.northjersey.com/story/news/bergen/teaneck/2018/06/10/teaneck-nj-schools-give-off-muslim-holiday-eid-next-year/673692002/.

[18] Office of the Mayor of Philadelphia, "City Announces Intention to Official Recognize Islamic Holidays," press release, May 31, 2016, at https://www.phila.gov/press-releases/mayor/city-announces-intention-to-officially-recognize-islamic-holidays/.

[19] Allison Klein, "Fairfax County Adopts School Calendar with More Religious Holidays," *Washington Post*, January 29, 2022, at https://www.washingtonpost.com/education/2022/01/29/fairfax-schools-calendar-religious-holidays/.

[20] United States Postal Service, *Postal Service Commemorates Two Most Important Muslim Festivals With New Eid Greetings Stamp*, June 10, 2016, at https://about.usps.com/news/national-releases/2016/pr16_049.htm.

in the United State and through the world for their faith," Extensions of Remarks, *Congressional Record*, daily edition, vol. 168, no. 64 (April 14, 2022), pp. E381.

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" (April 1, 2022), H.Res. 1021, 117th Congress.

Representative Al Green, "Recognizing Islam as one of the great religions of the world" (July 30, 2021), H.Res. 576, 117th Congress.

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" (May 13, 2021), H.Res. 393, 117th Congress.

Senator Richard J. Durbin, "Ramadan (Executive Session)," Senate, *Congressional Record*, daily edition, vol. 167, no. 62 (April 12, 2021), p. S1859.

Representative Donald Payne, Jr., "Eid al-Fitr," House of Representatives, *Congressional Record*, daily edition, vol. 165, no. 93 (June 4, 2019), p. H4296.

Presidential Proclamations and Remarks

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 Muslims around the globe by making remarks or press statements. Examples from the past few presidential administrations include the following:

Presidential Proclamations and Remarks—Joseph R. Biden (2021-)

Presidential Proclamations and Remarks—Donald J. Trump (2017-2021)

Presidential Proclamations and Remarks—Barack H. Obama (2009-2017)

Presidential Proclamations and Remarks—George W. Bush (2001-2009)

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:

Pew Research Center, "Video: Being Muslim in the U.S." A look inside the beliefs and attitudes of Muslims in America, featuring data from a Pew 2017 survey and stories of Muslims from across the United States.

Pew Research Center, "Muslims in America: Immigrants and those born in the U.S. see life differently in many ways." Findings from a 2017 survey of American Muslims.

CNN, "A Ramadan etiquette guide for non-Muslims," April 2, 2022.

Washington Post, Retropod, "Thomas Jefferson's Iftar dinner and the long history of Ramadan at the White House," June 14, 2018.

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 are available at the Library of Congress.

Related CRS Reports

CRS Report R41990, *Federal Holidays: Evolution and Current Practices*, by Jacob R. Straus.

CRS Report R43539, *Commemorations in Congress: Options for Honoring Individuals, Groups, and Events*, coordinated by Jacob R. Straus.

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