

Ramadan in Baghdad

The harmony of holiness and tradition

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Streets and markets are decorated for the coming of the month.

الاستعدادات بتهيئة وسائل الزينة لاستقبال شهر رمضان وسط العاصمة.

Perhaps the only advantage of the wars forced on the Iraqis during the 1980s is that they brought them back to religion and tradition. The hardships of these years did not dampen their celebration of the holy month of Ramadan, with its unique traditional celebrations, rarely found in the Muslim world, despite the diversity of the ethnic and religious mixture of Iraq. Strangely enough, even the Mandeans, who live with their Muslim neighbours, celebrate this glorious month.

Ramadan has a special taste, colour and smell which you can feel from the beginning of the month of Shaban. The moon has to be seen at the beginning of this month, as well at its end, so as to fix the beginning of Ramadan. The preparations for Ramadan

start during the last ten days of Shaban. The markets start stocking up on the food required for this month and the streets get busy with shoppers looking for special products including ingredients for soft drinks, dried apricots lemons, lentils etc

The last day of Shaban

Iraqis normally fast during the last day of Shaban recalling a Hadith which says that whoever fasts during the last day of Shaban would have fasted the whole of that month. It is also considered a preparation for Ramadan ➤

City Tourism



Sweet seller in Al-Rasafi square.

بائع حلويات على قارعة الطريق أمام ساحة الرصافي وسط العاصمة.



Second hand market.

سوق شعبي لبيع الملابس المستعملة وسط العاصمة حيث تلجأ معظم العوائل ذات الدخل الواطئ بتلبية احتياجاتها من هذه الأسواق.

fasting. After breaking the fast, people gather in the mosques to see the moon of Ramadan. The beginning of the month is then broadcast through different media and the lights are lit. Some families will go out to eat sweets displayed on stalls which line the streets. Cries of Takber will be heard from the mosques after the announcement of the beginning of the month with the words "Welcome the month of Ramadan, welcome the month of grace".

Drums of Ramadan

Despite the fact that every household has a clock, the majority of people rely on the drummer to wake them up for the last meal.

The drummers share the responsibility of ensuring the residents wake up in time and divide the streets between them. The mosques also wake the people up with their loudspeakers. The whole family has the last meal together - even the small children who are exempted from the fast. This is how they are taught about their religious duties from an early age. The last meal is light because the people go back to sleep. Before the morning prayer call they are told: "Drink water quickly before dawn, you are allowed to drink". Shortly afterwards the call is heard: "Stop...Stop, may Allah bless you". Nobody will refrain from fasting during the

day - even the elderly and children who are exempted all adhere to their Islamic duties. The restaurants and shops in the capital close their doors during the day. A few are allowed restricted opening hours as long as they put curtains in the windows as a sign of respect for those who are fasting during the holy month. Unlike in the Gulf states, offices are open during the day but the working hours are shorter.

Before the call to evening prayers and the firing of the artillery shot, housewives prepare a normally rich meal, with a variety of dishes, for breaking the fast. Dates have a prominent position. The best dates are "Barhi" from Basra. Those who prefer to break their fast in the mosque will be treated to dates and yogurt, brought either by the mosque management or the locals.

Life picks up after the evening meal and the mosques, especially those of the shrines, keep their gates open. Whole families go to Baghdad's main shrines: Imam Mosa Al-Kadhimi bin Jafar Al-Sadiq, his grandson Imam Mohammad Al-Jawad, both in Kadhimia, Abdul-Qadir Al-Gilani, Imam Abu Hanifa, both on the eastern side of Baghdad. Some families take their Iftar (evening meal) with them to these shrines on Friday. Mosques hold extra prayers and lectures during this month. The same pattern will be repeated in other Iraqi cities, especially the holy cities.

The hidden ring

One of the games played only in Ramadan, which gives the month its unique flavour, is muhebes (or the hidden ring). Two teams will take it in turns to hide a ring while the other team tries to find it. The game depends on the captain of the team, who plays a major role in determining which team wins. The game is played between two or more towns and a tournament decides the final winner. Each team has more than 50 players, the ring is hidden in one hand and the captain of the other team, or another person nominated by him, will try to find it. Every time they fail a point is scored against them. When the winning team scores 30 points, the game ends. Sometimes the game is played until dawn and has to be postponed until the following night. ➔

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Sweet seller in Kadhimiah.

بائع حلويات في سوق الكاظمية الشعبي..



Clothes market in Kadhimiah.

سوق لبيع الملابس في منطقة الكاظمية بعد الغروب.

The game depends on observation, nerves and the ability to keep facial expressions under control. Sweets are handed out to all the players and the audience. The atmosphere is one of gaiety, even for the losing team. The most famous teams come from the districts of Fadhil and Kadhimia. The game has brought people from different backgrounds together and strengthened relations between the various districts of Baghdad.

The holy nights

The night of 17th of Ramadan has a special place in the hearts of Iraqis because it is the night when Muslims won the battle of Bader

- their first victory against the non believers. Special commemorations are held on this night which includes speeches to illustrate the importance of this landmark battle for Muslims. The sad nights of Ramadan are the 19th and 21st - the nights on which Imam Ali was first wounded and subsequently died of his injuries. These are also nights of speeches and ceremonies in the mosques and houses of Baghdad and the cities of central and southern Iraq. Food is handed out to family, friends and needy people. The holiest night, the Night of Destiny (Lil Al-Qader) is spent in worship and reading the Quran in the mosques and shrines. The

last Friday, Orphan Friday, has a special place in the hearts of Iraqis and more food and money is given to the needy.

Childrens song

Children have their fun during Ramadan. They go from house to house after breaking the fast, singing:

O majinah

Open your purse and give us money

Then they add:

May God save the man of the house.....Ameen

By the grace of Allah and Yassin.....Ameen

They then shout the names of the people of the household who were known to them. If they are not fairly rewarded with money or sweets, they will shout:

O people upstairs

Are you going to treat us or shall we go?

They normally get some small change or some sweets.

Last days of Ramadan

The clothing and footwear markets become active in the last week of the month. as families are eager to buy new clothes for their children. Barbers' shops also get busy because most Iraqis have a hair cut for Eid. Most families prepare a special pastry known as "Klecha" made of flour and oil and filled with nuts and sugar or dates.

People stand on the rooves of their houses on the last day of Ramadan to see the moon of Shawal or listen to the radio to hear it announced. Once the sighting is confirmed, loudspeakers blare from the mosques farewelling the end of the month saying:

Farewell the month of Ramadan

Farewell the month of worship and forgiveness

People who were fasting will eat a light meal called the "Orphans' Meal".

The celebrations during this month are the same for everyone but meals may be more lavish and donations more generous according to the families' means.

There is a big question mark over Ramadan in Baghdad this year. How will it be celebrated amid the bobby trapped cars, and suicide bombs which strike randomly and without warning? ■