

washingtonpost.com

## Changing Ramadan Rituals

Advertisement

American Muslims Shifting Focus From Food to Community

By Michelle Boorstein

Washington Post Staff Writer

Saturday, September 27, 2008; B09

Growing up in southern Egypt, Mohamed Sayed ended Ramadan's daily fast with lots of friends and relatives sharing a big feast, sitting around the television, drinking sweet tea and eating dates "like Thanksgiving multiplied by 30."

Now 28 and living in Alexandria, Sayed is less traditional. For Ramadan, which began Sept. 2 and ends Thursday, he combines his iftars -- the end of his daily fast -- with his book club, "success strategies" meetings for young professionals and even a casual dinner at T.G.I. Friday's with a few friends.

"It's not just about the food," Sayed said, "it's also about being part of the community."

The ninth month of the Islamic calendar, Ramadan is the time when Muslims believe the Koran was revealed to the [Prophet Muhammad](#). Islam calls for Muslims to abstain from food, drink and sex from dawn to dusk, sharpen their self-discipline and focus on becoming closer to God.

Sayed's experience illustrates how the iftar is changing for many American Muslims. Traditionally observed daily with big family or neighborhood meals after sunset, some in smaller Muslim communities are celebrating the holiday just a few times a week.

Others, particularly since the Sept. 11, 2001, attacks, have used the holiday for activism, organizing iftars around Islam-related films or lectures or interfaith events. These changes represent soul-searching by some Muslims about how to create an American Islam, a trend pushed in particular by progressive Muslims seeking gender equity and more engagement with other faiths.

Ramadan remains important to American Muslims, the majority of whom were born outside the country. Fasting during Ramadan is one of the five pillars, or foundations, of Islam and is "very important" to more than three-quarters of American Muslims, according to a [Pew Research Center](#) poll released last year.

Melissa Robinson, a pharmacy student who lives in Lawrenceville, Ga., converted to Islam during college in 2003 and organizes iftars around a range of activities, from interfaith storytelling to an event to support Iraqi refugees in the area. She said she found going to mosques during Ramadan to be difficult, partly because of the division between men and women and partly because of the preaching of

cultural orthodoxy that she believes isn't truly rooted in Islam. Robinson is part of a progressive movement hoping to revive debate about what the Koran says about the status of women, other religious groups and engaging with modern culture.

Robinson, 27, attends iftars that have a civic purpose or are part of her normal schedule. On Tuesday, she attended an iftar with her book club, which was reading the popular novel "The Secret Life of Bees" by Sue Monk Kidd.

Robinson and others said there can sometimes be too much focus during Ramadan on preparing and eating food rather than the deeper meanings of sacrifice and charity.

"It's not healthy, it's too much food, and Islam says to honor your body," Sayed said. "I want to focus on understanding my religion, not so much on food and culture."

Taleb Salhab has gradually changed his iftar routine since moving to the United States at age 19 from Saudi Arabia, where family and friends gathered at sunset, and then again at 1 a.m. or 2 a.m. for a last-chance meal before the sun rose.

Now 39, he lives with his wife and two children in Dearborn, Mich., where one night this week he was one of 200 people at a film-iftar, where they watched "The Visitor," which touches on issues of civil liberties and immigration. The audience was a mix of Muslims and non-Muslims.

"People would never do things like this growing up. My family would discuss a wide range of issues, but we want to use the holiday to spark a conversation about issues that affect our whole community," he said. "People are commenting on how nice it is to do something new."

### Post a Comment

[View all comments](#) that have been posted about this article.

You must be logged in to leave a comment. [Login](#) | [Register](#)

Submit

Comments that include profanity or personal attacks or other inappropriate comments or material will be removed from the site. Additionally, entries that are unsigned or contain "signatures" by someone other than the actual author will be removed. Finally, we will take steps to block users who

violate any of our posting standards, terms of use or privacy policies or any other policies governing this site. Please review the [full rules](#) governing commentaries and discussions. You are fully responsible for the content that you post.

© 2008 The Washington Post Company