

Happy Ramadan!

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Today (18 June) is the beginning of Ramadan, a month of not only religious importance but also huge social and cultural significance for Muslims.

During the month of Ramadan, believers fast from dawn till sunset, refraining from consuming food, drinking liquids, smoking and engaging in sexual activity during the day. Muslims are also expected to refrain from 'sinful' behaviour that may negate the spiritual reward of fasting, such as false/hate speech (insulting, backbiting, cursing, lying, etc.) and fighting.

Although Ramadan is a month of religious importance and formalities, it cannot be understood by only these aspects. Its social and cultural significance for Muslims and the wider implication it has in communities go beyond the boundaries of religion.

Muslim societies across the world have different (and of course, similar) ways of experiencing Ramadan, but for ordinary people the core philosophy is the same: it is a month of joy, family unifications, communities coming together and taking part in collective social, festive and religious activities. It is a month of increased levels of genuine charitable feelings and sentiments of solidarity in community, and a greater sense of neighbourhood.

I am not romanticising some childhood memories and turning a religious month into a social/cultural utopia. No, far from describing a utopia, these are the real life aspects of Ramadan.

Although social habits and living conditions are constantly changing, modern day Ramadan nights are still busy with events and social activities, kicking off after the if-

tar dinner at the end of the day. In some countries, such is the level of these social events that Imam's have been appealing to organisers and asking them to start these after the evening prayer at the mosques, 'Otherwise', they say, 'people don't turn up and mosques stay empty'.

Among all the 'soulless' harsh realities of life, Ramadan is indeed a brief moment of soul-searching, a temporary and small but joyful break from the all the difficulties and miseries of the world, even if most of it is in the imaginations and hopes of the believers.

Ramadan is also a month where class divisions in the society become more evident and visible to many. This is not because of deep political debates and 'clever' intellectual analyses but from the realities of the dinner tables at homes, where the fancy appetizing dinners of the rich contrast with the very basic and simple dinners of the poor. In addition to everything else surrounding the activities of Ramadan, it is the iftar dinner that is the key in all of it, and how the fasting ends at the end of each day is what makes the class divide between the 'haves' and the 'have nots' so dramatically visible.



At The end of each working day, the bosses and the workers go their separate ways, to sit down with their families on very different kinds of dinner tables and break their fasts with different kind of food. The next day, the fasting bosses still exploit the fasting workers. Profits, on the other hand, don't fast at all, day or night. But none of these are caused by Ramadan. Ramadan only brings more questions to mind and highlights the vast material and objective

differences between claimed to be spiritually 'connected' classes in the society.

The sentiments and luxury of being generous during Ramadan do not apply to 'have nots'. Their children can't enjoy the same type of nice clothes that generous parents buy during this holy month. Their social activities must cost no money, and their Ramadan fasting during the day becomes a spiritual extension of their near-fasting existence throughout the rest of the year.

Such is Ramadan. Like everything else, it has a different style and form depending on which part of the town you live in and what class you belong to.

None the less, it is a month of 'sense of belonging' for the working classes, a month of silent joys and respect. Sometimes, it is a period of real solidarity on this earth, which gets its purpose from the unknown world of afterlife.

This difficult and joyful month that ends with Eid (Eid al-Fitr - a holy festival to mark the end of it) is unfortunately not a truly happy period for many Muslim societies and nations, from Far-East Asia to Western Europe.

The Rohingya people of Burma will not have joy in their hearts. They are described as 'among the world's least wanted' and 'one of the world's most persecuted minorities'. For them Ramadan will not bring the same joys to their refugee boats out in the open sea or to their makeshift refugee camps.

For millions of displaced people of Afghanistan and Iraq, millions of Muslims living in absolute poverty in these war-torn countries, with child mortality and unnatural deaths sky high, there will be a tearful Ramadan, like many before.

People of Gaza do not have the 'luxury' and freedom of celebrating their holy month as they wish. Thick walls, raining missiles from the skies, teargas and beatings, torture and killings will continue to be a part of their daily lives. Their Ramadan will not be just about fasting but also about continuing their dignified resistance .

For 12 million Syrian refugees and ordinary Syrians this year's Ramadan won't bring much joy and peace. Being killed by Western airstrikes, Assad bombs and ISIS

attacks, the Muslims of Syria and the Syrian refugees continue to suffer on multiple fronts. Ramadan for them will also be a month of trying to stay alive and make it to the next day, every day.

There will be a different Ramadan in the Mediterranean. Migrant boats will not offer the sense of happiness, peace and hope that one would expect from the holy month. Migrants will pray to stay alive and to make it to the other side, or be rescued if in danger. On the other side, if they arrive, they will pray to be dealt with fairly and with respect to their dignity. And after all, they will pray to be given the right to stay and be safe. All going well, this would be a memorable Ramadan for the migrants, a Ramadan gift, to have the chance to start a new life full with new hopes. Otherwise a Ramadan of uncertainty, broken hopes, and for some the cold death...

In Libya, Yemen, Sudan, the hunger, death, torture, oppression and all other miseries of war and poverty will give people no real break during Ramadan. The bombs of Saudi kings, missiles of Western drones and bullets of sectarian forces will continue to kill them. Children will continue to suffer... Iftar dinners may have to serve stale bread and sour water, eaten in a rush... And the evening prayers will be the expressions of hope for the most basic things in life.

