

Sawm

Sawm is the fourth pillar of Islam. It involves fasting during daylight hours in the month of Ramadan. As well as food and drink, adults must also give up smoking and sexual intercourse in daylight hours. There are a number of people who are excused from taking part in sawm, including: the elderly; people with diabetes or other health conditions which would make fasting dangerous; children under 12; people who are pregnant, breastfeeding or menstruating; people who are travelling. If an adult has been excused from sawm for any of those reasons, they should aim to fast at another point or make a donation to charity instead. During Ramadan, Muslims who are fasting will eat a large meal just before dawn, in order to set them up for a day without food and water. At the setting of the sun, they will break their fast with dates or water, before having a larger meal later. These evening meals during Ramadan are often events where family and communities get together. The Night of Power, or Lailat al Qadr, falls in the month of Ramadan. This marks the night when the Qur'an was first revealed by the angel Jibril to the prophet Muhammad. It is regarded as a very special and holy time:

the Qur'an 97:3 says it is "better than a thousand months",

and it is an especially good time for Muslims to pray and recite the Qur'an. Ramadan ends with Eid ul-Fitr, which involves celebrating with prayers at the mosque and meals with family and friends. Fasting during Ramadan promotes lots of things that are beneficial to the individual, such as:

- * obedience and submission to God
- * self-discipline
- * a renewed appreciation of God's gifts
- * empathy for the suffering of the poor
- * a new understanding of the values of charity and generosity
- * a way of giving thanks for the ,Qur'an which was revealed to Muhammad in the month of Ramadan
- * a way of feeling connected to other Muslims



Hajj



The Hajj is a pilgrimage to Mecca, which every adult and able-bodied Muslim who can afford to is instructed to do at least once in their lifetime. Hajj occurs in the month of Dhul Hijja, the twelfth month of the Islamic calendar. The tradition of Hajj is said to date back to the time of Abraham, (or **Ibrahim**) when God instructed Abraham to leave his wife and son alone in the desert of Mecca. God miraculously created a spring of water in the desert to sustain Abraham's wife and son. Abraham built the Kaaba, a house of worship, dedicated to the glory of God, and was ordered by God to invite pilgrims to visit it.

Hajj is one of the pillars of Islam. It promotes equality and fellowship amongst Muslims and shows worshippers that all believers are equal in the eyes of God.

A pilgrim on Hajj has to wear special white clothes called Ihram. They are forbidden from shaving, using oils or cologne, having sex, killing or hunting animals, fighting or arguing while on Hajj. Men are not allowed to wear clothing with stitching and women are required to cover their faces.

On arrival in Mecca, pilgrims head to Mina, where they spend the day praying in tents. The next day, they go to Mount Arafat, and spend the day repenting sins that they have committed in the past. They spend the night in Muzdalifa, where they pray and gather pebbles to be used on the next day in the pilgrimage.

This day is called Jamarat, and it involves throwing pebbles collected in Muzdalifa at three different pillars (small, medium and large). It is a symbolic stoning of the devil, which goes back to the story of the devil's attempts to tempt the prophet Abraham away from obeying God. Pilgrims then return to Mina for Eid al-Adha, or the Feast of the Sacrifice.

This celebrates Abraham's willingness to sacrifice everything for God, and it is typical for Muslims to sacrifice an animal on this day and give some of its meat to the poor. Pilgrims will also cut their hair on this day (men often shave their heads, but women only need to cut a lock of their hair).

Finally, pilgrims return to Mecca in order to circle the Kaaba, in a ritual called tawaf. This involves circling the holy stone structure built by Abraham mentioned above. The Kaaba is the most sacred structure in Islam; when Muslims pray, they are instructed to face Mecca in honour of this building. Pilgrims walk around the structure seven times in an anti-clockwise direction.

Festivals and Commemorations

Eid-ul-Adha, also called the Greater Eid, is the Festival of Sacrifice. This is a celebration and commemoration of the willingness of Abraham to sacrifice his own son when God commanded him to. The devil tried to tempt Abraham into disobeying God, but Abraham was faithful and, just before he was going to slaughter his son, God intervened and gave him a lamb to kill as a sacrifice instead.

