

Ramadhan in London: A microcosm of the Arab world

By: Karen Dabrowska

I love the spiritual side of Ramadan in London,” Houda Mizioudet from Tunisia who is holidaying in London told the Tripoli Post. I don't like Ramadan in Tunisia. I love the cosmopolitan side of London. You go to different London mosques. In any London mosque you find people from all over the world. It is like a microcosm [of the Muslim world.]



Al Manaar cultural heritage center

“I rediscovered Islam in London. Tunisia was the most secular country in the Arab world and any manifestation of Islam was banned

during the dictatorship so the only place I was able to express myself as a Muslim person was London.” Ramadan is now an integral part of British life and some Muslims believe Eid should be a public holiday. Foreign Secretary William Hague sent a special message to the Muslims community at the beginning of Ramadhan in which he said that the values of charity and compassion that are central to Ramadan are shared by Muslims and non Muslims alike.

"They have particular poignancy and significance in the light of the suffering of people of all religions in Syria today. In the British government we will not relent for an instant in our efforts to help bring that about, and to support those enduring poverty, repression and conflict around the globe". Foreign Office Minister Alistair Burt and Development Secretary Andrew Mitchell attended an Iftar event organised by Islamic Relief on 26 July. Mr Mitchell said :” We



Al Minaar
Muslim Cultural
Heritage Centre

Whitechapel mosque



are delighted that the Government will be matching pound for pound public donations to the Islamic Relief Ramadan appeal, up to a total of £5 million.

In the Olympic Village prayer rooms and washing facilities were provided. The Head of the Multi-Faith Chaplaincy Rev Duncan Green described how in the very early stages of planning for the Olympics Muslim groups were consulted. "They were supportive of what we provided. We made

sure that meals were available before day break and obviously at the break fast. Break of fast packs were also provided with fruits and other traditional foods."

The Director of Regent's Park Mosque Dr Ahmed Al-Dubayan emphasised that London is a multicultural city and with the Olympic games it is even more so. "The message of the Olympics is to bring people together. Regent's park mosque is one of the leading

organisations in the Muslim community not only in the UK but in Europe. It is unique because the land of this place was granted by the crown. The trustees are the Muslim ambassadors from the Muslim countries. It is a joint project between Muslims and Muslim society in the UK and the UK itself. Every day we provide more than 1300 meals. This year we invited athletes and some of the visitors who have come to London for the Olympics.”

Expect Turkey, London has more mosques than any other cities in Western Europe: 16 in North London, 39 in East London, 16 in South London and 10 in West London. The first mosque in London, dating back to 1886, was at 111 Campden Hill Road in Notting Hill Gate. It is unclear when it closed - perhaps it was some time during the Second World War, when many social institutions were thrown into chaos.

Fatema(left) and Marian





Foreign office minister Alistair Burt at Al Manaar

Woking Mosque, just above the m25 motorway was the focal point for the London Muslim community during the early 20th century, until late 1960s. It was through the personalities of the Woking Muslim Mission that land and money was granted by King George VI and his government in 1944 for the building of the Regent's Park Mosque.

These two projects were soon followed by the opening of the East London Mosque in 1941, which remains one of London's oldest and most active community

institutions. Since then there had been many mosques confined to small buildings which were mostly used as prayer rooms by the Islamic community.

Many mosques are funded by rich Islamic countries like Saudi Arabia and Turkey. Others are supported by loans and community help. Iftar is served every night and there is a special programme of lectures and activities during Ramadhan culminating in Eid celebrations at the end of the month.

