

Culture Food + Drink

In Jerusalem, a Ramadan Festive and Fierce

A writer's recent iftar meal with an Afro-Palestinian family reveals a community on edge.



The Muslim Quarter is the largest of the four quarters of Jerusalem's Old City. Photo by: Perekotypole/Shutterstock

BY Kusumita Das POSTED ON May 27, 2021

The narrow lane leading to Maram Firawie’s house in the Muslim quarters of Jerusalem’s Old City is manned by armed Israeli police guards on both ends. The lane is perhaps all of 300 feet long, but it ends at one of the great doors to Al-Aqsa mosque in the Noble Sanctuary—Islam’s third holiest site and the most contested piece of land since Israel occupied East Jerusalem in 1967—which makes it one of the most sensitive and well-guarded stretches in the 3,000-year-old Old City.

For non-Muslims, entering this lane is never without its share of hassle: from having to show one’s passport to answering a volley of questions pertaining to the reason for visit, the exercise can be both intimidating and time-consuming. And there’s a good chance that at the end of it all, one might have to retreat, especially during the holy month of Ramadan, when non-Muslims are forbidden from visiting Al-Aqsa. Over the course of my past few visits to Maram’s house, I had mastered the art of slithering past the guards, camouflaging myself among the Muslim crowds. This year as I make my way once again to my controversial destination 10 days into Ramadan, this time for iftar, I get lucky yet again.

I’d met Maram, a 28-year-old law student, a few months ago in a local travel community in Jerusalem; her warmth and hospitality forged a quick connection between us and I had been visiting her often. Maram and her family are among the 50 families belonging to the Afro-Palestinian community living in this hidden corner of Old City. And I don’t say ‘hidden’ lightly here—the map of Old City, that guides one to the Muslim, Jewish, Christian and Armenian quarters, makes no mention of the African quarter. Most local Jewish people aren’t aware of this community either. Two stone-walled complexes that date back to the 13th century and were used as prisons by the Ottomans during WWI, have housed this community since 1918, during the British mandate. They are descendants of the African pilgrims who came from Sudan, Senegal, Chad and Nigeria to pray at Al-Aqsa in the early 20th century, and eventually became its guardians. The Muslim men married Palestinian women—both Christians and Muslims—and a community took shape and grew. Maram’s father Hassan Firawie, for instance, married her mother Suzan, a Christian who later converted to Islam. The two complexes currently occupied by this community were gifted to their ancestors for a very nominal rent, in recognition of their services. Despite renovations, they still wear an ancient, weather-beaten look on the outside; one has to make their way through a maze of dark passages to get to the homey,



Al-Aqsa Mosque is the third holiest structure in the Islamic faith. The mosque sits inside a 35-acre site known by Muslims as Haram al-Sharif, or the Noble Sanctuary, and by Jews as the Temple Mount. Photo by: Ivoha/Shutterstock

The heady aroma of iftar food wafts out of kitchen windows, testing my resolve. Maram had suggested that I observe the dawn-to-dusk fast to get a taste of the real iftar experience, rather than merely savour an evening meal. So here I am, having had *suhoor*, the pre-fast meal before dawn, and copious amounts of water through the night. I felt somewhat prepared to brave the impending hunger and thirst pangs.

Maram’s home is a flurry of activity—she is half way through folding the *sambousek*, a Ramadan staple and a close, albeit meaty, cousin of the Indian samosa. Suzan is prepping for the pièce de résistance, the *makloub*. It is a rice-based dish that consists of meat and fried vegetables, cooked in a pot that is flipped upside down while serving—the name ‘makloub’ translates as ‘upside-down.’ Also spread out on the table is a heap of *qatayefs* or Middle-Eastern mini pancakes, waiting to be folded and stuffed. The soft disks are folded halfway and stuffed with white cheese, cream, or crunchy nuts; it is then either baked or deep-fried, coated in pistachio dust, dipped in sugar syrup, and served after a heavy iftar meal—decadence all the way. Following Maram’s instructions I get to work, folding and stuffing and coating the qatayefs. It’s quietly therapeutic unlike the heavy-duty mise en place involved in cooking the savoury items. Also on the menu are *kubbes* (torpedo-shaped crispy stuffed appetisers), dates, Arabic salad, *mutabal*—a burnt eggplant mash seasoned with Arabic spices, and three kinds of Ramadan beverages: carob, lemon-mint and *tamr hindi* (tamarind).

