THE
MUSLIM
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IN THIS ISSUE

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Empathy: Ramadan's Quiet Gift

Resilient Ramadan

Ramadan: A Call for Reflection and Charity

History of Ramadan

# COMPASSIONATE AND GRATEFUL RAMADAN

”

Empathy is one of the great gifts of Ramadan. Let us embrace it and keep it within ourselves. And let us go forward all year in the empathetic spirit of Ramadan all year. ”

THE MUSLIM WORLD LEAGUE JOURNAL

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# Muslim World League

## Recent Activities in Review

**March 15**

On the second anniversary of the attacks in Christchurch, the MWL issued a statement to reaffirm its condemnation of all forms of terrorism, intolerance and hatred. The MWL shared the story of Daoud Nabi, whose final words "Hello, brother," directed at the attacker are an everlasting reminder of the Islamic values of peace and harmony.

**March 15**

H.E. Dr. Al-Issa met with Martina Strong, Charge d'Affaires for the U.S. Embassy in Riyadh. They discussed issues of common interest and ways to increase cooperation between the MWL and the U.S. government.

**March 16**

H.E. Dr. Al-Issa welcomed the State Minister for Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of Bangladesh, HE Md. Shahriar Alam, along with his accompanying delegation. The MWL renewed its commitment to provide humanitarian aid to the Rohingya refugees in Bangladesh.

**March 20**

H.E. Dr. Al-Issa welcomed the Honorable President of the Islamic Commission of Spain, Dr. Dr Aiman Adlbi to the MWL offices in Riyadh. After a bilateral discussion the Dr. Adlbi joined the MWL Secretary General, Dr. Al-Issa, for a signing ceremony of a Memorandum of Understanding that seeks to increase MWL activities in Spain.

**March 21**

The Muslim World League recognized the International Day for the Elimination of Racism by sharing an important message from the Secretary General of the MWL. "Hateful rhetoric inevitably leads to violence. As representatives of a global, faith-based community, we seek every day to eliminate racism, prejudice and discrimination."

**March 22**

On World Water Day, the Muslim World League celebrated its successful programs around the world that deliver clean, reliable water to rural communities. In Ghana in 2019, the MWL sixty-nine solar-powered mechanized boreholes and adjacent ten-seater water-closet toilets in various communities across the country's eleven provinces. Water is necessary for health and sanitation and the MWL is proud to have provided this essential human right for more than 300 residents in these communities for the past two years.

**March 22**

H.E. Dr. Al-Issa welcomed the Minister of Foreign Affairs from Bosnia and Herzegovina, Dr. Bisera Turković. After visiting the site of the Srebrenica genocide last year, the Muslim World League has continued to build a strong relationship with the Bosnian government to support interreligious dialogue in the country.

The Muslim World launched the #RejectHate campaign calling on social media companies to enact policies that more acutely address Islamophobic content and other forms of hate speech that are pervasive online. The campaign kicked off with a video message from the Secretary General and has generated more than 5,000 signatures on the change.org petition.

H.E. Dr. Al-Issa welcomed the Ambassador from the United Arab Emirates, H.E. Sheikh Shakhbout bin Nahyan Al Nahyan, to the MWL offices in Riyadh. They discussed issues of common interest.

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H.E. Dr. Al-Issa received the Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, Engineer Walid bin Abdulkarim Al-Khuraiji, and His Excellency the Undersecretary for Public Diplomacy, Professor Fahd Asaad Abu Al-Nasr at the MWL offices in Riyadh. They discussed topics of common concern.

**APRIL 10**

H.E. Dr. Al-Issa welcomed the Malaysian Minister of Islamic Affairs, Dr. Zulkifl Muhammad Al-Bakri and a high-level delegation to the MWL offices in Riyadh. The delegation discussed issues of common interest in the Muslim community in Malaysia and around the world. The MWL Secretary General and Dr. Al-Bakri signed an MOU to combat terrorism and promote peaceful relations between Muslim countries. The agreement includes incorporating the principles outlined in the Charter of Makkah into educational materials in Malaysia, as well as a series of conferences, seminars and events to promote Arabic language and culture and the values of moderate Islam.

**APRIL 12**

The Muslim World League marked the beginning of Ramadan with a message from the Secretary General: "I congratulate you on the advent of the blessed month of Ramadan.May Allah accept our good deeds, and I wish you a year full benevolence."

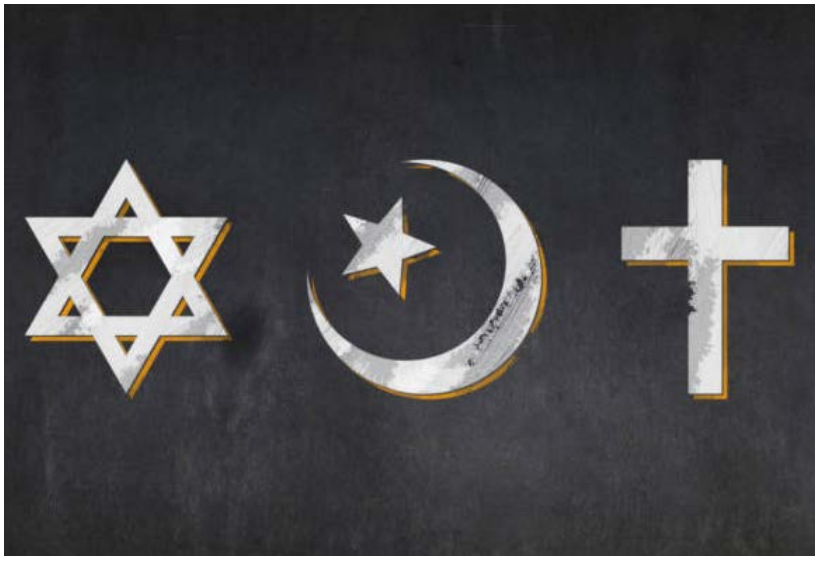
This issue heralds the coming of the holy month of Ramadan, the when Muslims rededicate themselves to their faith. Fasting, prayer and acts of charity throughout the month allow Muslims to depart from the routines they follow daily throughout the year and remember the blessings that god bestows and the life He has commanded us to lead. Ramadan takes beyond piety and prayer, although piety and prayer are certainly a large part of it. It also calls for us to direct our energies and resources toward our fellow human beings, through acts of charity and by coming together with family and friends in the evening to break the daily fast together. Ramadan is a time of both individual reflection and sacrifice and community worship and fellowship.

