



# A Guide to Ramadan

## For the Scottish Legal Profession



### ***Ramadan is coming ...***

*“A person who fasts with complete faith becomes aware very rapidly that he is a pilgrim in this world and that he is a creature destined for a goal beyond this material existence. The world about him loses some of its materiality and gains an aspect of “vacuity” and transparency which in the case of the contemplative Muslim leads directly to a contemplation of God in His creation. The ethereal and “empty” nature of things is, moreover, compensated by the appearance of those very things as Divine gifts. Food and drink which are taken for granted throughout the year reveal themselves during the period of fasting more than ever as gifts of heaven and gain a spiritual significance of a sacramental nature.”*

*Seyyed Hossein Nasr (Author and Professor of Islamic Studies at the George Washington University)*



## Your Guide to Ramadan

I've written this guide to help you to better understand what Ramadan is all about, and offer some insight as to what your Muslim staff will be doing during this period. I've offered the facts, my personal experiences, and some tips to help you to give the kind of support that will demonstrate your understanding and respect towards the experiences of your staff and colleagues.

How you respond to and support those individuals as they embark upon this period of fasting and celebration, reflects directly back to your organisation's diversity policies.

A better understanding of the religious practices and beliefs of others helps to prevent discrimination and bias. My aim is to help you to really live those diversity, equity and inclusion employer statements, and move closer to creating respectful and tolerant workplaces where all employees feel valued and supported.

Naeema Sajid  
Founder, Diversity+

## What, why and how?

There are 5 core beliefs and practices in Islam, known as the 5 pillars, all of which are obligatory for practising Muslims. These are:

- Declaration of Faith (Shahada)
- Prayer (Salat)
- Charity or giving (zakat)
- Fasting (Sawm or Ramadan)
- Pilgrimage (Hajj)

Ramadan is obligatory for all practising Muslims who are fit, healthy and able.

The Asian population in Scotland nearly doubled in size between 2001 and 2011, rising by 69,000, according to [scotlandcensus.gov.uk](http://scotlandcensus.gov.uk). 2.7% of Scotland's population identified as Asian, Asian Scottish or Asian British in the last reported Scottish Census in 2011.

1.4% (76,737) identified as Muslim, which is the highest figure after 'no religion' and Christian. We don't yet have the results of the 2022 Census, but it's predicted that the figures will have risen significantly again.

By comparison, according to the 2021 Census of England and Wales, people from Asian ethnic groups made up the second largest percentage of the population (9.3%). The proportion of the overall population who identified as Muslim increased from 4.9% (2.7 million) in 2011 to 6.5% (3.9 million) in 2021.

Looking at these figures and the growth in the Muslim population, it is clear to see why the prominence of Ramadan and Eid is growing, and why it is important for workplaces to both embrace and accommodate for what this means for their staff, clients, and investors.



Children (up to puberty) are exempt from fasting. As are women who are menstruating, breastfeeding or pregnant, and those suffering from ill health.

An exemption may also be for any other good reasons, such as travelling a far distance or under difficult conditions. Fasts that are missed for any of these reasons can be observed later in the year or a charitable donation offered.

The holy month of Ramadan is the 9th month in the lunar calendar (more about the lunar calendar to follow).

Ramadan begins with the ninth new moon of the year and ends with the 10th. It commemorates the month in which the prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) first received the Qu'ran.

The majority of the world's 1.9 billion Muslims will abstain from food and drink **(including water)** from dawn til dusk, each day for about a month. They will dedicate time for deep inner reflection and worship, strengthening their connection to their faith and enhancing their spiritual growth.

Ramadan is the pinnacle of the year for many Muslims, providing not only an opportunity for mindful focus but also for gatherings with community, friends and family, and taking part in charitable giving, gifting, and celebrations.



This year Ramadan is predicted to commence on 22nd March. I say 'predicted' because Muslims follow the lunar calendar. The lunar calendar is typically based on the moon's 29.5 day synodic orbit around the earth.

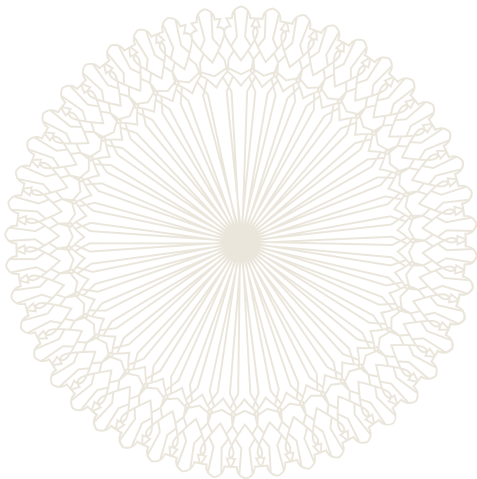
The year is then divided into 12 lunar months - which only adds up to 354 days in the year, roughly 11 days short of 365 days it actually takes for the earth to complete one full orbit around the sun : timing more familiar to those who follow the Gregorian Calendar.

