



# THE SPIRIT OF GIVING

## Interfaith Affairs in Istanbul

Global Exchange on Religion in Society



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## Being a minority

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Türkiye is a secular state with a majority Muslim population, with various sources stating that 99% of the population is Muslim. In a country of over 80 million, that still leaves room for minority communities of 1 million strong, including Armenian Apostolic Orthodox Christians, Roman Catholics, Jews, Syrian Orthodox Christians, Russian Orthodox Christians, Baha'is, Hindus, Sikhs and others.

Non-Muslim religious groups are mostly concentrated in Istanbul and other large cities. For this reason, Istanbul is one of the best places in the country to reach out to these minority communities and spread the spirit of giving once the holy month of Ramadan arrives.



Source: [DailySabah \(2018\)](#)

One of the most visible undertakings of the previous years have been interfaith iftars, which have been organised by the central and local governments. These are high level events, where the leaders from minority religious groups have been invited to break the fast at public gatherings, accompanied by speeches and affirmations of the government's dedication to fostering mutual respect and unity.

## A special year

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In 2022, the Turkish population rejoiced over the lifting of COVID-19 related public health restrictions, and people were ebullient with the arrival of Ramadan, being able to celebrate and break their fast in open spaces among friends, family, neighbours, and strangers.

Many requests to join activities to cook and help out organising iftar popped up on volunteering groups and channels across social media, with Istanbul's non-Muslim residents wanting to join not as members of a particular humanitarian organisation nor as representatives of any religious group, just as members of the community who want to immerse themselves in the spirit of giving during Ramadan.

These volunteers are also exemplifying their dedication to their community, as they can get involved through their local mosques and directly help out their neighbourhood. For those who moved to Türkiye within the last couple of years, this year marked the first Ramadan they could get involved in the activities of the holy month without limitations.

University and student organisations have also invited people of all backgrounds to interfaith iftars, which can be an exceptional experience for exchange students. One international initiative called [Ramadan Tent Project](#) also encourages young people from all religious backgrounds to volunteer to prepare the meals and later on break the fast together.

## Sharing culture though food

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The spirit of sharing through food can be found in many hidden parts of the city. One of these places is the The Quincentennial Foundation Museum of Turkish Jews and the adjacent Neve Şalom synagogue. The building itself may be hard to spot as it easily blends into the busy street of Büyük Hendek, and may be overshadowed by the Galata tower, which is located only a minute away.

One of the exhibitions in the museum focuses on Jewish holidays and observances such as Yom Kippur, Hanukkah and Rosh Hashanah and is accompanied by explanations of the traditional Turkish-Sephardi kitchen, and every visitor can take a print out of recipes for mustachudos (Dardanelles style) and tishpishti.



*Source: Private collection*

Representatives of the Jewish community have also participated in iftar dinners organised by the government in the past, and The Times of Israel [reported](#) that the Jewish community of Edirne, a city on the Bulgarian-Greek-Turkish border, had hosted an iftar in 2018.

## Returning the favor

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As 2022 comes to an end and Christian holidays are around the corner, those who celebrated Ramadan with their Muslim neighbors can now in turn extend the invitation for people to experience Christmas traditions.



*Source: Private collection*

For example, the Franciscan Community of Istanbul has organised interfaith lunches in the past on Christmas Day, and as the friars have been continuously involved in Ramadan celebrations, they will likely continue their interfaith Christmas activities as well.

In truth, one does not even have to be a permanent resident of Istanbul to witness the spirit of Ramadan. In the popular tourist area in Süleymaniye, the arrival of Ramadan is visible in the greeting banners strung across the minarets, and tables awaiting people to gather at sunset. This can create joy for any tourists that happen to join iftars by accident, while checking off sites on their Istanbul to-do list.

This presence and continuous evolution of interfaith iftars cements the feeling of belonging and open dialogue in the city, while also highlighting the perhaps lesser known history of minorities and diversity of Turkish history. In the end, Istanbul can be an inspiring example of sharing the spirit of giving and interreligious dialogue for the whole world.