Ramadan is different again this year because of the restrictions we have imposed on ourselves to fight the coronavirus pandemic. The iftars again will be smaller and a bit less joyous, and we will carry the general sadness that many of us feel because of this unaccustomed isolation we have been living. But vaccines are being developed and administered, and we have the end in sight. That is cause for great hope, if not yet outright joy. So, if Ramadan 2020 was a month of uncertainty and confusion, Ramadan 2021 is a month of optimism.

This year, Ramadan follows on the heels of the great Jewish and Christian religious celebrations of Passover and Easter. Of course, Passover and Easter always fall close to each other because their dates are linked to the spring full moon. Jesus's Last Supper, celebrated on the Thursday before Easter Sunday, was a Passover seder, after all. Despite the difficulties of managing lunar calendars in a world that functions on the Gregorian calendar, Jewish and Orthodox leaders have found ways (perhaps the subject of another essay) to keep those celebrations in the spring. Passover falls on the 15th day of the Jewish month of Nisan, which is always a full moon, and Easter falls on the first Sunday after the first full moon following the vernal equinox. Since Ramadan follows a strict lunar calendar, it only coincides with Passover and Easter a few times in each century.

That will happen in 2022, when Ramadan begins on April 2 and ends on May 1, and Passover and Easter will fall entirely within the month of Ramadan. Passover will be celebrated from April 15-22, and Easter will fall on April 17 for Western Christians and April 24 for Orthodox Christians. This offers people of the three great Abrahamic faiths a rare opportunity to join in an ecumenical recommitment to faith, tolerance and understanding. By next spring, we most likely will have reclaimed our normal lives from the virus that has forces us to remain indoors and separate ourselves from our fellow human beings. We have a chance at rebirth, and that our great faiths can lead that rebirth through a month-long show of solidarity, understanding and mutual respect that is both global and local and brings all people of the world closer together.

- **The Editors**



**Dr. Al-Issa delivers sermon at one of the biggest mosques in Europe.**

## Empathy:

# Ramadan's Quiet Gift

It is especially satisfying when Ramadan comes in the spring. Spring is a time of rebirth, a time when plants come to life and flower after the winter. It is a time when animals are born, when the sun warms the earth once again and the days grow longer. For Muslims this year, the rebirth that occurs in spring coincides beautifully with the spiritual rebirth of Ramadan, from April 12 to May 12.

Many people with only a superficial knowledge of Islam associate Ramadan with fasting, because they observe their Muslim friends and neighbors observing their duty to fast during this holy period. But daily fasting is only one element of Islam, which is a time that calls Muslims to come out of themselves, to break from the routine of their daily lives and focus on their relationship with God and their fellow human beings.

Fasting reminds Muslims of the presence of God in their lives, but every day we gather together with our neighbors, family and friends to break the fast. It is a joyous time in which Muslims can enjoy the company of those closest to them, invite new acquaintances into their lives and share a love of God and life. Many non-Muslims cherish the invitations they receive to join iftar with their Muslim friends. They may not fast themselves, but they can feast in the opportunity for fellowship that fasting has created.

> We celebrate holy days like Ramadan, Easter, Passover and Diwali to remember divine works and teachings, but also to re-center us on what is important and good."

Likewise, it is during Ramadan that Muslims redouble their duty to perform acts of charity. Charity is one of the five pillars of Islam, and it is especially important during Ramadan, when a special call to aid the needy sharpens the empathy that Muslims feel toward those less fortunate than themselves.

Empathy, in fact, is one of the great gifts of Ramadan. It is a mistake to think of this period as an inward expression of faith. Of course, every person of faith looks inward at their own behavior and their own relationship with God. But God calls on us not to shut ourselves off in prayer, but to be in the world. Prayer should give us the kind of peace of mind to make us better people, kinder people and more tolerant and forgiving people. God admonishes us not to sin, but He knows we are imperfect, and He is forgiving. We can be no less so.

"The Muslim world League has dedicated itself to carrying this spirit of Ramadan forward in all we do—in our charity and development work, in our worldwide effort to create understanding and mutual respect among people of different faiths, and in our campaign to reject extremism and violence."

This Ramadan, Muslims and non-Muslims alike should rededicate themselves to the idea of tolerance and acceptance. That does not mean that we compromise our beliefs. It means that we show respect for the beliefs of others, that we try to understand, and that we leave final judgment to God.

