

# Ramadan viewed by a non-Muslim Syrian



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## My thoughts go out to displaced Syrian families in Ramadan

As music and scents can sometimes stir powerful emotions and transport us back in time, so was the coming of Ramadan this year. It has triggered mixed emotions in me, I the non-Muslim, living hundreds of miles away from my country Syria.

Before the war, and for three decades, I lived in a multi-ethnic quarter in my home town Qamishli, Syria. My close neighbors were Arabs, Kurds, Syrians, Armenians... people of all faiths and denominations. They lived in harmony and maintained

cordial relations. I still remember, with much love, those people and miss them much.

The arrival of holy month of Ramadan each year was a unique occasion that affected all aspects of life and changed the comportment of Muslims. They would start fasting from dawn to sunset and refrain from consuming food, drinking and smoking for 29-30 days.

Nevertheless, Ramadan was not only a month of fasting and prayer but also of sharing, solidarity and conviviality. As for me, being interested in the spirituality underlying religions, it was also a unique experience. My family and I, and many other non-Muslims, were anticipating it with joy, much like most of the Syrians.

The firing of traditional Ramadan cannon shots would announce the start of the sacred month. The first day before dawn, I would be jolted out of sleep by the sound of banging drum of "al-Musaharati", the public-waker, calling the residents to wake up for "al-suhur" the pre-dawn meal, which is followed by a period of fasting until sunset "al Maghreb". Strangely enough, the traditional occupation of "al-Musaharati". typical of Ramadan, though obsolete, was still in practice in some suburban districts and was made very popular, thanks to famous Syrian pre-war soap-operas.

Then, starting from noon the same day, the kitchen-work of housewives preparing dishes for "Iftar" – the meal that breaks the fast at sunset – would commence. The clattering of cooking utensils, the aroma of strong spices of home-cooked food, of baked chickens and of the pleasant local delicacies, would linger long in our building, bringing out the flavor and the spirit of Ramadan.

Before sunset prayers that signify "Iftar", I would return home like all the residents. On my way back, I would pass the town's bazaar. The scene there was always exceptionally

curious and impressive at this time of the year. One would make his way with difficulty amidst the hustle and bustle of massive crowds very busy doing their last minutes shopping before (Iftar). The shrill cries of street vendors and pushcart owners blocking the ways, the clacking of brass cups of the traditional liquorice and tamer-hendi sellers would be heard everywhere, while the overcrowded stores big and small, displayed all sorts of traditional Ramadan delicacies and food. The weary shoppers, all of them male as women had other culinary tasks at home, would look restless and anxious to reach home in time for breaking the fast. In the meantime, I would push my way to buy newly-baked Ramadan bread "al-Maarouk", and some other traditional Syrian treats like Mushabak, Kamar-addin, dates... My children would never expect me to return home empty-handed.

Soon after, a shot of Ramadan canon would be heard heralding "Iftar" time. The streets would become completely deserted, stores closed and the whole town would come to a standstill. Only the loud calls for prayers from the nearest mosques would be heard and, of course, the rattling of dishes and spoons from the balconies of my neighbors. It is "Iftar", time for gathering of families to enjoy the delightful meals and share the simple joy of Ramadan.

Immediately after "Iftar", families would gather around the TV sets eagerly waiting for the release of the first episode of famous Syrian Ramadan soap-opera "Al-musalsalat", which would keep the people glued to their TV sets for 30 days until the last day of the holy month.

This rich spiritual tradition of Ramadan has been swept away by the outbreak of the vicious circle of war, that has devastated families and destroyed every aspect of life in Syria.

Now, only few days are left before the end of the holy month. My thoughts go out to tens of thousands of displaced and split

families, living in make-shift camps inside and outside Syria, in most dehumanized conditions, struggling to procure a simple meal for "Iftar".

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