Contrary to my expectations, African influences in the food are scarce. “That’s because the men who migrated from Africa married Palestinian women, and the kitchen is always a woman’s domain in Arab households,” explains Suzan. However, interracial marriages aren’t exactly common—the fault line of racism cannot be wished away. Over the years, however, the participation of Afro-Palestinians in the national struggle against Israeli occupation has brought the two communities closer. “Socially, we hang out as friends; marriages are still frowned upon but politically we are one,” Maram says, as we break our fast and initiate the iftar with dates and water. Only the week before, her younger brother was arrested by the Israeli police and released the next day. “For no reason at all,” she says. Nearly every member of her family has had a run-in with the Israeli police. “My father has been jailed in the past, another brother of mine is seven years into an eight-year sentence; my mother, sisters and I have been interrogated.” I get the sense that as traumatic as this is, they have also reached a point where they are almost unfazed by it all. Iftar evenings are still a time to host guests from around the world and across religions, including Christians and Jews. While it feels surreal to dig into a sumptuous platter over a sombre subject, the mood is far from dreary. This is perhaps possible only in a Palestinian household living under an omnipresent Israeli occupation, where violence and harassment are so par for the course that they let it roll off their backs, and stoically count the days when they’ll once again share an iftar meal with their brother.

As we eat, the conversation turns to the recent events in Gaza. Maram mentions that she has heard of a friend who was injured during the conflict. She also mentions that she has heard of a friend who was injured during the conflict. She also mentions that she has heard of a friend who was injured during the conflict.

I hear a distant boom go off somewhere in the neighbourhood. Word soon travels that a riot had broken out at Damascus Gate, which is one of the main gates to the



On the iftar menu are qatayefs (top left and right) or Middle-Eastern mini pancakes, and sambousek (bottom left and right), a Ramadan staple and a close, albeit meaty, cousin of the Indian samosa. Photos by: Kusumita Das

Muslim Quarters, after a massive group of extreme right-wing Jews came charging ahead, chanting “Death to Arabs.” The police was using stun grenades and tear gas shells to control the mob. It seems unreal to me that what I had been hearing about the Palestinian side of the Jerusalem story until then would abruptly transform into a lived experience. The qatayefs felt almost as hard to swallow as the ground reality that was streaming live on TV. Soon it is clear that I wouldn’t be going back home from Maram’s. But the night is far from done with us.

I am only starting to make sense of this dramatic turn of events, when a strange stink begins to waft in. “Skunk water,” says Suzan. This is another infamous technique deployed by the police to disperse mobs, wherein they use a chemical to add a filthy smell to water and spray it all over. The stink lasts for days. As we get busy spraying the last bit of air freshener to beat the stench, memories of the aromatic maklouba from only an hour ago seem distant.

Festivals are usually a time to live in a bubble, but for stateless Palestinians, whose lives are perennially strung between permits and politics, there is no such escape. After a restless night, when dawn breaks with the echoes of Al-Fajr (morning prayers) from Al-Aqsa in the backdrop of relentless stun grenades, this reality sinks deeper. Later that morning as Maram and I walk out of Old City amidst heavy security, trying not to breathe in the stink, she says dryly, “You ticked most boxes of a Palestinian life in one day—from fasting to cooking to iftar, and eventually riots.” She is right. I’d come looking for the way Palestinians experience Ramadan, and it had unravelled to me in its entirety.

While I was relieved to get home safely that day, little did I know that I had just lived through a chapter that would lead to where we are today, as rockets from both Israel and Gaza continue to shatter the shaky status quo between Jews and Palestinians. A festive start to Ramadan has progressively turned fierce as we step into an ominous Eid, the worst this region has witnessed in many years. It might be a long time before I can once again stroll through Damascus Gate, slip into Maram’s lane and pay her a visit again. We are only a mile away but now a war-ravaged world apart.

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Maram Firawie, 28, and her family are among the 50 families belonging to the Afro-Palestinian community living in this hidden corner of Old City. Photo by: Kusumita Das



Maram lives in one of the two 13th-century stone-walled complexes in Old City, which were used as prisons by the Ottomans during WWI, and have housed Jerusalem's Afro-Palestinian community since 1918. Photo by: Kusumita Das

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Kusumita Das is a freelance writer based in Mumbai. Her favourite word is serendipity and that’s exactly what travel means to her. An overnight train journey to the mountains is how she defines a perfect holiday. That combined with lots of tea.

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