

Background article: Practices, Festivals and commemorations

'Id al-Fitr: the Festival of Fast-breaking

In Arabic, 'Id means festival. 'Id al-Fitr is the Festival of Fast-breaking that comes at the end of the fasting month of Ramadan. It falls on the first day of the next month, which is called Shawwal. The date is fixed by the sighting of the new moon. Where the new moon cannot be sighted with the naked eye, there can be variations in this date due to different methods employed to decide when it should be. Some groups will take astronomical data to indicate if the new moon was present even though it could not be sighted. Other groups will consult the internet and see if the new moon was sighted in the nearest Muslim majority country, or in Makka, or in the community from which their families originally migrated. Shi'a Muslims will seek guidance from their Grand Ayatollah, and there can still be a variation as different Grand Ayatollahs use different methods to judge the appearance of the new moon in the territory in which their followers live. The Shi'a Bohra community alone use a scientific calendar originally worked out in the Fatimid era, which enables them to say with precision in advance when the new month will begin in their community. As it comes at the end of a month-long fast, there will be an air of communal joy and festivity; adults and children will want to take a day off to celebrate.

The festival begins with everyone taking a shower and putting on clean clothes. They take breakfast after dawn, which had been forbidden throughout the previous month. The whole community gathers for festival prayers, either in the open air or in the largest mosques in the area. These will take the form of *salat* with the addition of an address on the theme of the festival. Gifts are given, especially to children. Families gather for a celebration meal and food is shared with neighbours. There is much visiting of friends and family, including visits to the graves of family members who have died. There are sports and games for the children.

Before Muslim householders can celebrate this feast, they are required to make a gift to needy neighbours to ensure that they have sufficient funds to buy presents for their children and join in the festive spirit. How could a Muslim celebrate a feast whilst neighbours have not enough to eat and treat their children? This gift, called *Zakat al-Fitr*, is calculated at the cost of one meal for each person in the household; it should be passed to neighbours in need whilst respecting their dignity. This can be organised on a collective basis by mosques and other institutions, which might be especially important in situations in which a family have no near neighbours in need.