

His Excellency Dr. Al-Issa Honored by International Jewish Organizations

Holidays During COVID-19: A Different Kind of Celebration

Continuing the Spirit of Ramadan in the Face of Unprecedented Challenges

Ramadan: Not Just A Sacred Observance



# RESILIENCE AND RESOLVE

The MWL Remains Steadfast Despite Global Health Challenges



*We want Muslims and all other citizens to be aiding one another in this time of common challenge, without discrimination for religion, race, gender, or ethnicity.”*

– His Excellency Sheikh Dr. Mohammad Abdulkarim Al-Issa

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# Recent Activities by the MWL

“Throughout the coronavirus global health crisis, the Muslim World League continues to provide humanitarian assistance to communities in need regardless of faith. We are all in this together and we should be extending the bridges of support to all in need.”

— H.E. Sheikh Dr. Mohammad Al-Issa



APRIL 1

The Muslim World League expresses its appreciation for His Majesty King Salman’s decision to provide free treatment for anyone infected by COVID-19 in **Saudi Arabia**, calling it a true expression of the humanitarian values of Islam and an excellent example of unity for the international community.

In celebration of **World Health Day**, Dr. Al-Issa emphasized the religious and legal obligation to avoid all situations that might lead to the spread of COVID-19. Islamic Sharia law prioritizes the protection of all within the community, promoting hygiene at every level.

The Muslim World League’s response to the pandemic and emphasis on safety and cleanliness is a model for the international Islamic community.



APRIL 7

The **Muslim World League** began deploying a daily relief convoy to dozens of villages across the African continent, delivering medical supplies, food baskets, and hygiene kits to communities in **Malawi, Nigeria, Senegal, Sudan, South Africa, Somalia, and Djibouti** that are fighting the COVID-19 pandemic. The current crisis emphasizes the need for international unity and collaboration as well as the responsibility of Muslims and all other citizens to provide aid to one another when faced with a common challenge.



APRIL 10





APRIL 13

Under the direction of the Secretary General, the director of the Muslim World League office in **Rome, Italy** extended financial assistance to the Italian government via the **Civil Protection Authority of the Italian Council of Ministers** for the purchase of medical tools and supplies to help them provide required care to those infected with COVID-19. Shared resources and technologies will allow the international community to overcome this crisis and will enable further collaboration between groups in the future.

The Muslim World League office in **Dakar, Senegal** supported the **Senegalese Ministry of Health's** program to fight the COVID-19 pandemic by preparing a specialized government hospital to accommodate coronavirus patients. The facility will have necessary medical equipment, masks, sterilizers, sanitary equipment, and ventilators to ensure accessible and adequate care to the Senegalese people.



APRIL 14

Muslims around the world began celebrating **Ramadan**. The ninth month of the Islamic calendar is observed by Muslims worldwide as a month of fasting, prayer, reflection, and community in commemoration of the Prophet Muhammad's (PBUH) first revelation. This year, Ramadan fell during the ongoing coronavirus pandemic, meaning traditional community and family gatherings in Mosques or in homes had to be reimagined. Despite the global health challenges the MWL continued its charitable efforts throughout the month of Ramadan, distributing additional food and humanitarian aid packages in several countries around the world. Although the international Muslim community has adjusted its practices in light of COVID-19, the Islamic commitment to hygiene and the common good has strengthened the community during this sacred time.



APRIL 23

“*Shared resources and technologies will allow the international community to overcome this crisis and will enable further collaboration between groups in the future*”

In response to the UN's call for urgent action to address the COVID-19 pandemic, which outlined public health measures that the international community stands ready to support, the Muslim World League prepared numerous humanitarian initiatives to help communities most in need. The MWL sent food baskets to **more than two dozen countries** around the world and began providing support to **15 governments in Europe, Africa, and Asia**.



**APRIL 27**

The Muslim World League provided financial support to the **Serbian Ministry of Health** to help the government mitigate the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic. The MWL has worked closely with Serbia before, praising its role in facilitating dialogue between the global East and West.



**APRIL 29**

**APRIL 25**



The Muslim World League donated \$1 million to the **United Nations Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA)** to upgrade its training equipment and safety devices for trainees and instructors and cover staff salaries for one year. The agreement was signed by **Abdul Rahman Al-Matar**, MWL's UnderSecretary General of Executive Affairs, and **Christian Saunders**, UNRWA's former acting Commissioner-General.

**APRIL 28**



The **Muslim World League** began deploying a daily relief convoy to dozens of villages across the African continent, delivering medical supplies, food baskets, and hygiene kits to communities in **Malawi, Nigeria, Senegal, Sudan, South Africa, Somalia, and Djibouti** that are fighting the COVID-19 pandemic. The current crisis emphasizes the need for international unity and collaboration as well as the responsibility of Muslims and all other citizens to provide aid to one another when faced with a common challenge.



**MAY 6**

The government of **Malawi** praised the MWL for its food and financial support to some of the country's most vulnerable populations. The MWL office in Malawi facilitated donations of maize flour to some of the country's poorest communities to lessen the socio-economic impact of COVID-19.

The Muslim World League recognized the **UN World Day for Cultural Diversity for Dialogue and Development** by reaffirming its core mission to bridge the gap between cultures and religions.

**MAY 21**



**MAY 23**

Throughout the month of Ramadan, Dr. Al-Issa was featured on the **Hiaahsan Show**, a nightly television program dedicated to discussing the core values of moderate Islam and the importance of building greater understanding among world religions through open dialogue.

Muslims around the world celebrated **Eid al-Fitr**, marking the end of the fasting month of Ramadan. Celebrations around the world were different from years past due to the ongoing coronavirus pandemic, but the spirit of community and charity remained a vital part of the festival.

**MAY 24**



The MWL recognized the one year anniversary of the signing of the **Charter of Makkah**, a groundbreaking document that was unanimously endorsed by more than 1,200 Muslim scholars. The Charter of Makkah is widely considered one of the most important documents in modern Islamic history. It calls for combating hate speech, violence, extremism and terrorism around the world, while advancing the principles of moderate Islam and interfaith partnership.



The MWL renewed several projects around the world to continue support for the ongoing coronavirus pandemic.

Dr. Al-Issa was recognized as the inaugural recipient of **Combat Anti-Semitism Award** for his contributions toward countering extremism and combating anti-Semitism, Islamophobia and all forms of religious hatred. The award was conferred by the **Combat Anti-Semitism Movement** and the **American Sephardi Federation**. Read his remarks in this issue.



After receiving the inaugural Combat Anti-Semitism Award, Dr. Al-Issa joined **German Chancellor Angela Merkel**, **U.S. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo** and the leadership of the **American Jewish Committee (AJC)** for the opening plenary of the **AJC Annual Virtual Global Forum**. Read his remarks in this issue.