Hence Ramadan moves forward by 11 to 12 days each year. This means it will sometimes be in the winter months, when the days and fasts are shorter, or in the summer, when days and fasts are longer.



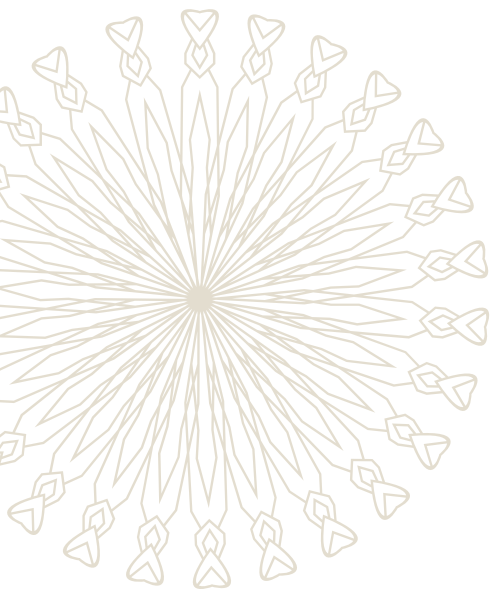
While Islam is universal, Muslims are not homogenous. Different nationalities, cultures, communities and families celebrate Ramadan differently.

There is a lot of diversity, and while it's impossible to understand everybody's Ramadan preference, in order to help create an inclusive workplace, it is important to understand the needs of your colleagues, as well as the threads that tie Muslims together during Ramadan.



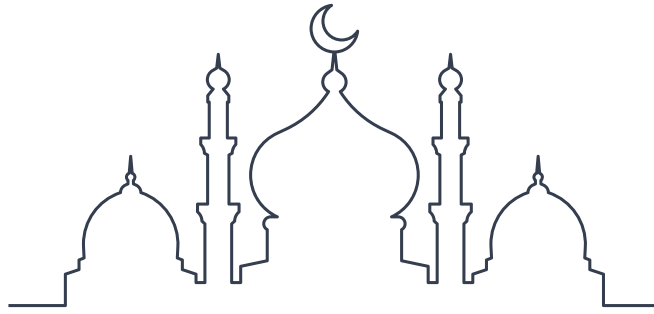
One thing that most Muslims would likely agree on is that daily and nightly habits change during Ramadan.

For example, many will wake and sleep at atypical times. In majority Islamic countries it's not unusual to nap during the day to help fight fatigue and combat the inevitable pangs of thirst and hunger.



Of course, this is much more difficult in the Western World - and in workplaces, where structures and process are not designed to accommodate a mid-day siesta.

I recall, in the summer months when fasts were very long, I would try to have a short nap in my car, while colleagues had their lunch break; a suggestion made by my parents, with their ever-nurturing desire to help us balance our personal and professional lives.



There are three distinct stages to the month of Ramadan: the first 10 days, second 10 days, and last 9 or 10 days, depending on whether the lunar month will be 29 or 30 days duration.

These stages are known as the Ashra of Ramadan. The first stage reflects the mercy, the second reflects forgiveness and the third reflects safety or protection.

The Last Ashra is deemed very important and most superior. It is in this Ashra the Night of Power (Lailatul Qadar) falls and many Muslims will also practice Aitkaf: seclusion from the outside world to enable complete devotion to worship and spiritual growth.

In the first 10 days, we can feel spiritually invigorated, determined to make the most of Ramadan, but also trying to adapt to a new life and work schedule that can see our energy flagging. I find coping without coffee can be difficult as the caffeine withdrawal symptoms quickly kick in. Our evenings are typically active, with preparing, sometime hosting or attending iftar (fast opening) gatherings, as well as making use of the night to read the Qur'an and performing further worship.



The second 10 days typically allows me to get into the flow of Ramadan; perhaps more settled and less fatigued as I get into a rhythm and routine. Spiritually it can also become somewhat more serene, with a focus on turning inwards and undergoing deeper contemplation.

It is during the last 10 days that most Muslims typically immerse themselves more fully into the spiritual phase. There is a sense that this is a last chance to worship, give charity, do good deeds, and see through all the good intentions you made at the start of the month. As a result, your Muslim colleagues might want to take these 10 days as leave from work or adjust working practices . If not, be mindful that they may be fatigued due to spending much of the night in spiritual immersion.

