

What is Eid and how do Muslims celebrate it?

Six questions answered

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Aya Attal, then age 17, of Crafton, Pennsylvania., hugs a friend at an Eid al-Fitr celebration, marking the end of Ramadan, on June 25, 2017 in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. Photo: Justin Merriman/Getty Images

Muslims all over the world are celebrating Eid al-Fitr this week, one of their biggest religious holidays. In July, Muslims will celebrate Eid al-Adha.

1. What is Eid?

Eid literally means "festival" or "feast" in Arabic. There are two major Eids in the Islamic calendar per year – Eid al-Fitr earlier in the year and Eid al-Adha later.

Eid al-Fitr is a three-day-long festival and is known as the "Lesser" or "Smaller Eid." Eid al-Adha, which is a four-day-long festival is known as the "Greater Eid."

2. Why is Eid celebrated twice a year?

The two Eids recognize, celebrate and recall two distinct events that are significant in the Islamic faith.

Eid al-Fitr means "the feast of breaking the fast." This Eid marks the end of the holy fasting month, Ramadan. During this time Muslims fast from food and water from sunrise to set, every day for one month. They also try to increase good deeds and focus on their spirituality. Ramadan marks an important time for Muslims. This is when Muslims believe that the Quran, the holy book for Muslims, was revealed to the Prophet Muhammad.

3. How do Muslims celebrate Eid al-Fitr?

Eid al-Fitr features two to three days of celebrations that include special morning prayers. People greet each other with "Eid Mubarak," meaning "Blessed Eid" and with formal embraces. It is a tradition in many countries to make special sweets to celebrate Eid. It is also tradition during this Eid for children to be given gifts and money from their elders. Many communities also host carnivals and gatherings for children to celebrate this special day.

Eid is not just a time to celebrate the end of Ramadan. It is also a time to think about others in the community, especially those who are in need. Practices vary from country to country.

In many countries with large Muslim populations, Eid al-Fitr is a national holiday. Schools, offices and businesses are closed so family, friends and neighbors can enjoy the celebrations together. In the United States and the United Kingdom Muslims may request the day off from school or work to celebrate.

In many countries with a majority Muslim population, there are huge decoration displays for Eid. It is common for special food to be prepared and shared with family and friends.

In Jordan, people rush to local malls and special "Ramadan markets" to get gifts for Eid al-Fitr.

Places that were once part of the Ottoman-Turkish empire also celebrate Eid. This includes Bosnia, Herzegovina, Albania, Azerbaijan and the Caucasus. They refer to it as "Lesser Bayram" or "festival" in Turkish.

4. How do Muslims celebrate Eid al-Adha?

The other festival, Eid al-Adha, is the "feast of the sacrifice." It comes at the end of the Hajj, an annual pilgrimage by millions of Muslims to the holy city of Mecca in Saudi Arabia. It is considered an obligation for all Muslims to do once in their lifetimes if they have the health and money to do it.

Eid al-Adha is celebrated because of Prophet Ibrahim (Abraham in the Bible and Torah). It comes from a time when Allah ("God" in Arabic) commanded Ibrahim to sacrifice his son Ismail as a test of faith. The story, as narrated in the Quran, describes Satan's attempt to tempt Ibrahim so he would disobey God's command. Ibrahim, however, remains unmoved and informs Ismail, who is willing to be sacrificed.

However, just as Ibrahim attempts to kill his son, God intervenes and a ram is sacrificed in place of Ismail. During Eid al-Adha, Muslims slaughter an animal to remember Ibrahim's sacrifice. They also do this to remind themselves of the need to submit to the will of God.

5. When are they celebrated?

Eid al-Fitr is celebrated on the first day of the 10th month in the Islamic calendar.

Eid al-Adha is celebrated on the 10th day of the final month in the Islamic calendar.

The Islamic calendar is a lunar calendar. The dates are calculated based on lunar phases. Since the Islamic calendar year is shorter than the solar Gregorian calendar year by 10 to 12 days, the dates for Ramadan and Eid on the Gregorian calendar can vary year by year.

6. What is the spiritual meaning of Eid al-Fitr?

Eid al-Fitr, as it follows the fasting of Ramadan, is also seen as a spiritual celebration of Allah's provision of strength and endurance.

Amid the reflection and rejoicing, Eid al-Fitr is a time for charity, known as Zakat al-Fitr. Eid is meant to be a time of joy and blessing for the entire Muslim community and a time for distributing one's wealth.

Charity to the poor is a highly emphasized value in Islam. The Quran says, "Believe in Allah and his messenger, and give charity out of the (substance) that Allah has made you heirs of. For those of you who believe and give charity – for them is a great reward."