
Notes on the Islamic Calendar

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The purpose of this brief article is to give some background on the Muslim calendar, describe some of the problems associated with that calendar, and give some sense of how it impacts contemporary Muslim worship in North America. There have been many problems with the Islamic calendar from its beginnings. In this article, I will focus mainly on the problem of intercalation.

Today, the Islamic calendar is a lunar one, consisting of twelve months. A month begins with an actual sighting of the new crescent moon. In Arabic, the names of the months (from first to twelfth) are: Muharram, Safar, Rabi' al-Awwal, Rabi' al-Thaani, Jumada al-Awwal, Jumada al-Thaani, Rajab, Sha'ban, Ramadan, Shawwal, Dhu al-Qa'dah, Dhu al-Hijjah. Each month is either twenty-nine or thirty days in length, resulting in an Islamic year of some 354 days. As such, the Islamic calendar moves through the solar calendar at a rate of about eleven days per year.

The calendar is also referred to as the Hijri calendar, which is commonly abbreviated as A.H. or *anno Hegirae* (in the year of the Hijra). *Hijra* (or *Hegira* as it has come to be transliterated in English) is the Arabic word for "emigration," and refers to the migration from Mecca to Medina by the Prophet Muhammad in 622 C.E. Muslims often remark that this date was chosen to begin the calendar as it marks the first time that the Muslim community could exist as a "community," free from persecution. However, it was not until after Muhammad's death that this date was chosen to begin the calendar. This was done by order of the Caliph 'Umar in 637 C.E. (Peters 1994, 252).

There is some dispute on the subject of intercalation of the calendar prior to the Hijra, with questions as to whether or not intercalation was used, or if the calendar was purely lunar. These arguments are described in detail by Hashim 'Ali (1954).

It appears that the pre-Hijri¹ calendar involved the insertion of an extra month (much like the Jewish calendar) to keep the lunar calendar in harmony with the solar calendar. This practice of intercalation was specifically forbidden by the Qur'an (9:36–37):

The number of months in the sight of Allah is twelve, so ordained by Allah the day He created the heavens and the earth; of them four are sacred: that is the right religion. So wrong not yourselves therein, and fight the unbelievers all together as they fight you all together. But know that Allah is with those who restrain themselves. Truly intercalation is an addition to unbelief: the unbelievers are led to wrong thereby: for they make it lawful one year, and forbidden another year, in order to adjust the number of months forbidden by Allah and make such forbidden ones lawful. The evil of their course seems pleasing to them. But Allah does not guide the unbelievers.²

Other references to the course of the moon are found in 2:189, 10:5 and 36:38–40.

Since the "official" calendar was not authorized until 637 C.E., there were problems in fixing dates prior to this time. Frank Peters has referred to the "degree of anarchy" in the reckoning of dates for this period, with concerns as to whether intercalation was used, and on what date the calendar began (1994, 253). With this caveat in mind, there are conversion tables available to go from the Hijri to the Gregorian calendars.³

With intercalation prohibited, worship was no longer tied to the solar calendar. As a result, Islamic festivals were not linked to the spring or autumn equinox as they had been in the past (H. 'Ali 1954, 127). The two main celebrations mark the end of the month of fasting (Eid al-Fitr, celebrated on the first day of the month of Shawwal) and the sacrifice of Abraham (Eid al-'Adha, celebrated on the tenth day of the month of Dhu al-Hijjah). Since the Islamic tradition holds that the new crescent moon must be observed, Muslims do not rely

on astronomical tables to determine the beginning and ending of months. It is this tradition of observation that has led to problems in contemporary Muslim worship, particularly with regard to the dates of the two Eids.

