

## Celebrating Ramadan During COVID-19 – Challenges and Policy Recommendations

During the last week, there has been a rise in the number of those infected with COVID-19 in Arab society. The towns of Jisr az-Zarqa, Deir al-Asad, Umm al Fahm, Daburiyya, Jatt, and others have seen a particularly large increase in cases, and are now the center of the outbreak in Arab society. Until now, few Arab citizens were hospitalized and seriously ill from the virus. However, as it seems that COVID-19 is only now arriving to Arab towns, it is logical to expect a change in the situation.

This is occurring only one week before the beginning of the month-long Ramadan fast, a period replete with cultural, social, and religious activities for Muslims in Israel. At the same time, with the end of the Passover holiday, discussions in the media have focused on a loosening of restrictions and a gradual return to routine, work, and study. There is concern that there will also be a relaxation of social distancing rules within Arab society. This situation is rife with challenges, both for Arab society and for the nation's law enforcement agencies. The assumption is that COVID-19 has only begun to affect Arab society, and that the peak is still ahead of us.

### Practices During Ramadan and the Situation on the Ground

Ramadan takes place during the ninth month of the Muslim calendar (Hijri) beginning this year on Thursday, April 24<sup>th</sup>. Ramadan is observed by Muslims throughout the world, including 1.4 million Arab citizens of Israel. Tradition requires abstention from eating, drinking and smoking between dawn and sunset. The fast concludes each day at sunset with an *Iftar*, a festive, celebratory meal with extended family and friends. These feasts, in addition to nightly prayers at mosques, are central to the month of Ramadan.

**In response to COVID-19, the Islamic Council issued a *Fatwa* (religious decree) stating that people should pray only in their homes, refrain from organizing and attending large events, and obey the instructions of the Ministry of Health.** Most people have been obeying the rules to date, but there are small groups who are not following instructions and praying in groups in plazas outside of mosques, which have been closed for several weeks.

Regarding work and school, it is common for Muslims to reduce hours during the month of Ramadan due to the fast. In Arab society, the school day is shortened with classes ending at 12:35pm. Many students stay awake late into the night and do not attend classes at all. It is important to note that over the last month, significant disparities have emerged between Jewish and Arab students regarding digital gaps. It is expected that Ramadan will only increase these gaps, as Arab schools will greatly reduce their hours.

The month of Ramadan is also characterized by giving gifts to the whole family and holding celebratory *Iftar* feasts. This year, Ramadan will occur during a time when many are out of work. A minority of Arab society works in professions that are considered indispensable, and now with the suspension of festivities, many will lose an additional source of income. In the midst of this situation, the epidemic of violence and crime continues to afflict Arab society, and there is a great need for social services.

## Principal Challenges

- Preparations for the holiday – prevention of crowding in businesses
- Publicity and persuasion – modifying the custom of gatherings during Ramadan by refraining from holding mass prayers at mosques or outside of them, and avoiding meals with those outside the immediate family
- Engaging the local authorities to act
- Engaging local religious leaders to act
- Increasing enforcement of regulations within Arab society during Ramadan

## Policy Recommendations

1. **Return to routine should be delayed in Arab society.** Since the COVID-19 crisis has arrived to Arab society two to three weeks later than the rest of the country, the discussion regarding “exit strategies” is premature and not relevant to Arab society.
2. **Increase the number of tests to monitor the status of infections.**
3. **Increase restrictions in Arab society during the month of Ramadan,** while being sensitive and coordinating with local authorities according to the rate of infection in each town and village.
4. **Publicity and persuasion** – Allocate public relations efforts to informing the Arab public about Ramadan guidelines, including campaigns to raise awareness about following instructions published in the news. Within this framework, specific emphasis needs to be placed on the prevention of mass prayers, holding celebrations only within the nuclear family unit, and targeting young people to caution against meeting in groups to smoke *nargila* (a common practice during the holiday).
5. **Focused nighttime lockdowns** – In the locations where there are outbreaks (and only in these locations), full lockdowns should be enforced from six in the evening until morning.
6. **Immediate start of stricter rules and enforcement,** including fines to those who do not comply – do not wait for the beginning of Ramadan. Regarding enforcement, police and other security forces need to exhibit sensitivity and restraint with Arab citizens.
7. **Preventing mass prayer** in the plazas next to mosques.
8. **Restrictions on shops and restaurants** – pressure on merchants should be eased during the day and increased at night. Local authorities should forbid the opening of the many shops and stands that do business particularly during Ramadan (e.g., falafel stands, pickled goods, sweets, and drink shops).

9. **Education** – Since learning is limited during the period of Ramadan, the “vacation” should be extended to include at least the first two weeks of Ramadan. Accordingly, the summer vacation should be shortened to help close the gaps which will have widened during Ramadan.
  
10. **Banking relief and access to credit** – The fact that the vast majority of workers in Arab society are employed in the service industry and cannot work from home has caused widespread strain. This, in conjunction with extra expenses during the period of Ramadan (even if relatively limited), requires special treatment on the part of the banks, which should be required to provide loans to Arab citizens.
  
11. **Social services** – Increase in the number of social workers and designated budgets for welfare departments in Arab towns.
  
12. **Culture and entertainment** – Broadcasts of concerts, programs, and virtual performances in Arabic by the Ministry of Culture and Sports (similar to the broadcasts in Hebrew during the Passover holiday).