

Ramadan In London: Muslims And Non Muslims Celebrate Spirituality And Diversity



Al Khoei Foundation, empowering women

Akram with imported dates at Al-Rasoul corner store in Crawford Place off Edware Road.

“Allah says I created creation so I would be known. I am the hidden treasure. He who knows himself, knows his Lord.” Sheikh Ahmed Haneef, the guest lecturer at the Islamic Centre of England, delivers his lectures with passion and conviction. He was born in Trinidad and Tobago, grew up in Canada and studied in Qum.

In the audience are Arabs, Iranians, Nigerians, Asians and converts from Britain and other European countries. Some of the women are clad in traditional black abayas, others come in colourful outfits with matching headscarves. Ramadan in London brings together Muslims from all nationalities, ethnic groups and walks of life as they participate in

special programmes in the mosques: daily prayers and iftar meals, lectures, youth programmes, women's programmes, intellectual debates and social gatherings.

Amir De Martino, the centre's educational officer described London as the Islamic capital of Europe. On the first day of

Amir De Martino Education Office
at the Islamic Centre of England
"London is the Islamic Capital of
Europe"



Dr Saeed Shehabi,
Trustee Abrar Islamic



Iftar at the Islamic Centre of England



Ramadan the centre attracted around one thousand worshippers. "Even those who don't practise their religion throughout the year make an effort to at least come to the mosque and get some benefit from this month. There is an opportunity to impart Islamic lessons for 30 days and mosques take full advantage of it", De Martino observed.

Special attention is given to lectures in English which attract young people whose limited knowledge of Farsi or Arabic makes it difficult for them to follow the programme in the main hall. During dua prayers on screen translation is provided.

Ensuring the needs of young people are catered for is also a

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Imam Khoei
Islamic
Centre, youth
programmes
are a top
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Ramadan programme at the Abrar Islamic Foundation 6

women from Iraqi and Iranian backgrounds as well as some Afghans, Indians, Pakistanis and Khoja. There are also Qur'an teaching classes after prayers. Members of the congregation often subsidise iftar and join in the serving of the meal. Non Muslims and neighbours are welcome to attend iftar and the Eid parties and intra faith events. There are also debating forums which include

topics such as discussions on the future of Muslims in the UK. Every year the foundation sponsors an Eid party in parliament attended by senior politicians and community leaders. As part of intra faith work, the foundation invites Muslim imams who work with them in prison chaplaincy for iftar.

"In London Ramadan gives a sense of identity to all Muslims", Al

Khoei believes. "Other than the unfortunate disagreement about the beginning and the end of Ramadan, Muslims from diverse cultural and ethnic backgrounds are brought together to engage in age-old practices which they carry with them to this day. This involves the exercise of self-discipline in the form of fasting from dawn to dusk, congregational prayers and giving to charity. In certain areas, one can notice a marked change

in the daily activities of Muslim Londoners which is a reflection of how the message of Islam continues to inspire so many. It is a blessed month which brings out the best in everyone, creating a spirit of selflessness and a sense of community. This is especially important in a modern society whose primary focus seems to be material wealth at the expense of spiritual well being. This is an opportunity for the British public to

Inter faith centre in Queens Park



Imported
dates



see Islam in its true form which has been sadly perverted in recent years", Al Khoei said.

Dr Saeed Shehabi, a trustee of the Abrar Islamic Foundation described Ramadan as a month of improved community relations. "These days people have time after their office hours to go to a mosque and eat there. The Muslim communities are larger now so there are more places where you can share your fasting experience".

Abrar is not a mosque but iftar is served three or four times a week and there are daily mid day prayers. "Our website and English and Arabic newsletters reflect the spirit of Ramadan", Dr Shehabi said. Non Muslims are invited to the monthly Open Discussions forum – this month's lecture on August 24th will deal with the experience of Ramadan".

