

## **Background article: Practices, Festivals and commemorations**

### **Minor commemorations**

#### **Mawlid ul-Nabi**

The vast majority of Muslims, both Sunni and Shi'a, will celebrate the birthday of Prophet Muhammad, which falls on the seventeenth of the Islamic month of Rabi ul-Awwal. There will be processions in his honour and gatherings for prayer and to give thanks and praise for his life and ministry. At the gatherings, there will be many talks and poetry recitals in honour of Muhammad. In some communities there will also be songs in his honour.

#### **Laylat al-Qadr**

A night of great significance in the history of humanity is the night on which the revelation of the Qur'an began on Mount Hira in 610. As Muslims believe that the Qur'an is the final book of guidance for all humankind from this time onwards, this is a moment for great thanksgiving for the guidance that leads people to find favour with God in this life and the next. This is commemorated as Laylat (Night) al-Qadr (of Destiny, or of Power). Tradition records that this event took place on one of the odd-numbered nights towards the end of the month of Ramadan. Many Muslims will commemorate this on the 27<sup>th</sup> night, whilst others will commemorate it on each of the odd-numbered nights from 21<sup>st</sup> onwards. It is held that the angels of God will be sent throughout the earth on this night to record those who are in prayer, and thus many will spend the whole night awake in prayer and supplication. The gates of heaven are held to be open on this night and messages are sent to people's hearts, according to the direction of God.

{For more details on the original event, see the Section on Sources of authority and wisdom: The Qur'an: Revelation, recording and preservation of the Qur'an}

#### **Laylat al-Mi'raj**

A miraculous event occurred during the years when Muhammad was in Makka before the migration to Madina [Q. 17:1]. Muhammad was woken one night by an angel and seated on a wonderful mount called *al-Buraq*. He rode with the angel as far as Jerusalem. The journey is called the *isra*, or Night Journey. He stepped down from *al-Buraq* on the Temple Mount, that is, on the Rock, today covered by the Dome of the Rock, where all the earlier Prophets greeted him and he led them in prayer. Then from there he was taken up to heaven where he had an audience with God. During this he received knowledge known only to God and, amongst other things, the instruction that Muslims should pray five times a day.

He then descended from heaven, returned to the Temple Mount and then was taken by *al-Buraq* back to Makka. This was a journey outside time; it all took place in a single instant and scholars discuss if it was physical or spiritual. This journey stresses the importance of Jerusalem, along with Makka and Madina, as the three holy cities of Islam. The early Muslim community faced towards Jerusalem in prayer. The Dome of the Rock has long been a site of visitation for Muslims. Each year, on the 27<sup>th</sup> night of the month of Rajab, the ascension or *mi'raj* is celebrated on the *Laylat al-Mi'raj*, the Night of the Ascension of the Prophet. People will gather in mosques and spend the night-time hours in prayer and supplication with addresses being given to explain the importance of the *mi'raj*, not just of the Prophet himself, but also as a model for the spiritual journey of each believer.