**Muslims around the world celebrated the holy month of Ramadan in the new reality of a world impacted by COVID-19.**

The coronavirus pandemic has turned our world upside-down and disrupted virtually every aspect of our lives. The requirements to maintain social distance and avoid large gatherings of people have hit religious communities particularly hard because most faiths draw their adherents together to worship and pray and celebrate in community.

Faith has been a unifying force for people since the dawn of civilization, and the beliefs, practices and rituals of a religious tradition form an integral part of the culture in which it resides. It is particularly disquieting for people when they are not able to engage in their normal religious practices with their friends, family and neighbors, when they cannot be at one with those who share their beliefs.

So it was that the pandemic has left many of the world's faithful feeling bereft—isolated at home and unable to draw spiritual sustenance in the ways they have always known. Easter and Passover services were held online, and celebrations were muted and largely private around the world. Muslims had a similar experience, unable to pray at mosques or share the main sabbath meal with friends.

But there was more: Muslims had to endure the entire month of Ramadan in isolation, unable to attend mosque or to break the dawn-to-dusk fast in celebration with friends and family. Ramadan is a

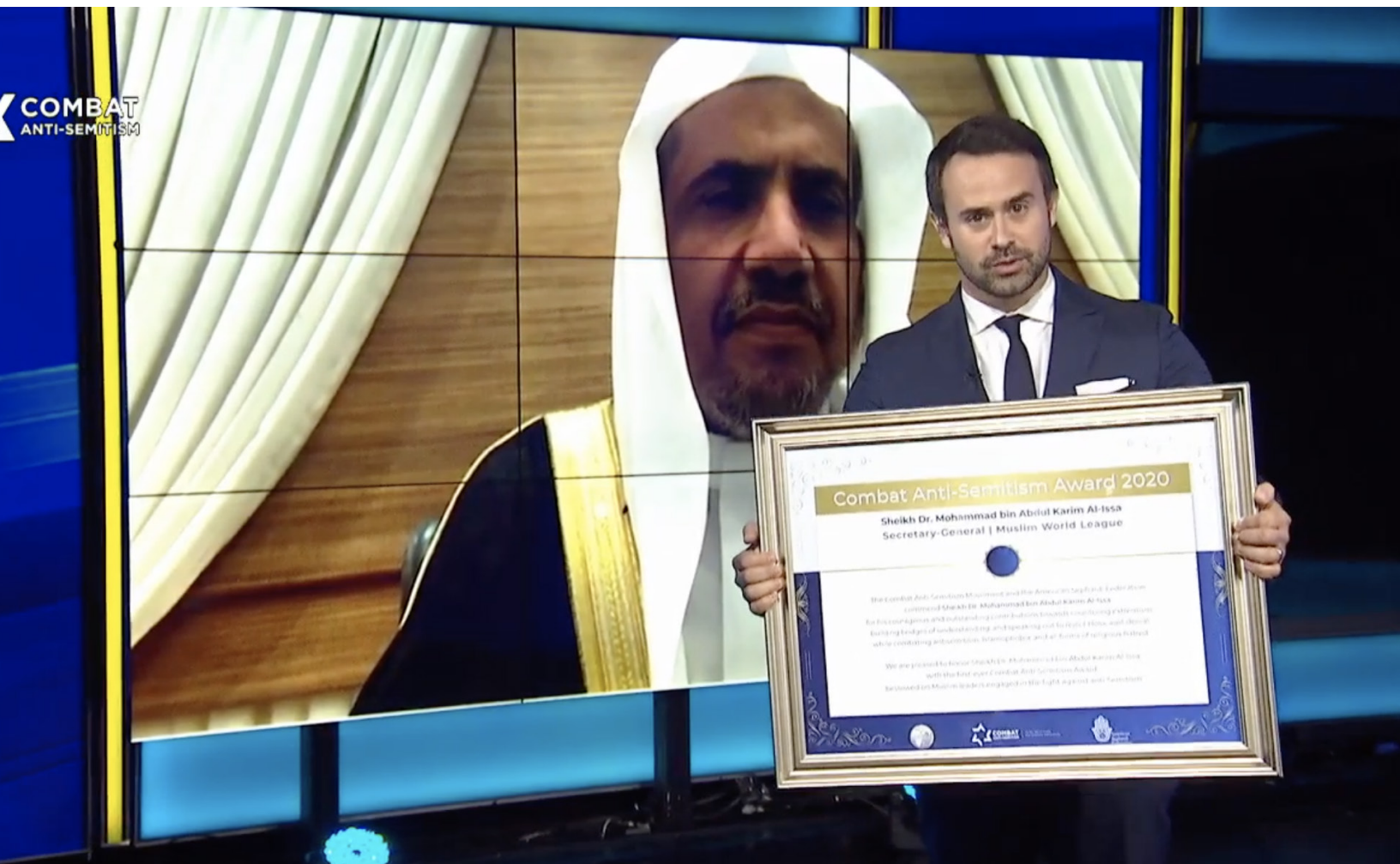
major event in the life of every Muslim community; it draws people closer to each other and to God, and it is a time for all Muslims to rededicate themselves to God and to charitable works.

Muslims who had planned their once-in-a-lifetime trip to perform the Hajj were also disappointed, because the Hajj was canceled this year as a measure to prevent the spread of the coronavirus among the thousands of visitors who would gather in Makkah. The Hajj, the annual pilgrimage of Muslims to Makkah and Madinah. The Hajj is a demonstration of the solidarity of the Muslim people and their submission to God, and it is the duty of every Muslim to perform the Hajj at least once in his or her lifetime.

In this issue, we look at Islamic communities and how they expressed their faith and adapted their practice during the coronavirus pandemic, and we recall other times in history when the Hajj was canceled or postponed due to disease or conflict. This has been an extraordinary year, and it is not yet half over. But faith is strong, and we draw strength from it in the most difficult times. And sometimes, when custom, tradition, ritual and celebration are stripped away, our faith is reinforced and strengthened and purified.

We also dedicate space in this issue to two addresses by MWL Secretary-General Mohammed Al-Issa on the subject of anti-Semitism and the need to combat religious intolerance of all kinds. He gave these addresses to the joint conference of the Combat Anti-Semitism Movement and the American Sephardic Federation on June 9, and to the American Jewish Committee 2020 Virtual Global Forum Event on June 14. The MWL has forged important ties with Jewish groups as they pursue their common goal of ending hatred and prejudice. A people cannot fight the intolerance they suffer unless it is willing to stand squarely beside others who are suffering and join their fight. To accept hatred of one is to legitimize hatred against oneself, so all people must categorically reject intolerance in all its forms and at all times.

