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Young Saudis Reinvent Ramadan

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Holy Month Devoted to Self-Sacrifice Instead of Self-Absorption

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JIDDAH, Saudi Arabia -- During Ramadan this year, Faten Jiddawi and a few friends from a charity packed into a hot van and delivered a new washing machine and refrigerator to a needy family.

Like many Saudis, Jiddawi used to mark the Muslim holy month by shopping, eating lavishly and watching television until the wee hours. Then she slept, sometimes all day until sunset prayers signaled the end of the daily dawn-to-dusk fast.

"That's what everyone did, but that's not really fasting," said Jiddawi, 28, a bank teller. "Fasting is about feeling your hunger, getting close to God and helping the poor."

In Saudi Arabia, one of the world's wealthiest Muslim countries, some people have started to criticize how many here observe Ramadan by essentially turning day into night to make fasting easier. Work and school hours have been shortened, shops stay open until right before dawn, and doctors and dentists offer appointments until 2 a.m.

But Jiddawi and many other young Saudis are trying to revive the holy month's original spirit of sacrifice and giving by volunteering during the day, attending religious lectures at night and spending more time reflecting on their faith.

"This is a religious duty, what we're doing," Jiddawi said. "And it's a wonderful feeling. This is really how Ramadan is meant to be."

The trend has partly been inspired by Ahmad al-Shugairi, a popular young preacher who for the past couple of years has been speaking out against the excesses of Ramadan. Several [Facebook](#) groups are also telling people to abstain from watching TV during the month, and at least half a dozen newspaper articles have criticized the lack of Ramadan spirit in the kingdom and the proliferation of soap operas made especially for the month.

"People used to get together to worship Allah during Ramadan," commentator Nourah al-Khereiji wrote in the English-language Arab News. "They would spend the night worshipping Allah and looking for the poor so they could do something to alleviate their suffering. These days we get together to watch TV!"

Salem Bajunaid, a university student who hosts religious lectures at his home

during Ramadan, which ends next week, said that about a dozen people attended each session last year but that the number has risen to about 30 this year.

"Every year, there's more demand for this kind of thing," Bajunaid said. "I've noticed that people are hungry to return to the spirit of Ramadan."

Some young Saudis viewed a more puritanical interpretation of Islam as "cool," said Ali Ghazzawi, 22, a clinical pharmacology student. But after the Sept. 11, 2001, attacks in the United States, which were carried out mainly by Saudis, many gained a more moderate and spiritual understanding of the faith, and "now preachers in jeans, like Shugairi, are Muslim cool," Ghazzawi said.

"Spirituality is not about abstaining from food or performing physical prayers. It's about a closer connection to God. It's about intentions," he said. "Are you doing this to perform a set of movements you are meant to do, or are you doing it for God?"

Jawaher Abbar, 22, whose family owns a company that donated the new appliances Jiddawi and her friends delivered, started working with the charity last year. "This kind of work is really spreading. It's contagious," Abbar said. "One friend starts, you go with them, and it just grows."

For Jiddawi, the shift came after she became a fan of Shugairi. His nightly TV program, the most popular religious show among young people, encourages viewers to focus on their civic duties as part of their religion and to become more productive members of society. Several of his shows this year have stressed a need to watch less television, eat less, shop less.

"We replaced the pain of hunger during Ramadan with the pain of overeating and indigestion," Shugairi, 35, said on one of his programs. "We've turned it into a month of soap operas and entertainment, a month of the supermarkets. We've turned the month of Ramadan into a holiday. Instead of saying hello to the month that purifies us of sin, we're saying hello to the month of samosas, entertainment, soap operas and shopping malls."

Shugairi started a Ramadan campaign to get young Muslims to do 1 million good deeds this month, such as feeding a hungry family, donating clothes or buying medicine for someone in need.

"He's one of us. He speaks the language of my generation. He's not judgmental and he wasn't always as religious as he is now, so he understands," Jiddawi said.

Ghazzawi, the pharmacology student, said Ramadan was meant to be a precursor to an ideal Muslim life to be followed year-round.

"What we do during Ramadan -- being kind, thinking of others, helping them and feeling God's presence during the whole day -- that's how we're supposed to

live," he said. "That's what I pray for every Ramadan, to be able to live like this for the rest of the year."

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