The Muslim world League has dedicated itself to carrying this spirit of Ramadan forward in all we do—in our charity and development work, in our worldwide effort to create understanding and mutual respect among people of different faiths, and in our campaign to reject extremism and violence. Empathy calls for us to feel the suffering of others and join in their sorrow, which is why we serve the poor and comfort all victims of sectarian violence. It is why we made a pilgrimage to Auschwitz with Jewish and Christian leaders, where we could understand in stark terms the unspeakable suffering that took place there and in the other Nazi camps.

The holocaust was a product of the rejection of empathy and its replacement with dehumanization. Once we lose the ability to love our fellow human beings at some level and refuse to validate their experience and their beliefs, we set out on a downhill path that starts with suspicion and descends to scapegoating, hatred and violence. Harmonious relations among people of different faiths and different races and ethnicities begins when we try to understand their experience and respect their ways.

We celebrate holy days like Ramadan, Easter, Passover and Diwali to remember divine works and teachings, but also to re-center us on what is important and good. Ramadan, like the holy days of the other major faiths, reminds us of the difference between good and evil, of our duty to worship God and obey His laws, and of our responsibility to show kindness and respect to each other.

Empathy is one of the great gifts of Ramadan. Let us embrace it and keep it within ourselves. And let us go forward all year in the empathetic spirit of Ramadan all year.

**Muslim family celebrating Ramadan.**

# Resilient Ramadan

Ramadan is a time for spiritual reflection, self-improvement and worship. Ramadan has always been a time of devotion, a time to pray, reflect and celebrate together as a community and with families. Muslims are expected to make a bigger effort into the teachings of Islam during this holiday. This year, Muslims will celebrate the holy month of Ramadan from April 13 through May 12. Ramadan is more than a religious obligation. It helps define national cultures and form a common bond among Muslims anywhere in the world.

The Covid-19 pandemic has presented challenges to leaders around the world. Many face difficult times in providing healthcare to their citizens and managing overwhelmed systems and facilities while trying to sustain local economies in the face of social distancing. Many challenges remain, and religious practices is one of them.

This year marks the second year that Muslims across the world will be celebrating Ramadan during a global pandemic. It's a different kind of celebration. We have learned much about the virus since those early days. People are being vaccinated, and there is now great hope, but many remain isolated. Nonetheless, Muslims have learned to adapt and have remained steadfast despite the global health challenges they face on year two.

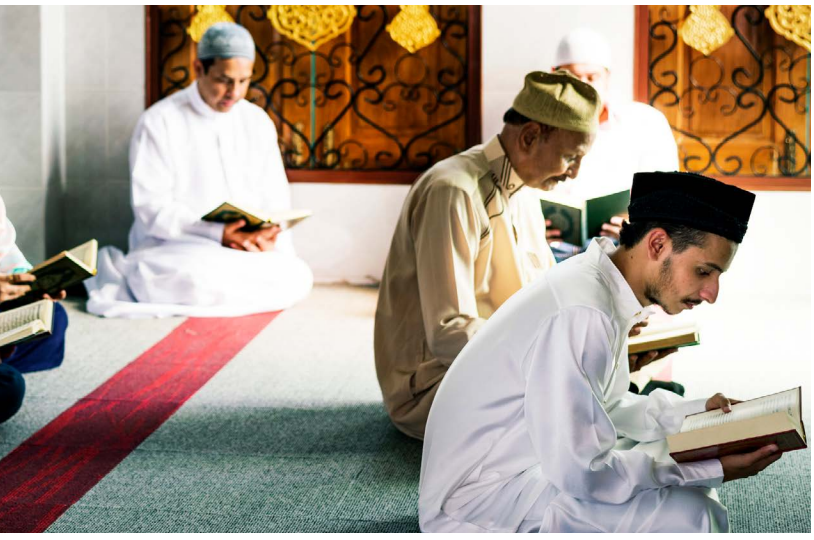
The ongoing coronavirus pandemic continues to present challenges for Ramadan's worship and celebrations, as many mosques remain closed, and religious leaders want to safeguard the

health of their communities by following the advice of local authorities and medical experts to and taking the necessary steps to stop the spread of the coronavirus.

Most Muslims are used to the dawn-to-dusk fasting required during the celebration of Ramadan, but this year is different. There are no nightly gatherings in large groups of family and friends to break the fast and they have to do it alone at home.

Muslims are resilient and have found new ways to adjust and express their faith in God and celebrate life with their families and communities. To overcome the challenges during isolation, Muslims have been able to connect with their communities via social media through broadcasts and virtual gatherings, and they even continue to cook for their neighbors and communities to keep with their traditions. Muslim families around the world have prayed from home rather than attending communal prayers at mosques to help mitigate the spread of the coronavirus.

*Iftar,* the evening meal that breaks daily fasting, used to be held at home with immediate family members and friends. Technology has been very useful in maintaining that bond. Muslims continue to cook at home and have been able to spend time with family members and community virtually. They have been able to share recipes and interact with others online to maintain a sense of community and togetherness that at times seems far away. Technology has helped households replaced big family gatherings with video conferences so Muslims can remain together while being apart.



**Muslim men reading Quran during Ramadan.**

Charity is big part of Ramadan, and Muslims continue to fulfill this obligation online by setting up online fundraises and food banks. Some have even set up drive-through iftars for those people who depend on the mosque to provide their daily meals. Muslims continue to show solidarity despite separation by continuing the spirit of Ramadan in the face of unprecedented challenges.

