

Ramadan fasting in extreme latitudes

Unlike few decades ago, the world map can no longer be drawn on the basis of religious boundaries as globalization has created a cultural and religious diversity on the face of this earth.

Just like any other religious denomination, Muslims from different racial and cultural backgrounds are settled all over the world due to various reasons. This relocation presents its own cultural and ethical dilemmas for these immigrants. One such a dilemma is the fasting in the month of Ramadan for the Muslim immigrants. Ramadan is a lunar-based month and varies in its duration between 29 and 30 days. Its timing changes with respect to seasons constantly and based on geographical location and season, the duration of

daily fast can range from a few to more than 20 h. Muslims who fast during this month do not eat, drink, smoke or take any medication from predawn to after sunset. For the Muslim residing near the North and South Poles of the Earth, it is impossible to adhere to the sunrise/sunset rule while observing Ramadan. The standard definition of 24-h/day with sunrise/sunset does not apply at these extreme latitudes since the sun can stay in the sky for days to months and vice versa. The Koranic definition of fasting from pre-dawn to dusk cannot be practiced at locations such as Sweden, Norway, Finland, etc.

There is no consensus on this issue of fasting in these latitudes among the Muslim scholars, but most of the Muslim residents of these areas practice following options to observe fasting in the month of Ramadan based on various Fatwa's-clerical decree.

The first option is to follow the calendar of the nearest country where a clear distinction can be made between day and night. For example, many Muslim communities settled in northern Europe follow the Ramadan timing of Turkey, as it is the closet Islamic country to them.

The second option is to follow the timing of Mecca or Medina with respect to timing of fast. In Alaska, the Islamic Community Center of Anchorage, "after consultation with scholars," advises Muslims to follow the fasting hours of Mecca, Islam's holiest city.

The Dublin-based European Council for Fatwa and Research, however, said Muslims need to follow the local sunrise and sunset, even up north. The author strongly disagree with this approach as God Himself says clearly in The Holy Koran,^[1] "Allah intends for you ease and does not want to make things difficult for you" [2:185]; and "Allah does not want to place you in difficulty" [5:6].

In conclusion, it is the author's opinion that it does not matter what option is utilized to fast or for how many hours, what matters is the intention as clearly mentioned by the Holy Prophet of Islam (PBUH) who said, "Verily, the action is (judged) by the intention (behind it)."^[2]

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