Things change quite dramatically towards the end of Ramadan, when we begin focusing our minds and energy towards Eid celebrations.



## **Ramadan through the years: A 20-year journey in the legal profession**

In 2002 when I commenced my legal career, Ramadan took place from around 5th November to 4th December. My fast would commence typically at 6am - before sunrise - and Fajr (the 1st prayer of the day). The fast would then end at sunset with Maghrib (the 4th prayer of the day), at about 4pm. So I experienced approximately 10 hours of fasting.

In 2016 in the height of the summer months a typical fast could last up to 20 hours. During both of these examples I continued to work, which meant conducting criminal trials and civil proofs whilst observing other personal and professional responsibilities. It was tough but not impossible.

I found that colleagues I worked closely with had compassion, and were supportive as they saw me attempting to balance my personal and professional commitments during this period.

That support was lacking in leadership teams, and I certainly didn't want to raise it as an issue in case it raised my profile in the workplace for all the wrong reasons, or gave rise to any question over my level of commitment or work ethic. There was also a general lack of ethnic representation at the top, so I could see no-one at that level who might understand the situation or provide a supportive safe space in which I could share my experience and the challenges I faced.

It's comforting to see that the tide is slowly changing and there's more of a desire to change those old attitudes. I cannot stress enough just how absolutely essential it is to lead from the top when offering considered and respectful staff support around cultural and religious events. This is something I discuss with legal industry clients, in our Boardroom Learning Sessions. These Sessions are a good place to start if you or your leadership team is looking for some help in understanding and making accommodations around these, and other cultural and diverse needs in the workplace. It can help make the difference between owning a diversity and equality statement, and meaningfully living up to it.



It's important to also remember that showing, and carefully acting upon compassion is crucial if you are to get the best out of, and retain the talent you have put money and effort into recruiting.

Over the years a lot more awareness has been raised about Ramadan and with good results. But the reality is that some basics are still misunderstood - for example the fact that fasting does also mean going without water.

There has also been a change in habits for the vast majority of Muslims around the world, no matter their personas. Covid-19, along with its accompanying lockdowns, social distancing, isolation, economic hardship, and physical and mental challenges, put a very different spin on the Holy Month.

Mosques, restaurants, and social gatherings may have reopened around the world, but the collective trauma of Covid, as well as lasting concerns and continuing Covid cases in some countries (yes, it is still with us), has provided another layer which workplaces needed to be aware of and sympathetic towards.

According to some business consultancies, Ramadan is the longest-celebrated religious festival of the year, which you would think strange given, commercially, we start planning Christmas as early as August.

It's been clocked at around seven weeks in total, including pre-Ramadan preparations, the month itself, and Eid celebrations in the days after.

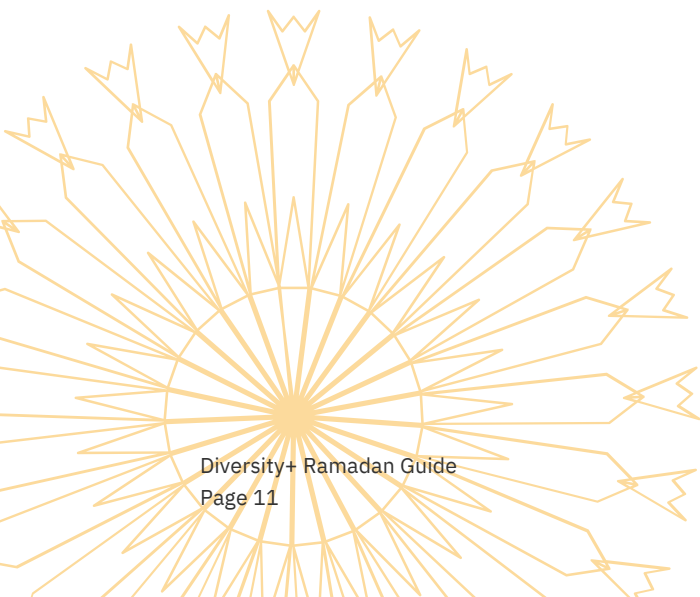
This makes it very attractive from a commercial perspective. We now have Ramadan advent calendars, fast opening food hampers and elaborately decorated cupcakes to name but a few.

From generation to generation, family to family, community to community; different points of view will emerge as to the acceptance of such trends. Much like Christmas it is becoming more commercialised, which some Muslims embrace, and others will not.

It's important to learn about what your colleagues may need, what they may care about, and what they may believe - rather than draw conclusions or make comparisons, particularly from one Muslim to another.

