

The Islamic Calendar

Use of the Lunar Calendar

The Islamic Calendar is based on the Lunar Calendar consisting of 354-355 days annually and is days shorter than the western Solar Calendar. The Lunar month is based on the time it takes the moon to complete a single orbit around the earth and it is just over 29½ days. There are advantages to the Lunar calendar. For example, the various dates in the Islamic Calendar such as *Ramadan* and *Hajj* rotate every year and are not fixed like the Solar Year. People, therefore, perform acts of worship in various climatic conditions and in different lengths of hours in submission to the will of Allah where human imagination plays no part.

The new moon marks the beginning of each new lunar month and it is easy for people to see the moon and know that a new month has begun. This probably explains why most ancient civilizations such as the Babylonians, the Jews, the Greeks and the Egyptians in the Middle East, the Aztecs, the Incas of the West, and the Hindus and the Chinese of the East used this system. Interestingly, the English word 'month' is derived from the word 'moon'.

Origin and Significance of the *Hijri* Calendar

The Islamic Calendar was started by the second Caliph Umar in 16 AH/ 637 CE [2]. The event *Hijrah*, the migration of the Prophet Muhammad (SAW) from Makkah to Madinah in 622 CE, was chosen to begin the Islamic Calendar because it was the first major sacrifice made by the *Ummah* for the preservation of Islam in its formative period. The Caliph Umar is reported to have remarked: "The *Hijrah* has separated truth from falsehood, therefore, let it become the Epoch Era" [3]. The *Hijrah* year reminds Muslims every year of the sacrifices made by the first Muslim and should prepare them to do the same. The constant use of the *Hijri* Calendar for acts of worship as a frame of reference to major historical events will help Muslims keep links with their roots and further enhance their knowledge of their religion and history.

Months of the Islamic Calendar

There are twelve months in the Islamic Calendar. As the Qur'an says: "Surely the number of months in the sight of Allah is twelve, in accordance with His decree from the day He created the heaven and the earth, out of which four are sacred" (9:36) [4]. The four Sacred Months (*al-Ashhur al-Mubarakah*) are *Rajab*, *Dhul Qa'dah*, *Dhul Hijjah* and *Muharram* [5]. The sanctity of these months was accepted in the Pre-Islamic era when fighting was forbidden and there were cease-fires where fighting was ongoing. Because *Rajab* is a sacred month, it was customary for people in pre-Islamic times to perform 'Umrah during it as they were guaranteed safety and security [6]. *Dhul Hijjah* is the month when people from far away places go to perform the Pilgrimage (*Hajj*). The two other Sacred Months come before (*Dhul Qa'dah*) and after (*Muharram*) this month, so that people's journeys to and from the Ka'bah to distant places are safe.

The twelve months of the Islamic Calendar are as follows:

1. *Muharram*
2. *Safar*
3. *Rabi' al-Awwal*
4. *Rabi' al-Thani*
5. *Jumada al-Ula*
6. *Jumada al-Ukhra*
7. *Rajab*
8. *Sha'ban*
9. *Ramadan*
10. *Shawwal*
11. *Dhul Qa'dah*
12. *Dhul Hijjah*

Determining Islamic Dates

Islamic dates are determined by the actual visibility of the moon as the Prophet (SAW) said: "Fasting begins by seeing it (the moon) and end the fast by seeing it" [7]. Muslim scholars have interpreted the Prophetic saying in two different ways. Some scholars have held the view that each location has its own sighting of the moon (*Ikhtilaf al-Mutali'*) [8]. But most scholars have taken the words "fasting begins by seeing it" (*sumu li ru'yatihī*) as a general command to all Muslims and not individual sectors of the community. Hence they regard the sighting of the moon in one region as valid for people of that region, provided the news of sighting the moon reaches them through authentic means [9]. In this regard, Ibn Taymiyyah says: "A person who learns about the sighting of the moon in good time and is able to utilize it for fasting, for ending the fast or for sacrifice, must definitely do so. The texts and reports from the Pious Predecessors point to this. To limit this to a certain distance or to a certain time would contradict both reason and the *Shari'ah*" [10].

	The Islamic Months	Important Dates
1	Muharram	1st- <i>Hijri</i> New Year
		10th- <i>Yawm Al-'Ashura</i>
2	Safar	
3	Rabi' al-Awwal	9th- Prophet's birth and call to Prophethood
		12th- Prophet's arrival at Madinah and his death
4	Rabi' al-Thani	
5	Jumada al-Ula	
6	Jumada al-Ukhra	
7	Rajab	27th - <i>Al-Isra wal Mi'raj</i>

8	Sha'ban	1st-15th (Voluntary Fasting) 15th- Night of Forgiveness
9	Ramadan	1st - First day of obligatory fasting 17th - Battle of Badr 20th - Conquest of Makkah 20th - 30 th (<i>I'tikaf</i>) 27th- Commencement of Revelation of the Qur'an 21st, 23rd, 25th, 27th, 29th - Search for <i>Laylatul Qadr</i>
10	Shawwal	1st - ' <i>Eid Al-Fitr</i> 6 days fasting
11	Dhul Qa'dah	
12	Dhul Hijjah	1st - 10th (Blessed days for worship) 8th - 13th (Days of <i>Hajj</i>) 9th - <i>Yawm Al-'Arafat</i> 10th- ' <i>Eid Al-Adha</i> 11th – 13th (<i>Ayyam Al-Tashriq</i>)

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Extract taken from the authors' first book entitled "*The Best of Times: Virtues and Significant important Days, Nights, Months and Festivals in Islam*" available free on request from the publisher IPCI, 434 Coventry Road, Small Heath, Birmingham B10 0UG.

[1] See Encyclopaedia Britannica 15/460-477 (15th Edition-1988) under "Calendar"