Coronavirus has been a challenge to everyone, but with every challenge come new ways to overcome it, and Ramadan worship is no different. Preserving human health is one of the highest values in Islam, and Muslims are working together to protect each other and their loved ones by avoiding social contact.

It is important to note that Ramadan is not just a sacred observance, it is a time for Muslims to strengthen their bonds within their families and enjoy the close company of their loved ones. Many families get together to prepare meals and carry out chores together to be able to spend more time together. This can be done in many ways, such as preparing the iftar meal, setting up the table or cleaning dishes and spaces after the meals.

This year, the pandemic has made food donations and other necessities even more important. The Muslim World League has continued its tradition of providing Ramadan food baskets to communities in need, a demonstration of the MWL's enduring commitment to humanitarian aid.

**Children posing for a photo at festival hosted by the MWL in Ghana.**

## Ramadan:

# A Call for Reflection and Charity

"You will never attain piety until you spend out of what you hold dear, and whatever you may spend on anything, Allah indeed knows it," the Quran teaches.

"Be steadfast in prayer and regular in charity. Whatever good you send forth for your souls before you, you shall find it with Allah. For Allah sees well all that you do," the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) instructs Muslims.

*Zakat*, also known as charity, is the Third Pillar of Islam and a foundational element rooted in the teachings of the Quran. It is mentioned throughout the Quran many times and is often referred to as "regular charity," demonstrating that it should not be merely performed on special occasions and holidays, but a constant and ongoing act.

The Quran teaches us to have empathy, understanding and love for all people. It instructs us to reject hatred, violence and divisiveness in all its forms. And it also calls on us to show gratitude for our blessings by giving to those most in need.

Muslims use the holy month of Ramadan as a time for reflection and a renewal of their faith and belief in these very ideals. As one of the most

**Dr. Al-Issa delivering food aid in Senegal.**

sacred Islamic customs, and one of the Five Pillars of Islam, this 30-day observance represents much more than fasting from sunrise to sunset. It is a call for spiritual purification and self-discipline. It is a chance to gain a deeper awareness of the suffering many people face. And it is time for one to strengthen their connection with Allah and show genuine concern for the less fortunate, especially after the immense pain caused by the global coronavirus pandemic.

This is why *zakat* is such an important aspect of Ramadan. For Muslims, it is an opportunity to be generous and give back to vulnerable communities around the world. During Ramadan, Muslims are encouraged to be charitable if they have the means to do so. Many Muslims and Muslim organizations donate their time and resources to philanthropic endeavors. They also participate in *Zakat* al-Fitr at the end of Ramadan, which involves feeding others on the morning of Eid.

Charitable and humanitarian work has been at the heart of the Muslim World League's (MWL) mission since its establishment in 1962. The MWL provides assistance to the less fortunate through a variety of initiatives, from distributing food baskets to supporting orphanages to developing basic infrastructure in rural communities to providing emergency relief.

Every year during the sacred month of Ramadan, the MWL delivers food aid and other essential items to vulnerable communities, including the Middle East, Africa, Asia and Europe. In the past year, the Muslim World League sent Ramadan food baskets and medical tools and supplies to Senegal, Sudan, South Africa, Nigeria, Somalia, Malawi and other

**The MWL delivering iftar meals during Ramadan.**

countries. And in 2019, the MWL distributed more than 500,000 Ramadan food packages in 28 countries.

But the MWL does not just give back during Ramadan. The MWL practices 'regular charity' as instructed by the Quran, which is in accordance to its founding principles. As the coronavirus pandemic swept across the world, the MWL extended a helping hand to governments and people who were suffering, regardless of their faith, nationality, gender or ethnicity. The MWL distributed urgent relief to more than 20 countries, including critical food aid, medical supplies, protective equipment, health kits, financial support, and educational materials to help in the fight against the coronavirus.

This past year has resulted in unprecedented human suffering, loss and pain. It has tested the global community's resolve and fortitude. It has shown us how misconceptions can lead to hate, distrust and violence. But it has also shown the world that we can only overcome the current challenges by working together and giving back to those we cannot support themselves.

A core tenet of Islam is thawab, which means a person will be rewarded for good deeds performed out of the goodness of one's heart, not for personal gain.