- The Editors



In June, Dr. Al-Issa was recognized by several important Jewish organizations for leading a tireless effort by the Muslim World League to combat hatred, and anti-Semitism in particular, around the world. After leading a delegation to Auschwitz alongside the American Jewish Committee at the beginning of this year, Dr. Al-Issa reaffirmed his resolve to create a better, more equal world in which there is no place for anti-Semitism, Islamophobia, or any other form of prejudice. Dr. Al-Issa was awarded the inaugural Combat Anti-Semitism award on June 9 by the Combat Anti-Semitism Movement and the American Sephardi Federation. On June 14, Dr. Al-Issa joined U.S. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo and German Chancellor Angela Merkel for the opening plenary of the AJC Virtual Global Forum. His speeches for each event follow.

# A Commitment to Tolerance, Co-existence, & Respect: Dr. Al-Issa Receives the Combat Anti-Semitism Award

**His Excellency Sheikh Dr. Mohammad Abdulkarim Al-Issa**

Members of Combat Anti-Semitism, members of the American Sephardic Federation, U.S. officials, religious leaders, distinguished guests, your excellencies, ladies and gentlemen:

As we celebrate Jewish American Heritage month, I am honored to be here today with you to discuss such an important topic – combating anti-Semitism around the world.

I would like to take a moment to thank Combat Anti-Semitism and its director, Sacha Roytman-Dratwa, as well as the American Sephardic Federation and Jason Guberman for organizing this timely event. Both of your organizations do great work for causes related to interfaith understanding and tolerance, and preserving the rich and storied history and traditions of the Sephardic community.

We also would like to commend your unwavering support to Muslims and rejection of those who wish to promulgate Islamophobia and other prejudices.

I also want to share my appreciation that Mr. Elan Carr, the U.S. Special Envoy for Monitoring and Combating anti-Semitism, is participating today. I have had the pleasure of meeting Mr. Carr to advance the critical work of building bridges of tol-

erance and understanding around the world.

And, of course, Ambassador Sam Brownback, the U.S. ambassador-at-large for international religious freedom, who has been a global leader in uniting different communities of faith around common goals.

I think we have all seen in recent days how important it is that we as societies – and even as a global society – work toward common objectives. And that we frame these objectives around the ideals of understanding, empathy and trust.



*Now, we must rebuild the bridges of dialogue and the bonds of partnership between our communities.*

We have been reminded that even in countries as advanced and multicultural as the United States, misunderstanding and mistrust is dangerous when allowed to fester.

It can lead to anger, violence and social divisions that help no one.

Everywhere in the world, we face challenges in building the bridges of communication, partnership and friendship. But in a world with many complicated threats, from terrorism to global pandemics, our partnerships are more important than ever.

Today, we all face a common enemy in the form of the coronavirus. It has spread to every corner of the globe, showing us that it does not care if a





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***"History in the Making": Dr. Al-Issa begins his visit to Auschwitz in January 2020, accompanied by Muslim leaders from around the world and AJC leadership.***

person is Muslim or non-Muslim, Jew or non-Jew, rich or poor, educated or non-educated.

And in a world that is increasingly interconnected, each of us must come together and act as one if we are to have any hope of getting past this unparalleled threat.

Alongside the hardship caused by the coronavirus, we also must remain steadfast in our fight against those who seek to spread hatred and intolerance.

Especially during times of economic challenge and social isolation, the danger of communities turning inward and rejecting the other is even greater. And we know that extremists of all type are seeking to exploit the current uncertainty to push an ideology of hatred and division.

Exactly the opposite ideology of the people represented here.

As I look at those participating today, I see many leaders who have dedicated their lives to bringing communities together, and to sowing the seeds

of tolerance and love. You are all at the forefront of this battle against anti-Semitism and you are leaders in the larger fight to safeguard the humanity of all.

I visited the most horrific site of Jewish suffering in history, Auschwitz, earlier this year. But I also have spent time in sacred Jewish institutions that should fill all humanity with hope – synagogues in New York, Paris, Warsaw and elsewhere. Buildings that stand testament to the survival of the Jewish faith and Jewish people. That show the ultimate triumph over evil.

In my many meetings with Jewish leaders in the Middle East, Europe and the United States, I have been touched by their universal concern for the sanctity of communities and individuals. Indeed, they are intimately familiar with the instances in the world where Christians, and even Muslims, are unjustly suffering. And together we have been able to forge partnerships to mobilize people of different faiths around the ideals of mutual understanding, embrace of the other, appreciation for diversity and rejection of extremism – in all its pernicious forms.

Often, I have asked Jewish leaders a seemingly simple, but difficult question:

How can I help? What can I do to support you in your fight against anti-Semitism?

Many have told me that the most important thing is to build awareness. Whereas Jews and Muslims lived centuries together, in these last decades we have sadly grown apart. Now, we must rebuild the bridges of dialogue and the bonds of partnership between our communities.

Since taking over the Muslim World League, it has been my mission to fight the forces of hatred and violence.

We have carefully implemented a holistic, multi-pronged approach that has included tolerance building programs in education around the world, and counter-extremism monitoring and counter-



action grounded in the true, moderate doctrine of Islam. And we have dramatically increased outreach to all of Allah's children—Christians, Jews, Hindu, Buddhists, and others. For our battle against intolerance and division is the same.

Earlier this year, our efforts in particular to shatter the ideology of anti-Semitism culminated in a visit to the Auschwitz-Birkenau death camp, where I stood united alongside my Jewish brothers and said:

Never again.

Not for Jews, not for Muslims, not for Christians, not for Hindus, not for Sikhs. Not for any of God's Children.

History's greatest horror, the Holocaust, must never be repeated.

We saw the personal belongings of the poor souls that were deported to this accursed place.

We encountered the stark barracks, where lice-infested bunk beds terrorized innocent men, women and children.

We witnessed the remnants of the gas chambers and crematoria as well as the train tracks that brought people packed in like cattle to the slaughter.

The 1.1 million people murdered at Auschwitz were human beings, just like any other, just like any Muslim.

And even though it has been seventy-five years since the gates of the Auschwitz death camp were torn down, creating a better world for future generations is a constant struggle that we must

not give up on.

Attacks around the world, including the massacre of Muslim worshipers in Christchurch, New Zealand, or the killing of Christians celebrating Easter in Sri Lanka demonstrate that if the forces of hatred and intolerance are left unchecked, they threaten every minority community, no matter where they may be.