Take my own example: I'm a moderate practising Muslim. I will and always have observed Ramadan, but I prefer to pray in the privacy of my own home or on occasion at a Mosque. I know many fellow Muslim women feel the same, while others will feel comfortable enough to pray at work. Today, we have workplaces better designed to allow for this, which is to be commended.

The good news is there are some easy ways for you and your organisation to support Muslim colleagues during Ramadan. Here are some of my tips:



### **1. Offer flexibility.**

In real terms Ramadan means different routines for different people so consider being flexible with working hours but be guided by your Muslim colleagues.

A Muslim women who is observing Ramadan may have very different needs to a Muslim man, particularly if she has family responsibilities, she mostly likely will not have the luxury of an afternoon nap, even when working from home.

### **2. Be better informed.**

Prepare in advance and send useful information about Ramadan to normalise the event and make it part of your workplace. Keep in simple but informative and use inclusive, positive language.

### **3. Gain local knowledge.**

Prayer and fast start/end times change depending on where you live and work. With many organisations have offices in multiple locations be mindful of these time changes. Contact your local mosque or Islamic centre. They will most likely have a Ramadan timetable you can refer to. Most have them online so you don't even have to leave your desk to be better informed.

### **4. Embrace focus time.**

Fasting can be exhausting, and energy can flag during working hours. However, many Muslims report an increased sense of focus during atypical times. Be open to your Muslim colleagues suggesting meeting times.



## **5. Establish etiquette.**

Try to ensure there's a respectful office culture - especially when it comes to eating around fasting Muslims. Most professionals will not take offence to co-workers eating or drinking nearby, but it's polite to be aware.

## **6. Host inclusive Iftars.**

A great way to show understanding and build camaraderie is to host an office iftar – the meal with which Muslims break their daily fast. Discuss with your Muslim colleagues to ensure dietary requirements are met and simple traditions, such as breaking your fast with water and dates, are observed. Small details can make a big difference.

## **7. Embrace the spirit of giving.**

If your organisation has a charity partner, collaborate with them to hold an event to commemorate Ramadan and embrace the spirit of giving. Link it up with your local Mosque who may be able to inform you about local fundraising. It's traditional for those with means to contribute towards an iftar for those who are less well off. Your local mosque may be doing that and welcome a donation.

## **8. Be curious without being offensive.**

Don't be afraid to ask questions. Most Muslims are delighted when interest is shown in their faith. But be mindful about what you ask and the intention behind it. If in doubt do a little research first. Respectful questions will be well received. Antiquated ignorance will not.



## **9. Understand Eid.**

The Eid festival at the end of Ramadan is a significant celebration quite often described akin to Christmas. It is a time that many Muslims will spend with family. Understand that Muslims will often request leave, but Eid doesn't necessarily start on a fixed calendar date. Do not be aggrieved at last minute or uncertain requests for leave.

## **10. Celebrate Eid.**

It need not be a full blown Eid party but the simplest of gestures, such as giving a Muslim colleague, or indeed a client, an Eid card - can go far in showing your wish to embrace the celebrations.

Of course, if you have any concerns about being able to do any of this in a respectful and meaningful way, then reach out to professionals - particularly those from the Muslim community like Diversity+, who have the lived experience to fully support you.

Please don't be tempted to ask any Muslim staff members to do this for you. It is a cause of frustration amongst all minority ethnic staff when they are asked to come up with ideas for aspects of organisational culture, and represent for their community, when they already have a job to do in the organisation. There are plenty of professionals in the field who can offer you the right kind of support, and like ourselves at Diversity+, will be able to have the kind of frank conversations with leadership teams, that would be impossible for a staff member to hold.

However you choose to approach your Ramadan plans, remember the significance of the month to many people around the world is a deeply special time. Whether that's in the actions you undertake, the messaging you put across, the communication you employ, or even the way you understand and support your Muslim colleagues, be mindful in your intentions and execution, and make this a memorable and meaningful Ramadan for your workplace.

**When staff come from different religious backgrounds, they bring with them a unique set of experiences, perspectives, and insights that enrich the workplace. By acknowledging and respecting these differences, we can all create workplace cultures that value diversity and inclusivity.**

By understanding the significance of Ramadan and Eid for Muslims, non-Muslim colleagues can show respect for the beliefs and customs of others.

This also helps to build stronger relationships and a sense of community within the workplace, creating a more positive and productive work environment.

At Diversity+ it is our intention to support Leadership teams across the Scottish legal sector to create diverse cultures that work for everyone in them, and everyone served by them.

We hope this guide contributes to that aim by giving you some understanding, and actionable tips, to make positive change in your part of the sector.



[www.diversityplus.info](http://www.diversityplus.info)