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# Muslim Attorneys Navigate Challenges of Ramadan

Rebecca Baker, New York Law Journal

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Working as a criminal defense solo practitioner can be challenging work. But Mahmoud Rabah has had the additional challenge this month of handling a full caseload while fasting for more than 15 hours a day and catching a few hours of broken sleep as he honors the traditions of Ramadan.

"As a litigator, I can say it is very difficult to work out case scheduling and trials around a month of fasting," he told the Law journal. "It's a very long day. It's incredibly hard as a solo practitioner to have to keep working, and you don't have anyone to fall back on. But you get into a rhythm and are able to cope with the rigors of what your job requires."

Rabah is among thousands of attorneys in New York and roughly a billion Muslims worldwide who are observing Ramadan, the holiest month on the Islamic calendar. Practicing Muslims do not eat or drink anything from sunrise to sunset for 30 days, which is meant to provide mental and physical purification and serves as a reminder of the suffering of others. It ends on Eid al-Fitr, a three-day holiday that includes feasts, gifts to children and a variety of celebrations.

Ramadan, which follows a lunar calendar and began on June 6, has been especially trying this year because it fell during the warm weather and long days of the summer solstice.

"The biggest challenge has to be the thirst," said Subhan Tariq, of the Queens Village-based Law Offices of Subhan Tariq, Esq. "After a while of not eating throughout the day, you get used to the slight feeling of being hungry, but the constant thirst is challenging. The hunger and thirst does lead to blood sugar lows which causes headaches. But it is a constant reminder of what those less fortunate than us go through on a daily basis."

Tariq also said he is more focused while fasting. "I'm not constantly thinking about what to eat for lunch or grabbing something to drink."

Sania Khan, an assistant attorney general in the New York Attorney General's Office, said that fasting prompts her to work more efficiently.

"It has made me more clear headed and focused," she said. "My ability to do things that may take four hours on an average day is shrunk down to two hours because of taking out the snack/coffee breaks/distractions. Fasting allows me to act and work with purpose."

Muhammad Faridi, counsel in the litigation department of Patterson Belknap Webb & Tyler, said his goal is to make his observance of Ramadan "as seamless as possible"

"My clients have businesses to run. That does not stop during Ramadan."

A lack of sleep, perhaps more than fasting, also tests one's endurance. Faridi said many Muslims go to the masjid, or mosque, from about 10 p.m. to midnight. After a couple of hours of sleep, they wake before sunrise to eat a final meal and to pray again.

"So this disjointed sleep pattern can get difficult to get used to," he said. "But usually one's body adjusts after the first few fasts which tend to be the hardest."

Faridi said sometimes his concentration has slipped while fasting. "I've noticed a few typos slip by," he said. "I'm blessed with wonderful colleagues who've been able to catch my errors before my letters and briefs go out."

Omar Mohammedi, a civil litigator with The Law Firm of Omar T. Mohammedi, said he tries to take naps between prayers at night and not to draft motions after 4 p.m. "You do that mostly at nights in between prayers."

Afsaan Saleem, a solo practitioner in Brooklyn, said one of the challenges of Ramadan is to stay focused.

"We can't turn to caffeine to help jolt us awake. However, without any food we also don't have the food coma that comes from a heavy lunch. But having to speak for any length of time without being able to take a swig of water or trying to pay attention in a late afternoon meeting or conference can be difficult."

## Alternate Schedules

To help cope with the physical challenges, Muslim attorneys said they alter their schedule or ask for adjournments until after Ramadan concludes.

Tariq said he arrives at his office around 1 p.m. and leaves right before sundown so he can rest more. "I get work done overnight after night prayers and before sunrise so that I can catch up with all the work that needs to be done."

Atif Rehman, vice president and counsel of BNP Paribas, said he schedules meetings so he can go to mosque between 1 and 2 p.m. during Ramadan. He acknowledged that as attorneys, fasting isn't as arduous as it is for other Muslims.

"I'm sitting in an air conditioned office, so I have it easier than someone working construction," he said.

Faridi at Patterson Belknap said he shift his schedule to avoid working in the late afternoon and early evenings when he has difficulty concentrating.