The celebrations for Eid-ul-Adha involve sacrificing a sheep (in the UK, this must be done at a slaughterhouse). The meat is shared out among family and friends, as well as given to the poor. Prayers of thanks are given, and Muslims give each other presents. In Muslim countries, Eid-ul-Adha is a national holiday and people celebrate with their family and friends. Money has to be given to the poor at Eid as part of the celebrations.

Id-ul-Fitr is the Feast of Breaking the Fast, and it occurs at the end of Ramadan. In this festival, Muslims are celebrating the end of the fast, but also giving thanks to God for the strength and self-control that they have developed during the fast. The festival begins with the sighting of the new moon after Ramadan. On this day, Muslims wake before dawn and offer prayers. They put on their best clothes, decorate their homes, and attend special services at mosque. Meals are shared between families and friends, and money is given to the poor.

Ashura is a day commemorated by Muslims, but it has a different significance to the Sunnis than it does to the Shi'as. For Shi'a Muslims, Ashura marks the killing and martyrdom of Hussein, the grandson of Muhammad. Shi'a Muslims perform rituals of mourning on this day, such as dressing in black and walking the streets chanting and slapping their chests. The death of Hussein is very important to Shi'a Muslims because they recognise him as an Imam from the Ahl al-bayt, or successors of the Prophet Muhammad.

Sunni Muslims celebrate Ashura as the day that Moses and the Israelites were saved from the Egyptians. Sunni Muslims mark this day with a voluntary fast. Ashura falls on the tenth day of Muharram, the first month of the Islamic calendar.

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Jihad

As mentioned above, there are numerous interpretations of the word jihad. Jihad can refer to the internal struggle to live a Godly life as a good Muslim; the struggle to create a true Muslim society; or the struggle to defend Islam by military force if necessary.

The Prophet Muhammad referred to the internal struggle as the '**greater jihad**'; this means that the battle within oneself to live a Godly and righteous life is the hardest struggle. However, there is some justification for 'lesser jihad', or holy war.

There are very strict rules for when this kind of jihad is permitted. For example, it must always be in self-defense; it must be started by a religious leader; its cause must be noble and something that God would approve of; wounded enemies must be treated in the same way as one's own soldiers; women, children and old people should not be harmed. The Qur'an also says that the war must stop as soon as the enemy asks for peace (**Qur'an 8:61**).

Zakat

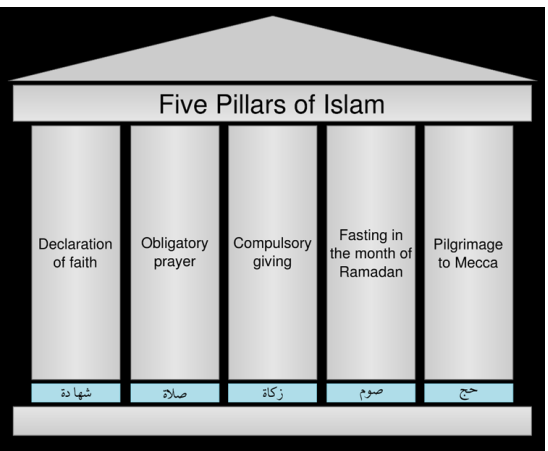
Zakat is the act of paying 2.5% of income and savings to poor people or needy causes. Zakat is considered as a compulsory tax rather than a charitable donation. Zakat is collected by the state in some countries such as Pakistan, Libya and Saudi Arabia, but in many other countries, it is down to the individual or groups to sort out. Shi'a Muslims give a higher amount of zakat, called Khums, to Imams, who then decide how the money will be distributed.

Zakat literally means '**that which purifies**', and it is taught that giving zakat purifies the giver and the receiver. It purifies the receiver because it stops them from being jealous of the rich and it is an acceptance of God's will. It purifies the giver because it is allowing them to gain true riches from God.

There is guidance in the Qur'an about who should receive zakat. The Qur'an 9:60 states that,

""Alms are for the poor and the needy, and those employed to administer the (funds); for those whose hearts have been (recently) reconciled (to Truth); for those in bondage and in debt; in the cause of Allah; and for the wayfarer: (thus is it) ordained by Allah, and Allah is full of knowledge and wisdom."

Zakat therefore acts as a kind of social security, ensuring that the poor are looked after and that relations between rich and poor Muslims are harmonious.



AREA	RAG	Retest 1	Retest 2	Retest 3
Hajj				
Jihad				
Sawm				
Zakat				
Festivals				