

# MUSLIM “IFTAR” AT THE SEAFRONT OF THE METROPOLIS OF NAUCRATIS

**Friday afternoon.** Having passed the imposing and famous Library of the Great City, I walk along the coastal avenue (within the spiritual jurisdiction of the Metropolis of Naucratis) in eastern Alexandria, enjoying the sea breeze, but also observing/studying, as usual, the human behaviors around me.

The time is 18h00. The sun is setting, officially its sunset is registered today at 18h25 pm. Several Alexandrian Muslims take a seat at tables on the seafront, where they will spread their food by families or large groups. This moment is important for my Muslim fellow citizens, who are already in the period of Ramadan. And this, because with the officially defined sunset – today at 18h25 – they can start the “iftar”, i.e. the first meal of the day, extending for one more day their fast, which requires them to refrain from every kind of food and drink from the previous dawn, at 03.00 am.

## **So it’s about Ramadan!**

The word Ramadan, or Ramadhan, comes from the Arabic root “al-ramad” which means “scorching heat or drought”. It is one of the five pillars on which Islam rests. The rest are Faith, Prayer, Charity and the Holy Pilgrimage “Hajj” (if possible to Mecca).

The month of Ramadan is the ninth month of the Islamic lunar calendar and the holiest of the four holy months. According to the rolling character presented by the Arabic calendar, each year Ramadan is celebrated 10 days earlier than the previous year (It follows the lunar and not the solar year). It begins with the New Moon and during its duration, lasting one month, it is compulsory for Muslims to abstain, from sunrise to sunset, from all kinds of food, even water, much more from smoking, drinking, perfumes and sexual intercourse, but not during the rest of the time until sunrise. This is the purely external, practical part of fasting.

The spiritual aspect of fasting prescribes a ban on lying, gossiping, cheating and generally all the negative characteristics of people. As prescribed in the Qur’an, fasting is an austere act of deep personal self-awareness and intense worship, in which Muslims seek the highest level of divine awareness. Ramadan ends with a three-day celebration called in Arabic Eid-al-Fitr (celebration of the end of fasting) or Eid-al-Shahir (small celebration).

The month of Ramadan is a time period suitable for prayer, for good deeds, for more time with family and friends. Fasting is intended to help Muslims learn self-discipline, temperance, generosity, as well as patience. It also reminds them of how much the poor suffer, those who rarely eat well or cannot find adequate food. The daily greeting they exchange during this period is not a coincidence: “Ramadan Kareem!” with a reply “Allah u akram!” (“Merciful Ramadan” – “God is Merciful”).

Ramadan, as a month-long fasting holiday, is compared to the peak Christian season of Lent, with an almost identical character of self-restraint, self-criticism, prayer and charity. Even Iftar coincides with the “ninth hour” of the monks, when they also dine in the Monasteries during Lent.

**Ramadan includes two main meals:** Iftar, after sunset, and Suhoor, before sunrise. These meals definitely include dates, following the example of the Prophet Muhammad. After Iftar and until Suhoor, anyone can eat whatever they want of food, sweets and drinks, except for alcohol and pork, which are strictly forbidden in the Qur’an.

Also, the faithful must read the entire Qur'an during this holy month, which has been divided into 30 equal parts, as many as the 30 days of Ramadan. When the first "crescent" from the New Moon becomes visible, the month of Ramadan ends and the month of Shawwal begins. The end of Ramadan signals the beginning of a three-day period called Eid al-Fitr, that is, the Feast of the Breaking of the Fast. It is a joyous time, which begins with a special prayer early in the morning, and is later followed by celebrations, feasting and distribution of gifts and money to children.

When Ramadan ends, Muslims give as extra alms a certain amount, calculated to be able to feed a local poor person for one day. This is known as "fitra" and its meaning is a reminder that there are people who are suffering and we need to help them. Many also on the occasion of the holiday pay their annual Zakat (obligatory alms) to the needy, which is 2.5% of their annual fixed savings.

On the other hand, it should be mentioned that God exempts some people from fasting. The sick and the traveler are among those who are exempt, but after their treatment or travel they must fast the days they missed. It should be emphasized that the exception also includes women who are menstruating, as well as women who are pregnant. Also, anyone who faces a serious health problem (diabetes, heart) is justified in abstaining for the whole month.

Ultimately Islam, when dissociated from human wickedness, political expediency and malicious dispositions of fanaticism and hatred, is a respectable way of life for those born into it.