Jews know this only too well. Your community has tragically been the target of several terrorist attacks. In Pittsburgh; in San Diego; in Munsey, New York; in Halle, Germany.

I condemned each and every one of these horrible assaults upon humanity. As if they were attacks on Muslims.

We must remain vigilant and steadfast in our efforts – not just for our own sake, but also for the sake of our children and their children.

There are those who still try to falsify history. Who claim the


Holocaust, the most despicable crime in human history, is fiction.

We stand against these liars, no matter who they are or where they come from.

For denying history can only serve to further the aims of those who perpetrate hateful ideas of racial, ethnic, or religious purity.

Genocide, tragically, persists as a modern threat.

We encountered it in Darfur, where thousands of Darfuri men, women and children were wrongfully targeted.

  
***Islam prophesizes peace  
between all peoples. Only  
through respect and tolerance  
for others can that be  
achieved. The alternative is  
ceaseless, violent conflict. ”***

We also saw it in Rwanda.

Even in Europe, only decades after the Holocaust, the world failed to stop the senseless massacres of Muslim men and boys in Bosnia.

And even now, today, the plight of the Rohingya people in Myanmar goes on.

The lessons of the Holocaust are universal.

And Muslims have a responsibility to learn them, heed the warning of history and stand as part of the international community to say never again.

True Islam opposes these despicable and deplorable crimes. The teachings of Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) show us that they are among the most heinous and atrocious crimes ever committed.

This is why true Islam deems any attempt to deny or underplay the brutal horrors of the Holocaust as the ultimate insult to the dignity of all those who perished.

But the phrase "Never Again" applies to much more than just the Holocaust. It should also reflect our unified opposition to prejudice and discrimination based on race, religion, gender, creed, ethnicity or any other such category.

Last year, I convened responsible leaders from the political and spiritual communities, from the business and advocacy worlds. We made a solemn oath to promote the virtues of responsible leadership in all we do.

What does this mean? It means acting with conviction, not convenience, and ensuring that the right decision is made, even if it is a difficult one.

It means acting in the best interests of the future to help construct a new world, which can be handed down from generation to generation.

For me, as a responsible Islamic leader, it starts with acknowledging that extremism and hatred exist in all religions. Every Muslim has a duty to reject the distortion of our holy texts by extremists seeking to justify hateful and deceitful crimes.

Islam prophesizes peace between all peoples. Only through respect and tolerance for others can that be achieved. The alternative is ceaseless, violent conflict.

We, at the Muslim World League, work tirelessly to strengthen the bonds between the Muslim and Jewish communities.

Our faith is committed to tolerance, peaceful co-existence, and respect for the dignity of all mankind. We share a responsibility to confront all those who would promote division.

Armed with the truth, we will fight the scourge of anti-Semitism and all hatred.

The Muslim World League is ready for this fight. And with partners like the American Sephardi Federation, we know that we are making progress in building a brighter tomorrow.

The path is difficult, and we know there may be roadblocks. But there is no mistaking in which direction we are heading.

We in the Muslim World League are proud to shoulder with our Jewish brothers and sisters to build understanding, respect, love and interreligious harmony.

As Allah proclaimed, we are both "People of the Book."

We have a deep kindred bond that connects us. We value the importance of family, friends and loved ones.

We believe in the importance of faith.

And we will act together to make just peace a reality for Jews and Muslims, and for all people, religions, civilizations and cultures.



# United Against Those Who Promote Hatred & Intolerance: Dr. Al-Issa Speaks to the Opening Plenary of the AJC Virtual Global Forum

His Excellency Sheikh Dr. Mohammad Abdulkarim Al-Issa



Members of the American Jewish Committee, my fellow religious leaders, distinguished guests, your excellencies, ladies and gentlemen.

And Prime Ministers, Presidents, and other national and local leaders in attendance:

It is my sincere pleasure to be here with you today, and I would like to take this opportunity to express my deep appreciation to a dear friend, Mr. David Harris, and the American Jewish Committee for inviting me to speak at the opening plenary session alongside such accomplished and transformative global leaders.

I would also like to commend you for your tireless work and dedication in an effort to rebuild positive Muslim-Jewish relations. It is a testament to the strong ideals of the American Jewish Committee that you speak out as strongly against those who wish to sow division and proliferate Islamophobia as you do against those who promote anti-Semitism.

***HE Dr. Al-Issa joined German Chancellor Angela Merkel, and U.S. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo for the opening plenary of the AJC Virtual Global Forum. The event was planned to be held in Berlin, Germany, commemorating the 75th anniversary of the end of WWII, but was moved to a live online format due to the coronavirus pandemic.***

To Her Excellency Ms. Angela Merkel, the Federal Chancellor of Germany, your courage in accepting many innocent Muslims fleeing for safety and security from their war-torn homes represents the togetherness that can be found in the very fabric of Germany life. When you spoke of Islam being a part of German

society, it was deeply appreciated throughout the Muslim world. Thank you again for the good you have done with your voice.

I am delighted to be with you, especially as the world celebrates such a pivotal moment in history – the 75th anniversary of the end of World War II.

Seventy-five years ago, the world was devastated by the scourge and inimical actions of the Nazis. These terrorists – and there is no better word for them – sought to export their warped and deplorable ideology across the world through hatred and violence. In their sick pursuit to create a divided, unequal world, the Nazis almost succeeded.

However, they drastically underestimated the fortitude and undying will of their enemy, those brave souls who many of us count as family, friends and loved ones. The Nazis also failed to understand that even in the dimmest of lights, there remained a flicker of hope.

The forces of good refused to give in and persisted in their fight to create a better and more equal world, if not for themselves, then for future generations to come. In the end, we stood together as victors and made the solemn vow to never let the atrocities of the Second World War happen again.

World War II taught us many important lessons that we carry with us today. Among those lessons learned is that we possess inherent values – intrinsic commonalities – that bind us together as human beings, irrespective of race, religion, gender, nationality, ethnicity, or any other such category.

Just as the forces of good stood shoulder to

shoulder against evil on battlefields across Europe so many years ago, we now must unite against those who promote hatred and intolerance today.

With each passing day, the world becomes more interconnected and closer. By doing good and rejecting evil, we realize the important work of strengthening our fraternal bonds. But we also see how everyday extremism or hatred espoused via social media easily leads to acts of terrorism that can threaten any one of our communities.

Look at the horrible attacks on synagogues in places like Pittsburgh, San Diego and Munsey, New York, or in Halle, Germany. Or the terrible attack on the Islamic community in Christchurch, New Zealand. Or the Easter attacks on churchgoers in Sri Lanka.

