

Productivity and Self-Discipline in Ramadan

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JEDDAH — More than 1,400 years ago, the holy month of Ramadan offered Muslims the chance to strengthen their minds and exercise self-discipline in order to attain higher things. In Islamic history, Ramadan was a time when major battles were fought and won. Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) also used to be the most active during the month of fasting.

Does Ramadan still hold the same spiritual and ethical values in the 21st century to people living in the Gulf Cooperation Council states. Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Bahrain, Qatar, UAE and Oman form the GCC.

Ahmed M., 45, is saddened to see people of all ages viewing Ramadan in Saudi Arabia as a time for sleep, laziness and decreased productivity. "If you go to an office and ask for someone, you're often told to come back later or the next day," he said. "If someone loses his temper, you're told he is edgy because he is fasting."

As a businessman, Ahmed is unhappy about dealing with people in both the public and private sectors during the month. He stressed that employees should know that this is not a month to delay matters that are important to other people's lives and interests. "Ramadan is a month of worship and active work. If we adjust our lifestyles properly, we can do both and also be more productive," he said.

Wael Bakor, 29, marketing manager at a major company in Jeddah, expressed regret at the attitude of employees. "Unfortunately, people become more tense and irritated during Ramadan. One can easily notice the bad moods, the tension and the inability to put up with anyone or anything," he said.

Wael believes that even if people have bad habits, they must try hard to convey the spirit of Ramadan by being more forgiving and understanding. In terms of work-related issues, Wael said that the salesmen in his company work two shifts that extend till after midnight. "Salesmen complain about work hours during Ramadan. It's really difficult for them to function normally when they fast and stay up late," he said. "Changing work hours, and increasing or decreasing them doesn't boost efficiency. When a company drains its employees of their physical and mental energy, there will be no room left for productivity," he added.

Alaa Al-Mohammadi, 27, works as a teaching assistant at King Abdul Aziz University, which, during Ramadan, opens between 10 a.m. and 3 p.m. Al-Mohammadi noticed the low level of productivity during the month of Ramadan, especially among students. "On account of the nature of the month when people stay up all night, absenteeism increases among students," she said.

Usually, students complain about exams and homework during Ramadan saying they neither have the time nor the energy to study. "This year is a bit different since we started the semester a few days prior to the beginning of Ramadan," said Alaa. "There's not much work to be done. However, I never start my classes at 10 a.m. sharp. Students are always late because they either get up late or are held up in traffic."

In Bahrain, the law gives people a shorter six-hour working day instead of the normal eight hours. The six hours are worked straight through.

Gulf Daily News columnist Les Horton felt sympathy for Muslims who have to work a full day while fasting. In an article published on Sept. 19, he wrote, "Many Bahrainis and other Muslims have

demanding jobs and many of them — we have some in our own office — plow on until work is done, regardless of being allowed a shorter shift. But there are others who treat it as a holiday and as a result of staying up for much of the night, are not able to put in the performance they are being paid for.”

The law in Dubai allows governmental sectors to change their work hours during Ramadan. Private companies are free to choose when they want to work. According to Mona Al-Kayat, a 30-year-old reporter who has lived and worked in Dubai her entire life, not everyone in the UAE complies with the rules. “Some companies still function according to their regular working hours,” she said.

When asked about people’s productivity, Mona said that in some sectors, you notice low levels of productivity. “There is an element of that here but it’s not so bad,” said Mona. “People still produce but their performance is affected. In fact, a lot of employees, even non-Muslims, love Ramadan because they have to work less and are able to spend more time with their families,” she added.

Mona expressed her concerns regarding traffic during Ramadan. Accidents are known to happen in Dubai just before iftar, a time when most people are in a rush. “The traffic in this country is so bad that road rage has made people go mad,” said Mona.

Hanan Al-Garni, a travel services assistant at Zayed University, feels that the atmosphere in Ramadan in Abu Dhabi is not as spiritual or encouraging as in Jeddah. “I’ve been in Abu Dhabi for the past year and two months. I miss the spirit of Ramadan in Jeddah,” she said. “People there bond in the holy month and encourage each other to do better things. Unfortunately, I don’t feel the same here.”

Abdalla Al-Khodary, 30, is an IT and business consultant who visited Doha for the first time during the month of Ramadan on a business trip. Working hours in Doha are reduced to six hours a day from 8 a.m. till 2 p.m. “Business hours can be a bit frustrating — we finish work at 2 p.m. but no businesses are open until at least 8 p.m. to give people time to pray, have iftar and then start work,” said Abdalla. “This means that banks, clothes shops, mobile phone offices and pretty much all other business hours are open from about 8 p.m. to 1 a.m.”

According to Abdalla, the spirit of the holy month can be felt when dealing with citizens and expatriates residing in Doha. “There is a shift in people’s manners and ethics. It’s truly touching to see that Ramadan brings out the best in people,” he said.

Sumayyah Meehan, 34, is an American convert to Islam and has lived in Kuwait since 1996. Meehan writes for different publications. She said Ramadan in Kuwait is different. As iftar time approaches, people happily run in the streets trying to gather the last items for the iftar meal such as fresh bread and samboosa. “Even drivers stuck in traffic often have smiles on their faces as they try to get home,” said Meehan. “There is really a sense of universal brotherhood in Kuwait during Ramadan.”

Most businesses in Kuwait open around 10 a.m. and close at 3 p.m. during the holy month. Schools also open for only four hours. “People spend the nights of Ramadan wide awake until dawn. They are losing out on the blessings of the holy month,” said Sumayyah. “Of course they are often too tired to perform their duties properly the following day.”

Fasting is not merely about hunger and thirst. It is also definitely not about turning night into day either. The spirit and intent of Ramadan lies in human transformation in a monthlong inner journey of struggle and discovery. It is to do one’s utmost to become a more productive, more generous, more patient, and an overall better, human being.