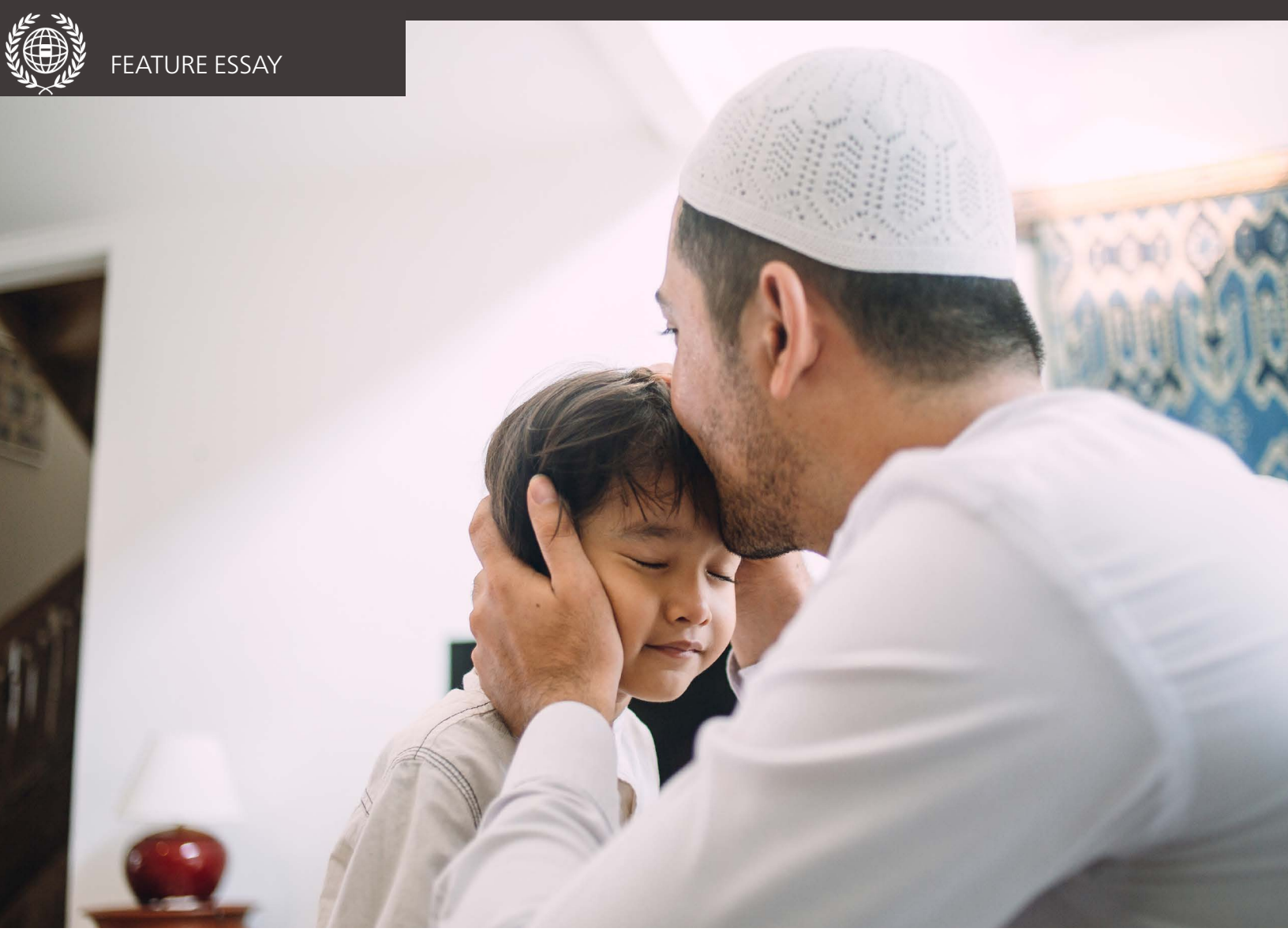
With this year's Ramadan, the MWL will continue to provide support to people suffering around the world. And whether it be providing a meal to someone in need or volunteering at a local food or soup kitchen, Muslims and Muslim organizations are encouraged to do the same – not for recognition or profit, but with the understanding that "Allah sees all that you do."

# ADAPTING RAMADAN CELEBRATIONS

It has been more than a year since the world adopted measures to combat the Covid-19 pandemic, marking the second time that Muslims experience a holy month of Ramadan celebrated largely in private. This can be stressful and difficult to coordinate – Ramadan in years past has always been a communal event, where members pray and celebrate together. However, Muslim families have now learned to adapt their Ramadan strategies to the pandemic's various trials through several ways, including:

- **Friday prayers broadcast via social media:** Due to many countries' strict quarantine lockdown rules, Muslims are not allowed to gather in mosques to participate in prayer. Therefore, imams either prerecord or broadcast their Friday prayers and sermons to various social media outlets. Not only does this let the imam's community continue to participate in the holy month, but it allows guests to learn more about Muslims, the community, and its practices.
- **Community Cooking:** Many Muslims have iftar with members of the community at the mosque after evening prayers. Since many mosques continue to be closed, members of the community have taken it upon themselves to continue to prepare meals for their neighborhoods. Mosque goers then pick up the iftar meals after concluding their prayers at home.
- **Virtual Gatherings:** Since many countries' health authorities have advised against travel and congregating in large groups, Muslims have struggled with the tradition of returning to one's home and family in the evening. However, the rise in the use of social media and videoconference apps such as Zoom makes it easier for Muslims to meet with family and members of their community to participate in Ramadan activities.

**Muslim devotees gather to collect their respective tiffin boxes at Bang Aw mosque premises in Bangkok.**



**A Family Celebrates Eid.**

## The Ultimate Act of Generosity This Ramadan:

# Vaccinating

Ramadan, the holiest month of the Islamic calendar, is a time for the more than 1.9 billion practicing Muslims to reflect spiritually, offer prayer, do good deeds, and, of course, fast. The period spent fasting, which goes from dawn to dusk, is an integral part of Ramadan and allows those practicing to devote themselves to their faith and become closer to Allah. Fasting during Ramadan, or *z*, is also one of the Five Pillars of Islam.

Around the world, those preparing for this holiday knew that this Ramadan would look different than year's past because of the ongoing coronavirus pandemic. While many made plans to adjust how their families would come together safely for iftar to break their fast, some began to wonder what the availability of vaccine during this holy month would mean for them.

Worldwide scholars of Islamic law and medical experts were consulted on whether receiving a Covid-19 vaccine during Ramadan would break one's fast. Overwhelmingly, these leaders were in agreement and reassured the Muslim community that the vaccine is permissible and does not invalidate the fast.