These were all acts of sick individuals, guided by sick ideology. But they also reflect the task that all of us face to confront the extremists in our own communities – those everywhere in the world falsely claiming inspiration from our religious texts, or our national flags, or some sick sense of ethnic or racial pride. Defeating evil, and all of its different ideologies and sources, is a massive enterprise that depends on the role of education, family and various platforms of influence that we must constantly strive to achieve.

And we can only win this battle together – through spreading the virtues of understanding, tolerance, empathy and, ultimately, love for one another.

Since taking over the Muslim World League, I have made it my mission to work with my broth-



*Throughout history, our differences have been political. They had nothing to do with religion. Islam speaks about divine truth, and never against the right of other religions to exist.*



ers and sisters of the Jewish faith to re-sew the threads of a relationship that dates back centuries, to the birth of Islam itself. Yet in recent years had seen our communities grow apart as politics and religion too often mixed, and because of an absence of comprehensive justice that should permeate the peace of our societies – something that requires awareness, honesty, and wisdom.

Two years ago, on behalf the Muslim World League, I wrote a letter to Sara Bloomfield, Director of the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum. I expressed our great sympathy with the victims of the Holocaust, an incident that shook humanity to its core, and voiced our solidarity in fighting the crime that is Holocaust denial.

I was surprised to receive a wave of calls, messages, emails, and letters from Muslim scholars and leaders from all around the world expressing their agreement and wholehearted endorsement of my views. They all emphasized Islam’s justice and humane rationale towards this hideous crime, and a number of these scholars joined us when we later visited Auschwitz.

Since that date, the Muslim World League has made a concerted effort to expand our outreach in the Jewish community. As the verses of the Quran dictate, these are “people of the book.” The verses of the Quran also dictate that Jews be given special privileges in the rulings of Islamic jurisprudence.

Throughout history, our differences have been political. They had nothing to do with religion. Islam speaks about divine truth, and never against the right of other religions to exist.

In our meetings with Jewish leaders on several continents including in the Middle East, the United States and in Europe, we have found so much common ground. We have repeatedly seen how we share the same concerns around growing intolerance and the same threats facing each of our communities. But also how we share the same determination to build a more tolerant and peaceful world – a world ruled a just and all-en-



***In May 2018, Dr. Al-Issa visited the Holocaust Museum in Washington, D.C. with Robert Satloff, Executive Director of the Washington Institute of Near East Policy on Dr. Al-Issa: “Yesterday, he talked the talk; today he walks the walk”***

compassing peace.

Muslims and Jews know only too well the danger posed by extremists of all types who seek to exploit instability to promote hatred and violence, and particularly Neo-Nazism. And as we now experience the challenges of a global pandemic that is killing so many innocent people, and economic turmoil that is costing so many people their jobs and savings around the world, we must be more on guard than ever to this threat.

The only way we can defeat this common enemy is by coming together and acting as one, building bridges of dialogue and cooperation guided by a logic that is just and comprehensive, accepting diversity and other forms of thought, supporting marginalized and overlooked people in communities around the world, rejecting indifference and guarding against violent and ideological extremism.

This is why it was of the utmost importance for the Muslim World League to establish a rela-

tionship with the American Jewish Committee – an organization at the forefront of fighting anti-Semitism and advocating for the cooperation of people of different faiths and beliefs to create a better future for all. We value the courageous stances taken by many members of AJC in standing against all forms of racism and hatred, including Islamophobia.

Last year, we solidified our relationship through the signing of a historic agreement to cooperate against racism and extremism in all its forms.

A key aspect of this agreement was to show solidarity by visiting the Nazi death camp at Auschwitz, which took place earlier this year in commemoration of the 75th anniversary of the liberation of that camp. I led a high-level Muslim delegation consisting of prominent Islamic scholars, from various Muslim countries, belonging to different sects: Sunni, Shiite, and others.

On that memorable day, I stood alongside my Muslim and Jewish brothers, united in resolve and said:

Never again.

Not for Jews, not for Muslims, not for Christians. Not for anyone else.

The horrors of the Holocaust must never be repeated or forgotten.

The undeniable evidence of the atrocities committed against innocent men women and children shook us all.

We saw the children's shoes, human hair, suitcas-

es and other personal belongings of those lost.

We saw the prison-like barracks, where men, women and children were forced to live.

We saw the remnants of the gas chambers, where poor souls were undressed and killed.

We saw the medical facilities, where Nazi doctors performed unholy experiments.

I personally wept at the mere thought of such horrific crimes.

More than 1 million men, women and children lost their lives at Auschwitz and this is something we cannot let ourselves forget.

Muslims and others must heed this lesson of

history. For the lessons of the Holocaust are universal. And the threat of genocide remains with us today.

And as Mr. David Harris and myself wrote in The Chicago Tribune just days after our visit to Auschwitz, Jews and Muslims have a responsibility to leverage all of our influence to stop suffering today.

The risks are very real. Look at what happened in Rwanda or Bosnia just a generation ago, as ethnic or religious hatred so easily morphed into genocide. Or consider the miserable plight of the Rohingya in Myanmar today, who remain subjected to systematic racist discrimination, violence and terrorism.

These are all crimes against Islam. Regardless of who was the perpetrator and who were the



*The only way we can defeat this common enemy is by coming together and acting as one, building bridges of dialogue and cooperation."*



**Dr. Al-Issa joined leadership from the American Jewish Committee at the POLIN Museum earlier this year.**

victims. And as Muslims, we have a religious obligation and moral duty to act against such unconscionable abuse.

The world is indeed a dangerous place, but these last years of reconstruction in Muslim-Jewish relations provide me with great hope for a brighter tomorrow, one that is characterized by engagement in dialogue that will lead to understanding and a just and all-encompassing peace. The obstacles to this vision abound in the form of bad decisions and actions that only make matters worse.

So even as hatred seems to proliferate with greater ease than ever before via social media, I think we are slowly winning the war. We are building partnerships in which Muslims and Jews, and many Christians and people of other faiths and convictions, are advocating common values, and educating their diverse communities on such commonalities.

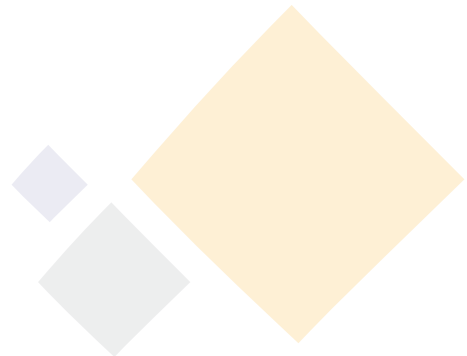
And together we are fighting to create a better, more equal world in which there is no place for anti-Semitism, Islamophobia, or any other form of prejudice.