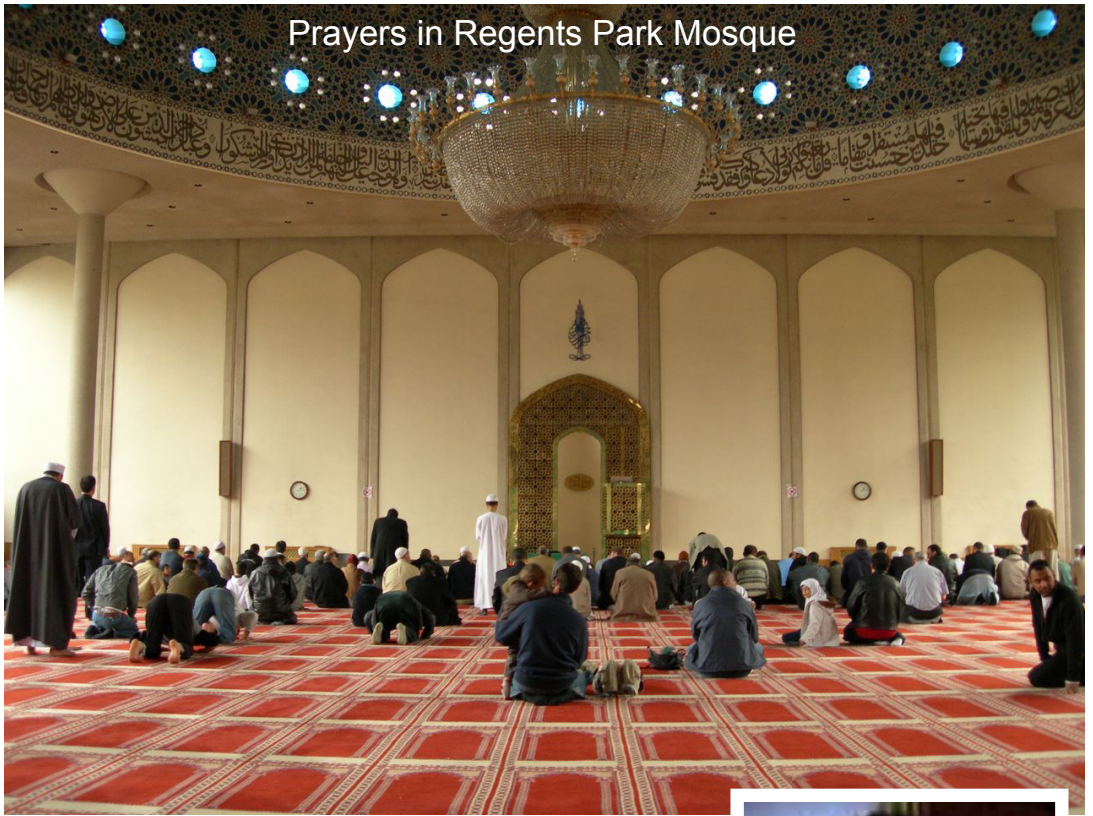
The mosque at the Al Manaar Muslim Cultural Heritage Centre in West London in the heart of the Moroccan community is in a quiet area away from the traffic and can be accessed through a pedestrian walkway. It has a extensive programme of activities for the local Muslim community, including a Somali focus group and has been visited by Prince Charles and Foreign Office Minister Alistair Burt.

The women's mosque is much smaller than the mens'. Both are illuminated by a magnificent chandelier. A deep orange patterned carpet blends well with the dark brown teak wood. The atmosphere is welcoming and the sisters who come to pray exchange fraternal greetings.

Naila a charming dignified Sudanese woman dressed in many shades of green with a loose fitting scarf who has lived in Britain



Prayers in Regents Park Mosque



since 1992 welcomes Houda who is on holiday from Tunisia and asks about developments in the country. She is saddened by the killing in Syria and is adamant that Assad should go. After prayers Naila encourages the women to come downstairs for iftar served on a carpeted floor in a large room.

The volunteers serve with joy in their hearts gladly handing out more food than the worshippers can possibly eat. First there are dates and basbousa a sweet cake and bottles of water. After a short prayer the main meal is served. Soup followed by large trays of rice



Dr Ahmed Al
Dubayan director
Regents Park
Mosque

and chicken from which the women help themselves.

Mariam aged 13 and her sister Fatema 11 who were born in Britain to a Pakistani father and an Indian mother are enjoying Ramadhan but comment that the 18 hour fast is long and the weather is hot. "I have been to quite a lot of mosques," Mariam said. "But I like this one most. The women are really friendly here. If we were in a Muslim country it would not be hard to observe Ramadhan but here there are more temptations

to wear short and drink alcohol." She admits that she doesn't like wearing the hijab but wears it during Ramadhan.

"People in Britain are quite understanding about Ramadhan. Once I was on the train and somebody knew I was fasting and stopped drinking water when they saw me. That was very nice."

Fatema normally stays home during Ramadhan not to come into contact with people who are eating. "The best thing about

Regents Park Mosque



Sharifah - Islam
is a religion of
peace



Ramadhan is feeling how the poor people feel.”

Sharifah originally from Detroit Michigan converted to Islam in 1992 and is a regular volunteer at the Muslim Centre. She is saddened that there is a misunderstanding linking Islam to terrorism. “Islam means peace. The media portrays this image that we want to bomb ourselves which is haram (forbidden). To commit suicide in Islam is an unforgiveable sin.”

When she has finished serving Sharifah relaxes and explains that when she was a Christian but there were questions that needed answering. “I could not get any answers from the ministers in the churches. They told me ‘do what I say – it is written like this, just follow’. When I did the research I found that the more I searched different knowledge came to me. It just clicked and I decided to practice Islam.”

Sharifah works for Age UK but spends a lot of time at the mosque as a volunteer throughout the year. She arrived in Britain in 1987 and finds it 'slow' compared to America 'but now its home.' She praises the mosque for its classes for children, Arabic and English lessons, programme for the elderly and Saturday school which assists children studying for GCSE. The mosque also offers free legal advice and is often visited by international delegations and British school children and non

Muslims who want to learn about Islam.

As Ramadhan draws to a close Houda is completing her 'mosque crawl' in London. The Al Manar cultural centre is her favourite. Food from different cultures throughout the Arab world is shared and she describes life in Tunisia and hears many first hand accounts of life in other Muslim countries. Meeting Muslims from all over the world is the best thing about Ramadhan in multicultural London.

The Woking Mosque in the 1940s