In Egypt Ramadan came with further oppression and more death penalties. Families are waiting in anxiety for news of their loved ones. It is death sentences the regime is dishing out, not festive iftar dinners.

In Saudi Arabia writer and activist Raif Badawi may well face further flogging by the regime. Imprisoned for blogging, his Ramadan will be one of tremendous pain of flesh and human suffering.

In many other parts of the Middle-East and beyond, people living in poverty, in exile; living in war zones, under corrupt and oppressive regimes will have another Ramadan like in previous few years. Prayers, hope, joy and tears, all mixed together.

Asylum seekers in Direct Provision System won't be able to have their own dignified iftar dinners or 'sahur' breakfasts (the last food eaten during Ramadan before the sun-

rise). Some may have forgotten the count of Ramadan's they have spent in the uncertainty of the Direct Provision System and in the un-homely environment of accommodation centres. They may wonder if they will be free and safe by next Ramadan, or will they be deported back to death zones.

Ramadan is a joyful season and the picture above may not reflect that. But it is not an exaggeration. It is the reality of millions of working-class, peasant, poor, ordinary Muslims around the world. But not all hope is lost in this world of misery. Candles will be lit for the dead ones, as always, new born babies will be celebrated, weddings parties will be held, despite the risk of drone attacks, and people will pray for the afterlife while they are thinking about their conditions in this one.

There will be joy in the air. Less than what millions of good people deserve, but there will be some. They will talk about their past days of 'glory' but also about the future. Iftar dinners will be poor in many places but honest. They will share with their neighbours the bread and water, after having shared decades long sadness, fear and hopes.

And in the cities of the Western Europe, Muslim migrants will have a happy feeling in their hearts, a sense of excitement. They will cook their traditional dinners, they will visit each other and talk about their past live in their other countries. They will share their plans about their future lives in their new countries. They will dress up, visit mosques and pray. They will bring presents to each other. There will be an unnoticed parallel word of celebrations, simply co-existing with the un-noticing daily life around them.

But all of this will come at a cost: they will be home sick. Some, lucky ones, will be planning to visit soon, maybe for Eid. Some others will not be so lucky, they can't go, since the country they knew once and the places they used to call home are gone. And, not to mention the struggle against the never ending Islamophobia and racist hate directed at Muslims. Not to mention the ongoing stigmatization of Muslims and institutional discrimination against them.

The Institute for Economics and Peace

(IEP) published its 2015 Global Peace Index Report.

According to this report 'the cost of violence around the world reached a record \$14.3 trillion (€12.7 trillion) in 2014, equivalent to the combined economies of Brazil, Canada, France, Germany, Spain and the United Kingdom.' This figure equates to 17 percent of the World's GDP and 43 percent of it is military expenditure.

That's a lot of schools, hospitals, iftar dinners and other good things... That is a lot of houses for everyone in need and plenty of food for everybody.

The report continues on to state 'Middle East and North Africa — where several countries suffered from an upsurge in violence related to sectarian strife and civil conflicts, as well as a rise in actions by Islamist extremist groups, now ranks as the most violent region in the world'.

'Iraq, Afghanistan, Pakistan, Nigeria, Libya and Syria are the worst places', it states, followed by more countries in the region. This is a vast geography with a lot ordinary good people...

Saudi Arabia's peace ranking is higher than Yemen... But then the Saudis are in Yemen...

The report continues on with the most peaceful countries, 'The threat of terrorism has also affected many of the world's most peaceful countries, with terrorist attacks occurring in France, Denmark and Australia in the last year'

If follows with the real good news: 'Europe remained the most peaceful geographical region in the world, securing the top three positions in the Global Peace Index.'

This is all thanks to the fact that 'a number of countries across the region saw their score improve for external conflicts fought. This can primarily be accounted for by the withdrawal of NATO-led forces from Afghanistan in December 2014. The UK, (for example), a major player in Afghanistan, rose eight places in the global rankings as a result of its exit from the Afghan mission'

It says that North America is just fine... 'This was largely due to an improvement in the US, which moved up two places in the

global rankings. The score for external conflicts fought improved, as President Barack Obama, sought to reduce US military involvement abroad, trying to wind down the US presence in Afghanistan and Iraq .

So, the US has been better at peace then Iraq or Afghanistan.

It seems like peace is measured by how far the wars you start are from your homeland. It seems that the fact that the US, UK and other European countries have been involved in creating many of the miseries and violence in places from Afghanistan to Libya, and leaving an ongoing mess behind is irrelevant... So long as they have pulled out in the end, what they left behind in Libya, Afghanistan or Iraq does not matter. It is now the problem of those countries to sort out their peace index.

That the Saudis, using Western weapons,

are bombing Yemen and killing civilians does not bring down their peace index. It is now Yemen that is not peaceful, not the land of the Saudis.

It seems peacefulness is a matter of location of the wars and not who makes them.

It seems the decade long imperialist horrors inflicted on millions of Muslims across a vast territory, or the support given to oppressive dictators ruling over millions of people in these countries do not affect one's own peacefulness ranking.

The conclusion based on the report is this: from Afghanistan, to Palestine, from Iraq to Libya and all the places in-between, where a lot of Muslim live, there is no peace.

What can we say, it is Ramadan after all and I sincerely wish happiness, joy but more importantly ever lasting peace to all Muslims everywhere...