We will prevail, because the truth is on our side.

Please know that Muslim World League will continue working every day to promote the true, moderate values of Islam that prophesize peace, love and coexistence. True, moderate Islam utterly opposes violence against any innocent life.

And we are delighted to work with partners like the American Jewish Committee, who value the sanctity of human life for all people as dearly as we do.

Thank you again for inviting me to speak here today. And I look forward to working with all of you to advance the cause of understanding, tolerance, empathy, love and a just and all-encompassing peace for our world.







*A family celebration of Ramadan.*

# How Muslims Are Celebrating During a Pandemic

## ***A Different Kind of Celebration***

For Muslims, observing holy days is more than a religious obligation. The ways Muslims celebrate the important days of the faith help define national cultures and form a common bond among Muslims anywhere in the world. Although different Islamic sects may observe days that are exclusive to their Islamic traditions, other days are universal.

The most important ones are common for all Muslim worshipers and are held around significant Islamic rituals or to commemorate important events in the history of the faith. They incorporate the same measures, which involve

prayer, acts of devotion and religious and social interaction with families and communities. The holidays are cause for both worship and celebration, for the individuals to express their faith in God and to celebrate life with their family and community. The ongoing coronavirus pandemic challenges these longstanding traditions and imposes new forms of celebrations to which Muslims must adjust.

## ***Closing Mosques and Praying at Home***

Maintaining good health and safeguarding ensuring good public health are important Islamic values, and many of the most authoritative religious leaders have followed the counsel and



directives of local authorities and medical experts to take necessary steps to guard against spreading the coronavirus. Communal prayers are one of the most important elements of each Muslim holiday. Additionally, for many Muslim men, Friday group prayers are an obligation. During the pandemic, as the majority of the mosques across the world remain closed, and Muslims are urged to pray at home. Some Middle Eastern countries have modified the *adhan*, which has historically called Muslims to prayer at the mosque and now calls them to “pray at home.” However, in countries such as Iran and Pakistan, communal prayers have been resumed so long as social distancing restrictions are obeyed.

### **Ramadan**

*Taraweeh* is an essential part of the Holy Month. The special evening prayer is traditionally held daily at mosques and performed by imams. However, during this year’s Ramadan, mosques as well as other holy sites including Makkah and Madinah in Saudi Arabia and Al-Aqsa mosque in Jerusalem, remained closed.

The spiritual rejuvenation engendered by the holy month seemed evermore intense this year. Most Muslims are accustomed to the dawn-to-dusk fasting required during Ramadan, but this year they faced that challenge without being able to look forward to the joy of gathering each night in large groups of family and friends to break the fast. Instead, they face an additional challenge – social isolation.

During the pandemic, *iftar*, the evening meal that breaks daily fasting, had to be held in individual households among immediate family and not shared amongst the company of many. Luckily, technology allows us to get connected while maintaining a safe distance. So *iftar* went virtual. Muslims cook in their own homes and share recipes online with families and friends, or post on culinary blogs.

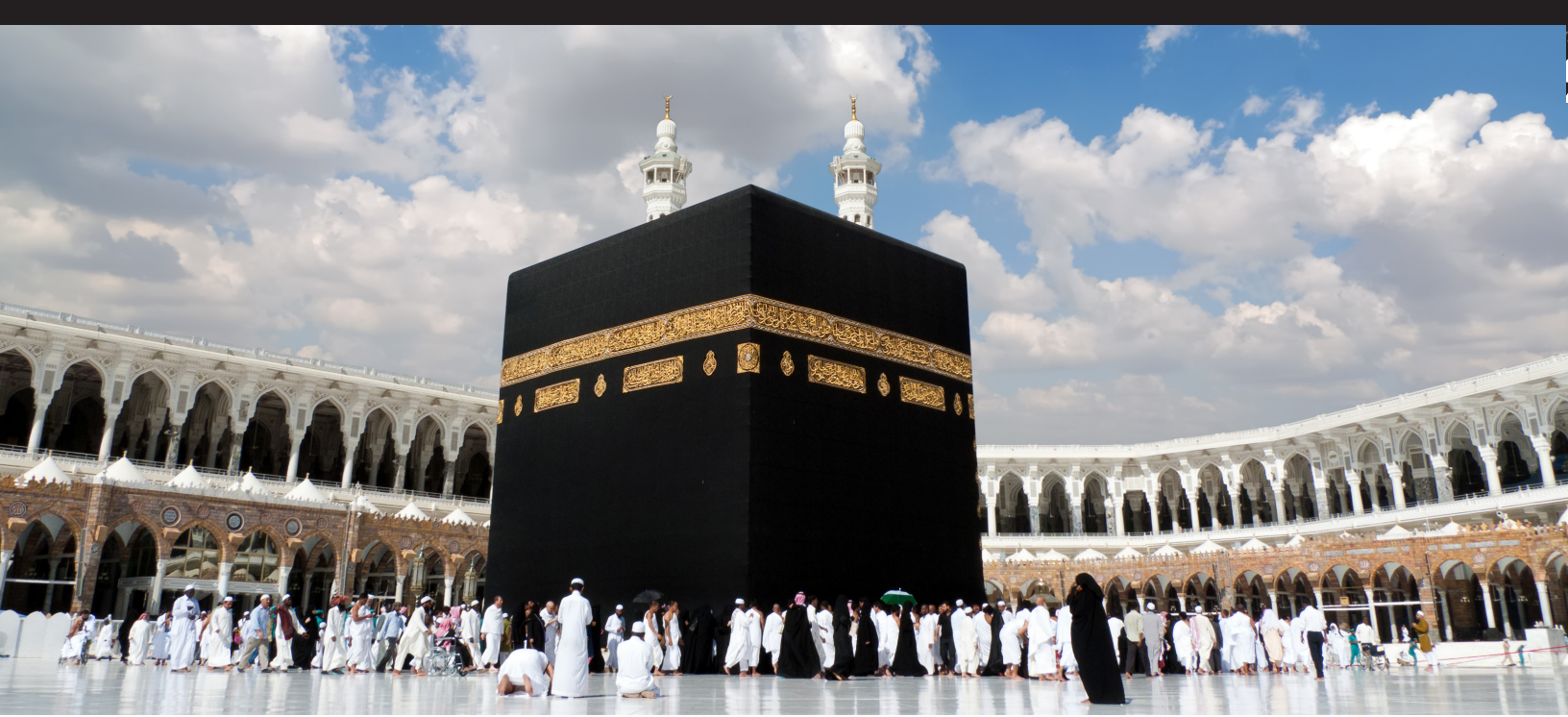
Another essential element of Ramadan is *zakat* – charity. Muslims redouble their charitable efforts during the holy month, and found ways to move this activity online. Muslim organizations in various countries set up online fundraisers and food banks, while others provided community services and classes about empowering women. Many local centers set up drive-through iftars for those who depend on the mosque for the daily meal. In some communities, volunteers deliver food baskets to those left most vulnerable.