> "We need to tackle and address early concerns raised by Muslim communities who may be offered their vaccinations whilst fasting and working in frontline and supporting roles. There is no reason why a first- or second-dose vaccine cannot be administered during Ramadan. The content is halal, and receiving it will not invalidate the Ramadan fast, as per the opinion of Islamic scholars, "
>
> -Dr. Habib Naqvi

### A Contribution to Society

Global leaders have urged the Muslim community to accept the vaccine as soon as it becomes available to them, not only for their own health, but for the greater good of society. It is an Islamic duty to preserve life, and vaccinating yourself is one of the most effective ways of preventing Covid-19 from taking any more lives than it already has. Creating a community of vaccinated people will protect those who are most vulnerable from the illness and halt or reduce the spread of the virus during Ramadan.

Ibn Sina made Islamic culture synonymous with scientific progress. The couple who synthesized the Pfizer/BioNTech vaccine are of Muslim origin. Those practicing Ramadan can continue this good work by inspirational Muslims through *fard kifaya*, a collective obligation.

### Expert Advice

Basharat Saleem, the executive director of the Islamic Society of North America, said that the vaccine injection "will not invalidate the fast because it has no nutritional value and it is injected into the muscle."

"We need to tackle and address early concerns raised by Muslim communities who may be offered their vaccinations whilst fasting and working in frontline and supporting roles. There is no reason why a first- or second-dose vaccine cannot be administered during Ramadan. The content is halal, and receiving it will not invalidate the Ramadan fast, as per the opinion of Islamic scholars," said Dr. Habib Naqvi, director of the Race and Health Observatory of the United Kingdom's National Health Service.

Dr. Hina Shahid, chair of the Muslim Doctors Association, said "This has been a unique time globally, with festivals of Ramadan and Eid occurring during the peak of Covid-19. Muslims and other faith communities have met these challenges head on; it was inspiring to see the community using technology for prayer and sharing images of iftar with family and friends at the start of the pandemic…Vaccination is one of our biggest tools to make sure we can go back to

**A Muslim Woman receives A Vaccine.**

normal soon, including celebrating festivals with our loved ones when it is safe to do so. I encourage everyone to get vaccinated when they get called, including during Ramadan, and to discuss any concerns with their GP."

More so, the Pfizer/BioNTech, Moderna and Oxford/AstraZeneca vaccines have received approval from the British Islamic Medical Association, the Assembly of Muslim Jurists of America and the grand mufti of Saudi Arabia.

## Having a Healthy Ramadan

For those worried about health risk and additional side effects of receiving a vaccine while fasting, medical experts confirmed that it is perfectly safe to receive the doses on an empty stomach.

Dr. Gunjan Mahajan, a specialist clinical pathologist at the Medeor Hospital Laboratory in Abu Dhabi, said, "The priority is to take the vaccine, both the first and second dose, and people need not change their appointment because of the fasting hours. In the majority of cases, the only side effect that the vaccine manifests is a sore arm, some dizziness or headache, and that too kicks in a day after the vaccination.

"Our bodies are perfectly strong to deal with an inactivated virus even when we are fasting. In fact, the body is in a state of rest when we are

**Muslim Female Doctors Examine A Vaccine.**

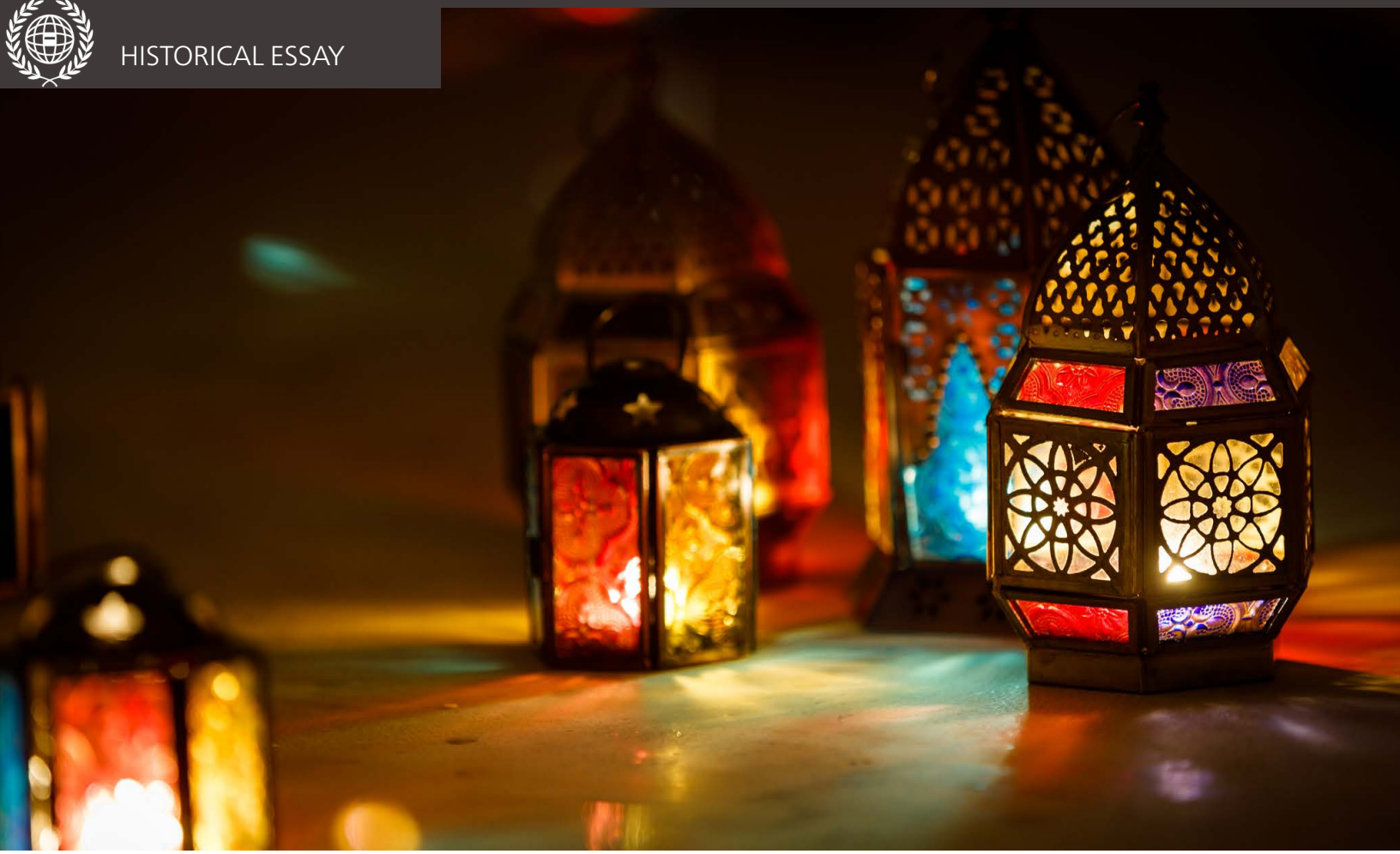
fasting and does not have to deal with anabolic, catabolic or metabolic chores, and the immune system is highly effective when we are fasting."