"I tend to work early in the morning or late at night," he said. "That means that I'm not able to call others at the firm if I have questions about what I'm working on. The shift in schedule also makes it difficult to organize and attend team meetings when most people at big law firms are on their second cup of coffee."

Faridi also said he is forced to turn down invitations to work-related social events. "I miss not being able to catch up with colleagues at these social gatherings. But that is part of the Ramadan experience—it's designed to encourage reflection."

Rabah, who has offices in Brooklyn and Queens, said he often has to continue trials during Ramadan to avoid a monthlong delay in proceedings. When he has asked for adjournments, he said, the

reaction has been mixed.

He has encountered judges who were "totally oblivious" to the requirements of Ramadan, he said, including one who offered to provide water when Rabah asked the court for a delay while he was fasting. Another judge, he said, wanted to schedule a trial on Eid when Rabah said he would not be available to start proceedings.

"It was almost like I was litigating my own holiday," he said, noting the judge relented after his opposing counsel, who is Jewish, came to his defense.

"She told him that if it was a Jewish holiday, we would make accommodations. She said, 'I'm not making Mr. Rabah work on his holiday,' he recalled. "I can't tell you how much support I get from other attorneys. Among my fellow attorneys, there's a very high awareness."

Raising awareness is part of the mission of the Office of Court Administration, which addresses cultural, gender, race and religious diversity of newly elected and appointed jurists at an intensive, week-long New Judges Seminar at the Judicial Institute in White Plains. OCA spokesman Lucian Chalfen said instructors focus on how New York City and state are particularly culturally diverse and to be mindful of those sensibilities.

Mohammedi, who handles employment discrimination and other cases in federal court, said he has been granted adjournments for Ramadan without issue.

"Judges and opposing counsels have always been very accommodating," he said. "On many occasions, out of respect for my religious beliefs, my clients have voluntarily asked to take care of matters after the month of Ramadan."



Judge Carolyn Walker-Diallo.  
Credit: Facebook.

Carolyn Walker-Diallo, a Brooklyn Civil Court judge who made headlines last year when she was sworn in on a Quran, said judges are trained to be sensitive to religious differences. However, she said she has had encounters with those who don't understand the holiday.

"There are some people who know what Ramadan is but not what's involved," she said. "There are some people who have offered me water on the bench."

## Lessons in Patience

Walker-Diallo said she has had to observe Ramadan this year while alternating day shifts and night shifts in Criminal Court, where she has been assigned.

"It's a practice in patience," she said. "The whole point in Ramadan is the spiritual aspect of it and conquering the basic side of you. It's a time of reflection about what you're here to do and why."

Whatever discomfort that fasting creates, the Muslim attorneys said there is an upside.

"There's nothing like it," Faridi said. "It forces you to fundamentally break with your habits and

routines. The hunger and thirst are necessary elements for a fulsome introspection and a transformative experience."

Tariq said fasting has made him more empathetic to clients who are going through difficult times.

"With our busy schedules, we lose track about the more important things in life—family, friends, and the pursuit of helping humanity. Ramadan and fasting is a time for us to reflect upon the world, sacrifice food, money and most importantly time in helping those around us and humanity as a whole."

Mohammedi said attorneys at his firm have been invited to attend community Iftars, or breaking of the fast, that are hosted by government offices and public officials. The Muslim Bar Association of New York held an Iftar on June 9 as part of its annual general meeting.

Mohammedi, the president of the Association of Muslim American Lawyers, a tri-state bar association, said his group has organized dinners for Muslim and non-Muslim lawyers to share the tradition with the legal community.

"It makes me appreciate what I have and be kind to the needy," he said. "It also trains me to be a good person. In Ramadan you cannot argue, raise your voice or get angry. It teaches me to be patient with fasting and people."

Tariq said it's the responsibility Muslim attorneys to spread awareness of Ramadan, Eid and other Muslim practices.

Those of us who are fasting should be more forthcoming in speaking to our colleagues about fasting and encouraging them to join in on it," he said. "I may sound idealistic, but, humanity needs all of us to make sacrifices in order to help each other. We must work together constantly in order to make the world a better place."

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