At the World Muslim League Dr Haifaa Khalafallah ran a Ramadan

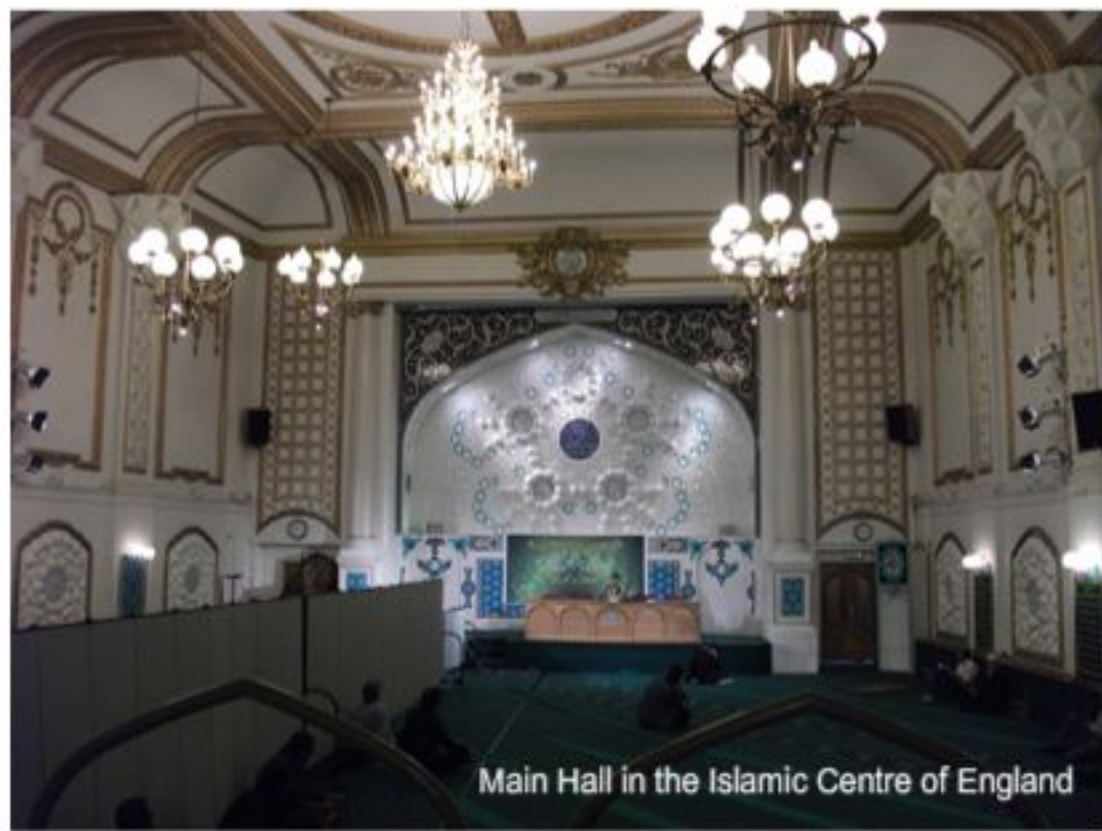
evening during which the participants shared Iftar, prayed together and reflected on what Islam meant to them. Similar evenings are held in most mosques. Dr Khalafallah also holds serious academic lectures on Muslim history at the The London Central Mosque and Islamic Cultural Centre. "They are aimed at Muslims, especially European Muslims so they understand how they are integral to European history and the history

of civilisation. Understanding the problems of Muslim history helps to differentiate between tradition and culture on the one hand and the tenants of Islam on the other", Dr Khalafallah said.

Ramadan tends to be one of the busiest months of the year at the London Central Mosque. There are daily one hour lectures after the third prayer of the day given by a guest lecturer, scholar or speaker –the heads of Muslim organizations like the Muslim Council of Britain

Reflecting during a Ramadan evening at the World Muslim League





Main Hall in the Islamic Centre of England

or the Institute of Islamic Jurisprudence. Lecture topics include health in Islam, Ramadan, the importance of it, how to get the most out of Ramadan according to one's own specific goals and objectives. Specialists in Qu'ranic recitation from Cairo recite the Quran on a daily basis in the evenings. Eight hundred to a thousand meals are provided for iftar. In the last ten days of Ramadan a spiritual retreat for 40

men will be held in the mosque, where the imam of the mosque in Mecca delivered Friday prayers.

"The whole essence of Ramadan is something which is collective but it is more specifically for individuals to purify themselves, to refine their hearts, their inner selves to get close to God Almighty. We have collective activities but ultimately it is up to the individuals themselves to work on the

relationship between themselves and God Almighty which is essential", Omar Siddique, the Visits Office and Public Relations Co-ordinator at the London Central Mosque explained.

Open days at London's mosques are bringing Muslims and non Muslims together. The Islamic Centre of England invites people from multi faith groups to the English lecture and iftar. When iftar was during school hours many

school children visited the centre. The homeless and those who are separated from their families can share iftar with fellow Muslims. There are also charitable functions like the charity iftar on August 29th organised by the Iraqi Youth Foundation to raise money for the Iraqi Orphan Foundation.

The debates and discussions both about Ramadan itself and other issues affecting Muslims are every important for the empowerment of

Omar Siddique Visits Officer and Public Relations Coordinator at the

London Central Mosque and Islamic Cultural Centre. The whole essence of Ramadan is something which is collective but it is more specifically for individuals to purify themselves



Iftar at the Islamic Centre of England



the community, make young people aware of their needs and aspirations and discourage possible anti-social behaviour.

