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North Texas Muslims begin Ramadan with plea for unity

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Muslim leaders in North Texas marked the start of Ramadan on Saturday with calls for harmony.

In a news conference at Southern Methodist University, Shiites and Sunnis, members of Islam's two major sects, said their communities should work together to promote tolerance and protect human rights.

"The main thing is religious acceptance. And it is challenging, for sure," said Basheer Ahmed, president of the Institute of Quranic Knowledge & Intrafaith Religious Acceptance.

"There is destruction, people killing each other, and some say it is for religion — which is contradictory to our religious beliefs."

Ramadan, the ninth month in the Islamic calendar, is a period of prayer, fasting, charitable giving and self-accountability. Muslims regard it as a holy and blessed time. Islamic tradition holds that the first verses of the Quran were revealed to the Prophet Muhammad during the latter part of Ramadan.

Ramadan traditionally begins with the sighting of a new moon. Differences in regional customs, along with variations in the time of the moon sighting, mean that the start of the holy month may be observed at different times in different places. In Dallas, Ramadan was recognized as beginning at sunset on Saturday.

The Sunnis and Shiites at the news conference said they preferred simply to be referred to as Muslims, bound by the same faith.

"For centuries, Sunnis and Shiites have coexisted together and lived together in complete peace and harmony," said Azhar Aziz. "If you are curious how they can, look at how we are gathered today.

"Muslims are about peace and unity. And we need to protect our communities from getting infected by this poison of hatred and senseless violence."

Moazam Syed, a member of the board of the Institute of Quranic Knowledge, said: "We need to go to a higher ground, a moral ground."

His daughter, Naureen Syed, said she saw the two groups avoid one another during her days as an active member of the Muslim Student Association at the University of Texas at Arlington.

"Shiites were not joining our organization because it was mainly Sunni," she said. "We reached out to them and invited them to meetings, to the point we had both communities praying next to one another."

As a Sunni, she said, she had her own preconceptions about Shiites "until I found a Shiite and realized we were not so different."

She said of the two branches of Islam: "I know they can work together. I saw it on a college campus."

Also, Channel-33 ran a 60 sec clip from our press conference