### **Eid al-Fitr**

As much as Ramadan is about self-control, the *eid* is about relaxing the rules and happily celebrating long-awaited time together. With social distancing restrictions in place, the “festival of breaking the fast” changed its nature. The celebration traditionally starts with Salat al-Eid. This is when worshipers gather in large open spaces or in mosques for special prayers, which are usually followed by a small breakfast – the first daytime meal after the month of Ramadan.



Muslim families around the world prayed from home rather than attending communal prayers at mosques to help mitigate the spread of the coronavirus.



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**Most years, Saudi Arabia welcomes millions of Muslims from around the world for Hajj, as shown in the image above. In June, when Saudi Arabia announced limitations to Hajj for 2020, the Muslim World League shared its support for this decision, citing the importance of limiting the spread of the coronavirus amid the global pandemic.**

Under the pandemic, to keep communities together, many religious and municipal organizations set up online events such as webinars, video conferences, prayers and live streaming. Instead of visiting their family members' houses, people stay in their own households and replaced family visits with video conferences. Such technologies have significantly helped families share time together while physically being apart. In addition to the use of technology, Muslims have returned to traditional ways of communication – the exchange wishes using traditional mail.

### **Hajj**

Although it can be practiced over the year, the biggest *umrah* – pilgrimage Makkah – usually takes place during Hajj. Saudi Arabia suspended travel to its holiest sites at the end of February because the government did not believe it could ensure the safety of the millions of Muslims on pilgrimage to Makkah and Madinah. The sacred sites were closed for the first time in centuries and remain closed today. With the virus spreading throughout the world

and impacting behavior in unprecedented ways, it remains to be seen when pilgrimage will become common practice among Muslims around the world again.

The global coronavirus pandemic brought new restrictions for Muslims to obey in their everyday religious practices as well as during the holiday celebrations. Worshippers have to take further measures to fulfill one of the highest values in Islam – human health. For this reason, instead of spreading love by spending time together, Muslims are trying to protect those they care for by avoiding social contact. Luckily, modern technologies have helped ease this challenge by making possible staying in touch while being apart.





*This year the pandemic has made donations of food and other necessities even more important. The Muslim World League continued its tradition of providing Ramadan food baskets to communities in need, a demonstration of the MWL's enduring commitment to humanitarian aid.*

## Solidarity Through Separation: Continuing the Spirit of Ramadan in the Face of Unprecedented Challenges

The COVID-19 pandemic has presented challenges to leaders across every facet of society. From providing healthcare to individuals within the context of overwhelmed systems to sustaining local economies in the face of social distancing, no aspect of life has been untouched by the crisis - and religious practice has not been exempt. From April 23 through May 23, Muslims across the world were confronted with this issue head-on as the Holy Month of Ramadan presented unique challenges to worship. The pandemic called for an unprecedented resilience

from the Islamic community at large.

The Muslim World League has been at the forefront of encouraging Muslims and non-Muslims alike to social distance. From the early days of the pandemic, MWL Secretary-General Mohammed Al-Hssa underscored that it is a religious duty to protect human life at all costs, including by limiting gatherings at religious sites. When Saudi Arabia decided to suspend the Umrah to prevent further spread of the virus, the Muslim World League received hundreds of

messages from muftis, senior Islamic scholars, and governments with Muslim minorities commending the decision. All seemed to recognize the issues of public health and human life that were at stake.

Despite the need for people to remain physically distant, the Muslim World League worked tirelessly to continue its regular activities throughout the Holy Month, promoting interreligious dialogue, providing extensive humanitarian aid to vulnerable communities, and creating opportunities for a more peaceful world. Food basket distribution matched the levels of previous years and had even greater impact be-



*“I am working every day with my fellow religious leaders on how to unite our efforts for the common good of all. This action represents our religious and moral duty, and none of us are resting at this time of so much need.”*

*- H.E. Dr. Mohammed Al-Issa*

cause of the increasing need worldwide caused by the pandemic. From Italy to Afghanistan, the Muslim World League maximized its capabilities, mobilizing to provide not only food but critical medical supplies, healthcare infrastructure, and protective equipment for vulnerable communities.

Dr. Al-Issa also continued working virtually with religious leaders throughout the month to spread the message of moderate Islam and to enhance interfaith partnerships. Leaders across borders united with a common message: separation as a religious duty, standing in solidarity with one another to show that human life must come first. With the spirit of

reflection and community embodied in Ramadan, the Muslim World League continued to build bridges of understanding and cooperation that can help remove the artificial barriers between the faiths. “During this period of social distancing, reaffirming our intellectual and spiritual proximity is more important than ever before,” said Dr. Al-Issa.

During a program airing on MBC during Ramadan, Dr. Al-Issa discussed the need to protect all religious sites and places of worship. The Muslim World League has actively condemned attacks on places of worship as they have occurred, forming a partnership with the Appeal of Conscience Foundation in 2019 to unite efforts in the protection of religious sites around the world. “Houses of worship must be sanctuaries of peace,” said Dr. Al-Issa after the partnership was announced. “No one should be killed for daring only to pray.”

The Islamic community rose to meet the challenge of practicing appropriate social distancing during the Holy Month, as families gathered virtually to break their fast and commune with one another. In Saudi Arabia, the Minister of Islamic Affairs, Dawah and Guidance spearheaded a social media-based Ramadan program including educational and dawah lectures focused on the etiquette and rules of fasting, the virtues of Ramadan, and the importance of worshipping God throughout the month. In the entertainment space, MBC’s hit Ramadan series *Um Haroun* promoted themes of tolerance and coexistence. The series, which is set in the Gulf in the 1940s when Arabs and Jewish families lived and worked side by side in harmony, is sparking the kind of debate and discussion necessary for moving the ideals of tolerance and mutual respect forward.

While Ramadan this year was a Holy Month unlike any other in recent memory, Muslims around the world remained vigilant in protecting human life. The Muslim World League’s initiatives continued to have a positive impact on communities across the world, channeling the spirit of Ramadan to spread the message of moderate Islam, promote charitable giving, and leverage interfaith partnerships to build a more peaceful world.