In Edgware Road the hub of London's Arab community, shops are importing extra supplies of fresh dates from the UAE, Iran and Tunisia. Akram, who works the evening shift at Al Rasoul corner store reported an increase in sales of tahina commonly eaten with dates. Halal Restaurant nearby has a special Iftar menu at 13

pounds per head consisting of dates, pickles, soup, rice, okra, mixed vegetables, chicken or lamb curry, soft drinks, sweets and tea and coffee. The spirit of generosity prevails and the drinks and dates are often on the house. The satellite tv in Arab restaurants enables Muslims all over the world to watch the same Ramadan programmes. And there is no shortage of articles in the mainstream media about the Ramadan experience.

Conveners of Ramadan programmes are convinced that understanding and acceptance of the holy month is increasing in British society.

The Prime Minister, David Cameron sent his very best wishes to all the Muslim communities in Britain and around the world. "I know one of the messages of Ramadan is the importance of charity and the act of giving to those less fortunate

than ourselves", Mr Cameron said. "That tradition is not just a great Muslim tradition. It's also a great British tradition, something we cherish right across our society, amongst people of every faith and none. I'm very proud that Britain has been at the forefront of the international response to the terrible floods in Pakistan".

The Foreign Secretary, William Hague said : "I'm conscious as a British politician of the huge

Sheikh Haneef's lecture at the Islamic Centre of England



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contribution that so many Muslims in Britain make across the breadth of our society and that is something of course that we want to see even more of in the future. So its a very, very important time of year, celebrating what Ramadan is about, important values of selflessness, of charity, of compassion, of looking after people less fortunate than ourselves. And these are values of course that unite Muslims and non Muslims alike”.

The Mayor of London, Boris Johnson, is promoting the Ramadan Festival, a Western Muslim initiative to develop a platform for faith inspired cultural narratives about the Muslim diaspora. The unifying qualities of creativity – art, music, dance, food, and debate – and promoting interaction are the hallmarks of the festival. The mayor is also sponsoring Eid in Trafalgar Square on 26 September.

An Eid Festival will be held in Brent between 2nd - 5th October and on every other Sunday in Ramadan. Britain's leading esoteric oriented Muslim exponents of Irfan (the Sufis) are organising Iftar and a faith-inspired cultural programme in West London's Notting Hill.

"Compared to 20 years ago there is now more awareness among the British people about Ramadan", Dr Shehabi said. "At least the word Ramadan is recognised. This is

partly because of the larger number of Muslims some of whom now have official responsibilities in government either as ministers, peers or as advisers and members of the mainstream parties. This is bound to be reflected in the way others understand Muslims".

Dr Khalafallah is convinced that Britain is the best place in the West to be if you are a Muslim. "There is a great understanding and realization of what Ramadan is. London accepts differences,

Ramadan programme at the Abrar Islamic Foundation





people can walk around with punk hair and shalwar and saris and there is no need for cultural conformity". She is inspired by the joyous feeling of celebration Ramadan engenders.

Omar Siddique pointed out that during the past ten years Muslims and Islam have been in the forefront in the media for one reason or another. "There has been a greater backlash on the Muslim community because of the negativity surrounding Islam and

Muslims in the news. But it has also encouraged a lot of people, especially the non Muslim public, to find out more about Muslims, Islam, their practices etc

"My particular role entails me receiving thousands of visitors on a monthly basis who come from schools, colleges, universities, the metropolitan police, government groups, etc And it involves me explaining to them the basis of the faith, what it entails, what it means in the life of a Muslim and any

questions that they might have. From that naturally people have got to know about Ramadan being a central pillar of the Muslim faith”.

Halal meat is widely available in London and halal food is provided in hospitals and schools where a large percentage of the children are Muslims. Some employers are giving their Muslim staff a day off on Eid and Muslim children are permitted to opt out of religious education classes. Last year the

Asda branches in areas with a large Muslim population wished shoppers a Happy Ramadan through large posters.

Eid could even become a public holiday but first Muslims would have to agree among themselves to celebrate Eid on the same day and fix a date acceptable to all.

“ If the whole wider community can be involved that would be great”, Omar Siddique said. Eid is a religious festival. However it is

Iftar menu at Halal Restaurant



The Islamic Centre of England



something I would encourage non Muslims to witness. The practice of the Prophet (pbuh) was to have the prayers not in the mosque but out in the open, in the parks. There are many organizations who carry this task out on a yearly basis. They will hire parks, like Regents Park for the day and have the evening prayer for 15 to 20 thousand people in one congregation, and there are food stalls, fun fair rides, fashion shows - so it is fun day. If the wider

community at large, Muslim and non Muslim can enjoy that why not?

"Ramadan should be studied closely by non Muslims and understood", Dr Shehabi concludes." It is not pure worship. It is worship which has its practical implications especially in terms of community relations and health disciplines. Non Muslims will benefit from it whether for spiritual or material purposes".