



## OUR VOICES

# Muslim Holiday Is About Sharing And Caring For The Needy



by The Chicago Reporter

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On July 20, millions of Muslims across the U.S. celebrated Eid Al Adha, the Muslim Feast of the Sacrifice, commemorating Prophet Ibrahim's faithfulness to God after being tested with the unfulfilled command to sacrifice his son. In Chicago, the Arab American Muslim families I know celebrated with feasts, prayers, and giving. They shared and distributed food with those in need. They visited cemeteries to share the celebration in the memory of departed loved ones. They drove across town or to nearby states like Michigan to celebrate with their extended family. Community organizations mobilized to support their constituents.

SANAD Food Pantry organized feast day, a block party providing hot meals to community members.. Arab American Family Services' "adopt a family" project brought new clothes, shoes and toys to many immigrant families.

More and more, the dominant U.S. society has attempted to include holidays like this in U.S. diversity efforts. For example, New York Public Schools recognize it as a holiday. Annual news articles educate the public about the holiday's history and meaning.

Yet while those who are not part of the Arab American Muslim community are increasingly acknowledging the joy and the family and community bonding Eid Al Adha encapsulates, less attention is being paid to the painful gaps and absences in many of the celebrating families. Especially today, many Muslim American families are incomplete because of the compounded effects of war and displacement, the COVID-19 pandemic, and U.S. immigration bans, all of which obstruct efforts to make loving families and communities whole.

Consider, for example, Chicago's relatively large number of Syrian, Yemeni, and Palestinian communities. Many Yemeni families have been separated from one another due to the lasting effects of the Muslim Ban coupled with the COVID-19 pandemic and the war in Yemen. Many individuals impacted by the Muslim Ban are still stuck in limbo, even though President Joe Biden reversed the ban. For them, family separation means

the mental anguish that comes with family members stranded abroad or grown children living without their parents.

For Syrian refugees, including **13.5 million** internationally displaced of which approximately 4 **million are children**, family separation has produced profound psychological, social, and economic tragedies. In one case, one group of **siblings** was scattered across six countries. While limited data exist on family separation in Chicago, family separation for Syrian refugees generally leads to significant stress from the loss of loved ones, fear for the safety of one's family members in Syria, massive health and financial consequences, and immigration-related complications.

In my interactions with immigrants and refugees at **Middle East Immigration and Refugee Alliance** and the **Arab American Action Network**, I have met many Iraqis who are in the U.S. alone, unable to reunite with loved ones due to displacement produced by the U.S.-led war and the injustices of the U.S. immigration system. I also know Chicago-based Egyptians who cannot return to Egypt as a result of the U.S.-backed Abdel Fattah Al-Sisi regime's **attack on activists** in exile (and **their loved ones** who are still in Egypt) who participated in the Arab Spring revolution of 2011.

Chicago is **home** to one of the largest Palestinian communities in the U.S. In my capacity as interim director of **the Institute for Research on Race and Public Policy** at the University of Illinois at Chicago, a study I am directing, the **State of Racial Justice** for Arab Americans, shows that many come from villages that have been destroyed by Israeli policies of land confiscation. Some remaining villages have more members living in Chicago than in the village of origin.

Israel's denial of Palestinian refugees right to return **under international law** exacerbates these struggles. As we saw when **Israel barred** U.S. congresswoman Rashida Tlaib from entering Israel, Israel's **barring of Palestinian** Americans from entering Palestine and Israel and **the humiliation** they endure at Israeli borders leaves their loved ones on edge when they are traveling to their Palestinian homeland for holidays, leisure, or work.

In 2018, Rasmia Odeh, a beloved Palestinian Chicagoan and community leader **was deported** by U.S. immigration authorities as a strategy to repress Palestinian American activism. I can only imagine the pain her family and friends in Chicago experienced when they could not celebrate this past Eid Al Adha with her.

Arab American Muslims do not need shallow gestures of inclusion and diversity that celebrate the community as if it is a static stereotype that exists outside of history like the numerous news reports that do nothing more than explain "What **Muslims Eat during Eid**" or "How **Muslims celebrate Eid Al Adha**." These shallow gestures are no different than a Hallmark-like happy holidays shout out or a multicultural melting pot that

celebrates cultural and religious difference but refuses to take seriously the institutionalized forms of violence and racism that contribute to family and community-based experiences.

To be sure, faith and the relation between individuals and the divine are foundational to Muslim identity. Yet Arab American Muslims, like any community, celebrate their holidays in real time, within the historical and political realities of our times.

How about we get to know who our Arab American Muslim community really is and the pains and joys of their family celebrations?

We need to honor peoples' realities and the joys and struggles that make up their holiday celebrations.

While recognizing Eid Al Adha, how about we also stand up and put pressure on the Biden administration when it comes to border control restrictions and the war on terror that prevent family reunification.

Likewise, more organizing is needed to challenge the U.S. corporations dominating COVID-19 vaccines globally with their hierarchy of importance determining who will live and die and what countries will be left bereft to suffer not just sanctions but the full ravages of COVID-19. Ending U.S.-led wars against predominantly Muslim countries and addressing profound failings in our immigration system would help enable Chicago's Arab American Muslims to celebrate the next Eid Al Adha with, and not apart from, their loved ones.

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