The head of laboratories at the Fakeeh University Hospital in Dubai, Dr. Palat Menon, said that in general, vaccines actually were more efficacious when people were fasting.

It is recommended to get plenty of rest during the day and to eat foods of nutritional value when breaking fasts, foods containing macronutrients such as carbohydrates, proteins and fats and micronutrients such as Vitamin C and iron.

### Assalamualaikum and Ramadan Mubarak

The science is clear. Reducing transmission helps save lives, and one of the best ways to do this is by becoming inoculated against the virus. The efforts to fight Covid-19 that have been made by so many doctors, researchers, scientists, and frontline workers will not be in vain during Ramadan. The Islamic community will not allow progress to halt during this holy month, but instead join together to create a safer and healthier world.



**Ramadan Lanterns are created specifically for the Holy Month.**

# The History of Ramadan

Originally occurring during the scorching summer months in Saudi Arabia, Ramadan literally means "intense heat." It is the ninth month of the Islamic lunar calendar and occurs approximately one day after the new moon. The beginning of Ramadan is declared by the Judicial High Court based on the testimony of local moon sighters. According to Muslim faith, it is during this month that the first verses of the Quran were revealed to the Prophet Muhammad.

The Quran states that Ramadan is "a guidance for mankind, and clear proofs of the guidance, and the criterion (of right and wrong). And whosoever of you is present, let him fast the month, and whosoever of you is sick or on a journey, a number of other days. Allah desires for you ease; He desires not hardship for you; and that you should complete the period, and that you should magnify Allah for having guided you, and that perhaps you may be thankful." [2:185]

Following this guidance, the common practice is to fast between the dawn meal (*suhur*) and the sunset meal (iftar). Because the month is meant to focus on spiritual reflection and self-improvement, abstaining is meant to redirect the heart away from worldly activities. It is also a test of self-discipline, self-control, and sacrifice meant to inspire compassion and generosity toward

**Dates are a traditional part of the dawn meal, Suhur.**

the less fortunate. The length of the fast depends on each individual's location, but generally ranges from 11 to 19 hours. Practicing Muslims also abstain from drinking, smoking, and sex during these hours. But fasting alone is not enough, according to the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH), who said, "If a person does not avoid false talk and false conduct during the fast, then God does not care if he abstains from food and drink." In the 21st century almost one quarter of the world's population observe the fast.

The primary traditions of Ramadan have remained unchanged since their introduction in 622,. However, as Islam has spread over borders and to other continents, the celebrations have grown and evolved. In Egypt, the *midfa al-iftar,* or "*ftar* cannon, is fired to signal the breaking of the fast. In Turkey, drummers rouse the town for their morning meal. The tradition of charity has also adapted to current times. Originally, the "alms of the breaking of the fast" was mandatory for all Muslims and consisted of giving a portion of dates or barley directly to the less fortunate. These days, a monetary donation to a mosque or charity is more standard.

The month builds towards *Laylat al-Qadr*, also known as the "Night of Power," "Night of Decree," or "Night of Destiny," which is the night when the Quran was first sent down from heaven, according to the Muslim faith. It is believed to be the holiest night of the year. According to the Quran, this evening of worship is better than worship of a thousand months.

The 29 or 30 days of Ramadan come to an end on Eid al-Fitr, a day of community and celebration. The name literally means "festival of breaking the fast," but the convention of beginning the day with the taste of dates or something else sweet has led to the nickname "Sweet Festival."

Fasting during Ramadan is one of the five pillars of Islam, along with the declaration of faith, daily prayers, charity, and the Hajj pilgrimage to Mecca.