# RAMADAN: NOT JUST A SACRED OBSERVANCE

Ramadan is the holiest month in the Islamic faith. During Ramadan, Muslims are required to fast from dusk until dawn, devoting their time to spiritual reflection through prayer, Qur'an readings, and lessons to aid in one's personal growth. Muslims also spend their time self-reflecting and engaging in personal growth through this time of fasting. However, Ramadan is also the perfect holiday for Muslims to strengthen the bonds within their family and enjoy the close company of their loved ones.

During Ramadan in 2018, the UAE's *Khaleej Times* asked some 22-year olds to share their thoughts about how they spend Ramadan with their family. Fatima Rahman said, "Since Ramadan has begun, my family and I spend more time together now. Whether it's Iftar, Suhour, or just sitting together and talking, this month makes it possible for every member of the family to come together."

There are many ways in which Ramadan allows families to bond and grow together spiritually and emotionally. One activity includes bonding through the Qur'an. Often during Ramadan, families gather to read the Qur'an together and discuss important lessons. Connecting spiritually through the Qur'an and engaging in meaningful spiritual dialogue allows for family members to enjoy a new closeness with each other.

Saba Zahir told *Khaleej Times*, "We sit together as my father reads the Holy Qur'an. These are special moments that we experience only during Ramadan." This then encourages families to set the spiritual goals they wish to achieve together as a family. After devoting time to read the Qur'an together, families usually recite the last prayer of the day together. And because this prayer is generally recited before retiring for the night, it is usually known as a tarawih prayer,

taking its name from the Arabic word for rest or relaxation.

Families bond most frequently and joyously after breaking their fast and participating in iftar. Typically, family members band together to prepare the large traditional meals, although the fast is generally broken in a very simple way, by eating a few dates



***"We prepare meals and carry out chores together as a team, and this allows us to spend more time with each other."***

Yasir Saeed described the way his family bonds during Ramadan. "We prepare meals and carry out chores together as a team, and this allows us to spend more time with each other," he said.

Each family member is able to contribute for the preparation of *iftar*, whether that be helping prepare the meals, setting the table, or cleaning dishes. While waiting for the meal to finish, commonly, family members gather together at the table engaging in conversation or read the Qur'an together, once again taking time to reconnect spiritually as a unit.

Ramadan is not only a holiday dedicated to Muslims to deepen their spiritual awareness, but also a holiday to strengthen family bonds. Muslims are able to devote more time to their family and engage in activities such as Qur'an readings, *tarawih* prayer, *iftar*, and even something as simple as watching television together, doing spring cleaning, or enjoying outdoor adventures.



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*During the month of Ramadan, HE Dr. Al-Issa led daily discussions of important topics in Islam on the Hiaahsan Show.*

## Who Watched What During Ramadan

Among the perennial joys of Ramadan are the numerous new star-studded TV shows, movies and special programs that are made for those celebrating the holiday to enjoy. This year, with the restrictions faced across the globe caused by the coronavirus pandemic, those shows brought even more joy to the lives of hundreds of millions of people. With most of the world on lockdown and living with curfews, people had more time to watch hours more entertainment. Hours that normally would rather have been spent enjoying usual iftar gatherings and experiencing the joy of seeing friends and family.

The importance of TV viewing during Ramadan is reflected in an Associated Press report that people in the Middle East spend 58 million more hours on Facebook and watch more YouTube videos at Ramadan than at any other time of the year. This Ramadan was perhaps extraordinarily typical.

Family and friends gathered to spend an extra amount of time watching a variety of feel-good comedies, dramas, cooking shows, and thrillers specifically made for Ramadan and the Eid holiday. Egypt, the most populous Arab nation

with 100 million people, is known for producing the most entertainment for Ramadan, and this year's hits certainly provided hours of binge-watching across the region. One of the most popular shows was *Al Ekhteyar*, based on the true story of Egyptian army colonel Ahmed Al Mansi. Viewers were glued to the thriller, which was shown across the Arab world on MBC and OSN and portrayed Al Mansi's role as the commander of the Thunderbolt Forces, Egypt's elite military commando force. Al Mansi would later die in a terrorist attack in North Sinai in 2017. When the series first launched a trailer on YouTube in April, it got over one million views. One can only imagine the millions more who tuned in.

Ramadan is the biggest season of the year for Arabic television shows and advertisers. For the first time ever, Saudi Arabia produced a soap opera for Ramadan, which also proved very popular. *Al Mirath*, which means "Inheritance," was a long-form TV series with lots of drama. The show was touted as "the first Arab soap opera," and the timing of its launch made it a particularly poignant viewing choice this year. It addressed social and familial issues, which have been felt quite keenly by many around the globe since the coronavirus pandemic. Google reported that TV dramas and soap operas see a 151% increase in viewership on YouTube during this holy month.

Cooking shows were as popular as ever this year, with the three most-watched being *Al Matbkah Al Arabi*, *Bil Afya Maa Hayat* and *Hala B Ramadan*. Produced in the United Arab Emirates, Emirati Chef Hayat Al Shaibani's show, *Bil Afya Maa Hayat*, highlighted the various foods available throughout the GCC and how to incorporate traditional GCC cooking techniques into international menus. Other shows asked the Arab world's most popular celebrities to send in their favorite dishes and recipes.

Naturally, tech played a huge role, and online viewing was also up this year, with millions turning to the online streaming service, Watan-

flix. The platform provided hundreds of choices of movies, series, plays, shows and children's cartoons and programming in full HD format. One of their shows, *Howa Allah*, had 20 episodes and focused on the religious meaning of various aspects of Ramadan. The platform also hosts some of the Arab world's most popular movies and series dating back to the 1960's.

Much of the new original content provided a look back at pre-corona times, with people sitting in cafes, hugging their friends and family members, and conducting the kind of normal life we knew in pre-corona times. For many, it provided a sadly nostalgic memory of the way Ramadan used to be, yet also some inspiration and comfort.

Other post-iftar and pre-suhoor viewing starred iconic Arab women. Dina ElSherbiny led the way in *The Forgetfulness Game*, which was adapted from an Italian series. The plot was about a woman who loses her memory and is found trying to remember her old life, or embracing her new one. The series, produced in Egypt, also got a lot of attention due to the fact that ElSherbiny's husband, world famous Egyptian singer Amr Diab, sang the song for the opening credits. Also making a comeback after four years of not starring in a Ramadan TV series was Egyptian actress Mona Zaki.

Ramadan viewing, however, would never be complete without the iconic and legendary Yusra making an appearance. This year was no exception. Widely viewed as the Queen of acting across the Arab world, Yusra, who is also a UN Goodwill Ambassador, starred in *Broken Promises*, a drama in which she plays a woman whose family plots against her. It was clearly another year of blockbuster entertainment, talent and choices.

Perhaps most importantly of all for those starring and those watching, Ramadan 2020 was a year no one will forget.

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