In countries where Muslims are in the majority, there are usually government agencies to determine the beginning and ending of months. As such, there may be official pronouncements about when to celebrate the two Eids. In North America, where there is no Muslim majority, Muslims are left to decide for themselves when they will celebrate. In the past, this lack of one (and only one) authoritative opinion has led to discrepancies in the beginning and ending of the month of fasting. Recently, the lack of one authoritative opinion has also affected the determination of Eid al-'Adha, which is even more problematic.⁴

Several times in the past decade Muslim communities in North America have celebrated Eid al-Fitr on different days. Sometimes, this has meant that people in the same city celebrate Eid on different days. Since the Muslim tradition does not require each individual Muslim to actually observe the new crescent moon, and allows for people to accept the word of trustworthy observers that they have seen the new moon, this is an issue not so much of reliability as it is an issue of power. For example, a particular community may decide that they do not want to accept the opinion (and hence the authority) of a group such as the Islamic Society of North America (ISNA), which is the largest umbrella organization for Muslims in North America.

The most recent example of controversy occurred with the Eids celebrated in the year 2000. Muslims celebrated the end of the month of Ramadan on dates ranging from Thursday, January 6, through to Sunday, January 9, 2000.⁵ Some of this, to be sure, was due to the geographical spread of Muslims throughout the world. However, some of it was due to the autonomy of local Muslim communities. For example, Muslims in both Toronto and Los Angeles (two of the largest Muslim centres in North America) celebrated Eid al-Fitr on either Friday or Saturday. Predictably, there was concern

among Muslims that they could not come together to celebrate, and that some were fasting while others were celebrating.

The controversy over the calendar continued to the date of Eid al-ʿAdha for 2000. This holiday was celebrated by Muslims from Wednesday, March 15 through to Friday, March 17, 2000. Here, the controversy was over whether Muslims should celebrate this holiday on the tenth day of the month of Dhu al-Hijjah, or on the date that the pilgrims were offering their sacrifice in Saudi Arabia. The Fiqh Council of North America, a branch of ISNA, issued a ruling that Muslims in North America should celebrate the Eid on the same day that it was being celebrated in Saudi Arabia.⁶ This ruling was contested by a number of Muslim scholars throughout the world, who believed that Muslims in North America should celebrate on the actual tenth day of the month of Dhu al-Hijjah.⁷ Here, there was the added concern among some North American Muslims about being slavish in following the practices of Saudi Arabia.

The controversies about the calendar provide some insight into Muslim religious practices in North America. There are issues among North American Muslims as to who speaks for them, and whose rulings they will follow. Some are willing to sacrifice unity (which they claim never existed in the first place)⁸ for the principle of self-determination. Clearly, these dialogues of power among Muslims in North America will be important for those of us who are Muslim, and those of us who study Islam.

Notes

¹ Here I use the term “pre-Hijri” rather than the more common term “pre-Islamic.” This reflects the Muslim belief that Islam does not begin with the Prophet Muhammad. I am indebted to Ken Derry for his help on this point.

² Adapted from the translation of ʿAbdullah Yusuf ʿAli (1989, 448–49).

³ For example, see <http://www.islamicity.com/hajj/calendar.htm>, which gives current dates, or <http://www.cs.pitt.edu/~tawfig/convert/>, which allows you to choose any date for conversion.

⁴ Since the commemoration of the sacrifice of Abraham falls on the tenth day of the month of Hajj, one would assume that the conflict would be over when the month begins, and therefore which day is the tenth. However, the problem becomes should the sacrifice be celebrated everywhere on the same day it is celebrated by the pilgrims in Saudi Arabia.

⁵ <http://moonsighting.com/AUASS.html>

⁶ This ruling, entitled “Element of Place is Dominant in Eid al-Adha” is available at the following location: <http://moonsighting.com/ElementOfPlace.html>.

⁷ For example, see the ruling by the Pakistani jurist Maulana Mufti M. Taqi Usmani at <http://moonsighting.com/tusmani.html> or the ruling by the American scholar, Dr. Omar Afzal, available at http://www.ummah.net/hajj/oa_hajj.html.

⁸ For example, see Esack 2000.

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