**Wearing traditional dress, Turkish drummers wander the streets waking residents for suhoor.**

# Ramadan across Cultures

Ramadan is known as a period of prayer and fasting, as Muslims across the world reflect on their faith. It is also a period of celebration and community. The Islamic faith unites many peoples and societies across the world, each with their own traditions and cultural practices to mark this holy month.

The traditional daylight fasting of Ramadan helps Muslims to focus on spiritual reflection and the purification of the soul. For the people of Java, in Indonesia, this process starts the day before Ramadan begins. Across the island Muslims participate in *Padusan*, a cleansing in which people submerge themselves from head to toe in springs, believing the ritual will wash away filth before the Holy Month begins.

Traditionally, local elders and religious leaders would identify sacred springs where people would undergo *Padusan*. In modern times it is more common for people to go to nearby lakes, swimming pools, or the sea. Some even complete the ritual in their own bathtubs.

Catching *suhoor*, that early morning meal before the sun rises, is essential to many Muslims if they are to endure the day-long fast. Fortunately for people in Turkey, it is quite easy to know it is time to eat. Since the days of the Ottoman Empire, Muslims have been awakened by the roar of more than 2,000 drummers across the country sounding the start of the day. These drummers dress in traditional Ottoman costumes and beat the davul, a double-headed drum. The drummers rely on the generosity of ordinary people, with many Muslims believing that they will receive good luck in return for their contribution.

A similar tradition has emerged in the Indian city of Delhi to ensure that people rise for *suhoor*. The *seheriwalas* of Old Delhi walk the streets of the

city in the small hours of the morning, chanting the name of Allah and the Prophet. They start as early as 2:30 a.m. and wander the streets with sticks or canes, knocking on doors and walls to awaken Muslims for *suhoor*.

Just as that first meal before dawn is essential, after a long day of fasting many Muslims are understandably enthusiastic for their first meal after sundown. No tradition better captures this excitement than *midfa* al iftar, when cannons are fired at sunset to signal the breaking of the Ramadan fast.

This tradition is said to have started accidentally. More than 200 years ago in Cairo, the Ottoman ruler *Kohosh Qadam* was testing a new cannon at sunset when he accidentally fired it. Many of the city's residents took this as a sign that it was time to eat. The tradition spread across the Ottoman Empire, including to Lebanon, where it continues to this day.

**- A seheriwala wanders the streets of Old Delhi, chanting to Allah.**

**- People in Java gather to participate in the padusan to mark the start of Ramadan.**

Some nations use fewer explosive methods to signal the end of the fast. In Albania, the Roma Muslim community announces the beginning and end of fasting with traditional songs. Each day of Ramadan, people march through the streets beating the *lodra*, a double-ended drum. Families will often invite the musicians into their homes to play these songs as a celebration of the start of iftar.

Traditional songs are also essential to the recognition of Ramadan in Senegal. At night the Senegalese will sing religious songs through the evening, with locals often competing amongst themselves.

Many countries bring the traditions of their cultural heritage to the fore when celebrating Ramadan. In Azerbaijan, horse races are customarily staged to show happiness, and many are organized to celebrate the holy month. Azeri Muslims also partake heavily in a tradition of giving. They exchange gifts with neighbors and prepare extra dishes for meals in case of unexpected guests. The Azeri people also seek to fulfill vows during Ramadan. Those who have taken vows in the name of God during the year will seek to realize those vows through prayer, charity and fasting for several days after Ramadan is complete.

The Islamic community is a fabulous tapestry of societies that span the world. United by their faith in Allah, they nonetheless represent different histories, cultural origins, and geographic realities. The beautiful fusion of religious adherence and local practices adds a different vibrancy to Ramadan celebrations in whichever corner of the globe you visit.

# RAMADAN IN A PANDEMIC: THEN AND NOW

Nearly 500 million people around the world were infected when the Spanish influenza plagued the world in 1918 and 1919, and between 50 and 100 million people perished. It was so virulent that in the Arabian Peninsula, historians of the period, and surviving folk memories, describe that time as the "year of compassion" (*sanat al-rahma*) or "Year of fever" (*sanat al-sakhna*).

In 1918, Spanish Flu coincided with Ramadan, which fell during June-July. The cases peaked in September-October and subsided in November. Records show that it was one of the few times that mosques were shut down for brief periods coinciding with Ramadan.

This was the case again in 2020, as the world's nearly 2 billion Muslims experienced their holy month very differently amid the coronavirus pandemic. Saudi Arabia implemented bold measures to fight the outbreak, gradually closing Mecca and Medina. Cities throughout the Arab world also shuttered mosques and suspended religious educational programs and Friday sermons.

Nevertheless, amidst the difficulty and tragedy surrounding this type of global health crisis, there are positive parallels to be drawn. Just over one hundred years after the Spanish Flu, as the world battles Covid-19, we have seen common themes emerge despite very different circumstances, and advances in medicine and technology.

These revolve around displays of community and selfless acts of service. Similar to our continued social distancing in 2021, the fight against the influenza pandemic of 1918 was mainly based on isolating patients in homes and places outside the town or the walls of the city. Not unlike our modern-day frontline workers and medical personnel, Muslims during the Spanish Flu took care of their brothers and sisters by caring for the ailing and the deceased, volunteering to distribute vaccines and medicine, and cooking community meals.

As a testament to the best elements of humanity, we have seen Muslims honor the essence of Ramadan through reflection and upholding the spirit of community. Through multiple global pandemics, Muslims have been able to shine, and come out stronger on the other side.

**Riyadh, 2 years before the 1919 Spanish influenza pandemic.**

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