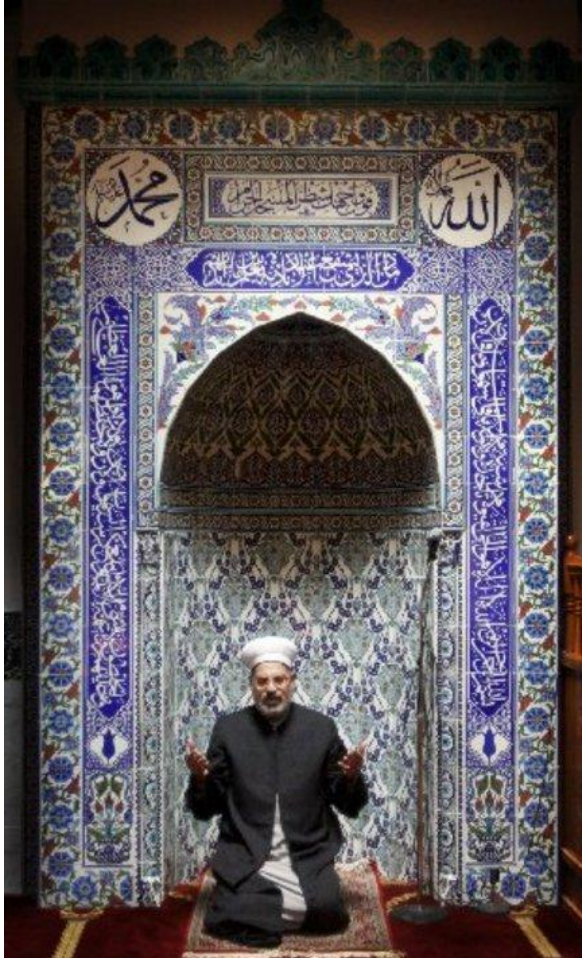


Holy month of Ramadan begins - Faithful fast from sunrise to sunset to feel closer to God

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After demonstrating the prayer positions that are made facing the altar which identifies which direction is east, Iman Hamad Ahmad Chebli of the Islamic Society of Central Jersey shows how he would position himself facing not the altar but rather the members at the mosque in order to address them in Monmouth Junction, N.J. on Tuesday, August 10, 2010.

The sighting of the new crescent moon today ushers in the holy month of Ramadan, the ninth month of the lunar Islamic calendar. Adherents abstain from food, drink and sexual activities from sunrise to sunset.

It is during Ramadan that the Muslim faithful believe God revealed the Quran to the Prophet Muhammad.

Imam Hamad Ahmad Chebli of the Islamic Society of Central Jersey in South Brunswick said Ramadan is comparable to the fasting part of Lent -- the 40-day period of prayer, penitence and almsgiving leading up to the Easter holiday for Christians, and the High Holy Days for Jews.

"It is ordered by God. We as Muslims say we listen and we obey," said Chebli, adding that from a spiritual perspective, fasting makes one closer to God.

Area Muslims must abstain from eating after 4:41 a.m. and will break their fast at 8:01 p.m. today, Chebli said.

"Ramadan means to make yourself close to God, your parent, to your society and to be a better person. Every year you increase your goodness, your relationship with others," Chebli said.

The monthlong observation also is a time for Muslims to increase their alms-giving, one of the five pillars of Islam that faithful Muslims follow.

Riaz Siddiqui of Ewing, head of the religious committee for the mosque, said more people attend prayer services during the month.

"This is a month of training. We train ourselves to try to live the Islamic life. We follow the traditions of the prophet so the rest of the 11 months we can put this training to action," said Siddiqui.

A verse in the Quran, Islam's central religious text, says fasting is prescribed to Muslims as it had been prescribed to "those before you" to create God-consciousness.

Aside from the "spiritual act" of fasting from food and sex, abstaining from bad thoughts could be more difficult, said Fakhruddin Ahmed of West Windsor.

Fasting and feeling hunger makes one sympathetic to people throughout the world who have nothing to eat, Ahmed said.

Ahmed recalled a colleague named Joe who once waited to have dinner at 9 p.m. -- the time the sun set on a business trip to Iowa -- to break the fast with his faithful friend. He also remembered that when one of his sons, now in his mid-20s, was in middle school, his friend fasted in solidarity with him.

"My experience has been ... Americans have a tremendous respect for Muslims that are fasting. ... There's a tremendous empathy," Ahmed said. "They would go out of their way to not eat and drink in front of you when you're fasting."

Adherents break their fasts with an evening meal called the iftar, usually done with family or in a larger community gathering. Prepubescent children, the sick, travelers and pregnant and menstruating women are exempt from fasting during Ramadan. Eid ul-Fitr, which marks the end of Ramadan, is scheduled this year for Sept. 10.

