

Muslim Religious Celebrations in Palestine



By Sheikh Yousef Abdel Wahab Abu Sneineh

Muslims in Palestine celebrate several holy occasions that include the *Isra'* and *Mi'raj* of Prophet Mohammad (Peace Be Upon Him – pbuh) from Mecca to Jerusalem, the Prophetic *Hejira* or migration from Mecca to Medina, *Al-Mawlid an-Nabawi* or birth of Prophet Mohammad (pbuh), and the holy month of *Ramadan* and *Laylat Al-Qadr*, variously rendered in English as the Night of Decree, Night of Measures, or Night of Value.

Not only do religious occasions have a spiritual significance for Muslims but they are also occasions for social cohesion and interaction. During religious celebrations, Muslim families meet for large meals, give each other gifts, and spend time together. In particular, women and children are well taken care of and the sick are visited and consoled.

The *Isra'* and *Mi'raj*

The *Isra'* and *Mi'raj* is one of the holiest occasions for Muslims all over the world. It is observed on the 27th day of the month of Rajab, the 7th month in the Islamic calendar. This event marks the night that Allah, or God, took Prophet Mohammad (pbuh) on a journey first from Mecca to Jerusalem and then to heaven. It

signifies the strong link that exists between the Levant in general and the Holy Land in particular and Mecca. The journey of the Prophet (pbuh) took place one year and a half before the *Hejira* or migration to Medina of the Prophet (pbuh).

Prophet Mohammad (pbuh) arrived in Jerusalem and led prayers in a gathering that was attended by all previous prophets. On the same night, the angel Gabriel brought Allah's message to the Prophet (pbuh). This clearly indicates that the Prophet (pbuh) is the last of the prophets and messengers of Allah and that the land has become Muslim by divine decree. The Holy Qur'an states, "Exalted is He who took His Servant by night from al-Masjid (mosque) al-Haram to al-Masjid al-Aqsa, whose surroundings We have blessed, to show him of Our signs. Indeed, He is the Hearing, the Seeing (Al-*Isra'* 17: 1).

As a result of the *Isra'* and *Mi'raj*, the city of Jerusalem has become a holy city for Muslims all over the world.

In fact, it is the third holiest city for Muslims after Mecca and Medina in Saudi Arabia. On this occasion, special celebrations are held in Al-Aqsa Mosque, attended by Muslim religious scholars, *imams*, who are the leaders of prayers in mosques, and the public. The *imams* give speeches and sing prophetic eulogies. Until the early twentieth century, there was a lock of the Prophet's (pbuh) hair in the Dome of the Rock that Muslims used to kiss on the occasion of the *Isra'* and *Mi'raj*. When the Ottomans left Jerusalem, they took with them the lock of hair that is now preserved in Istanbul, Turkey.

The *Hejira*

Every year, Muslims all over the world celebrate the *Hejira* of Prophet Mohammad (pbuh) from Mecca to the Medina in the Hijaz region in Saudi Arabia. Symbolically, the *Hejira* marks the beginning of the establishment of

Dome of the Rock. Photo by Ahed Izhiman.





Muslims praying at Al-Aqsa Mosque. Photo by Tarek Bakri.

the state of Islam in Medina. Prophet Mohammad (pbuh) had migrated there together with His companion Abu Bakr Siddiq and accompanied by His venerable companions. In Medina, they all were given a very warm reception by the local inhabitants, known as Al-Ansar. Because on the very same day when the Prophet (pbuh) and His companions entered Medina, the city lit up, it was henceforth called *Al-Madina al-Munawwara* (the Lighted City).

While in the Medina, the Prophet (pbuh) lived with the migrants and Al-Ansar and mediated reconciliation between the feuding tribes of Aws and *Khazraj*. In addition, He initiated the construction of Al-Masjid al-Nabawi to teach His companions and the people that Islam is a religion of science, faith, and hard work. Two years after establishing the state of Islam, the Prophet (pbuh) defeated his enemies in the famous *Ghazwat Badr* (Battle of Badr), which is noted in the Holy Qur'an. It must be mentioned that the events of the *Hejira* are talked about many times in the Holy Qur'an.

Al-Mawlid an-Nabawi

Muslims celebrate Al-Mawlid an-Nabawi, the birth of Prophet Mohammad (pbuh), on 12 Rabi' Al-Awwal (corresponding to February 15) each year. The prophets Abraham and Issa, as well as the Bible and Torah, prophesied the advent of Prophet Mohammad (pbuh). On this occasion, the narrative of the birth of the Prophet (pbuh) is recited, and prophetic eulogies that depict His high morals, good conduct, generosity, wisdom, and altruistic character are sung. Moreover, excerpts from the Prophetic *Hadith* (biography) and teachings of the Prophet (pbuh) are read aloud. The *Hadith* reveals that Islam is a divine religion and that people should join Islam and show knowledge, faith, and wisdom, and give a good example. In addition, the Prophet (pbuh) taught that Islam is a religion of tolerance, justice, and love. Because *Al-Mawlid an-Nabawi* signifies the birth of the Muslim nation, all Muslims should learn the moral values and wisdom of Islam and exercise them in real life.

The Holy Month of Ramadan and Laylat al-Qadr

Ramadan is the month of intensive fasting and prayer, and Muslims believe that Allah will grant them double rewards if they fast and pray during *Ramadan*. During *Ramadan*, Muslims undergo a process of self-cleansing both physically and spiritually, and ask Allah for forgiveness and salvation.

Muslims believe that *Laylat al-Qadr* is better than one thousand months. During that night, the angel Gabriel revealed the Holy Qur'an to the Prophet (pbuh). Muslims flock in large numbers to Al-Aqsa Mosque where they spend the whole night in prayer and worship.

During *Ramadan* social ties among Muslims are strengthened. People break

the fast together and the poor are invited to mosques for free food and prayer.

Eid al-Fiter and Eid al-Adha

Eid al-Fiter (Breakfast Feast) marks the end of the fasting month of *Ramadan* and is one of the holiest occasions for Muslims. Its beginning is declared by religious authorities the night before the feast when they see the first light of the crescent of the waxing moon. It is celebrated with a breakfast meal that generally includes meat. A mutton or calf is slaughtered and distributed in three parts among the family, friends, and relatives, and the poor.

Eid al-Adha (Feast of the Sacrifice) celebrates Abraham's willingness to succumb to the will of God and slaughter his own son – but God gave him a lamb to be slaughtered instead. It is the holiest feast for Muslims. Pilgrimage to Mecca undertaken on this day, the *Hajj*, is one of the five pillars of Islam, required of the faithful along with *shahada*, confession of faith; *sala*, prayer; *sawm*, fasting during *Ramadan*; and *zaka*, the giving of alms.



Well of Souls beneath the Dome of the Rock. Photo by Shareef Sarhan.

For *Eid al-Fiter* and *Eid al-Adha*, delicious date cookies called *ka'ek* and *ma'moul* are baked and beautifully decorated, to be served with a cup of *qahwa sada* (a strong special blend of coffee that is boiled for a long time and prepared without sugar) to visitors that often include all members of the extended family who may stop by only for a few minutes to exchange the latest news and share in each other's lives, strengthening family and friendship ties.

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