

NEWS

# Thousands celebrate Eid al-Adha at MetLife Stadium

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EAST RUTHERFORD — Thousands of Muslim Americans flooded MetLife Stadium on Sunday to celebrate the Eid al-Adha holiday in what organizers called a "historic" show of unity.

“This gathering is a momentous occasion,” said Passaic city Councilman Salim Patel.

Dean Makkaoui, an event organizer, said anywhere from 20,000 to 30,000 worshipers showed up, “maybe more,” but that a definitive headcount was hard to determine. The event was free and didn’t require preregistration.

Two back-to-back prayer sessions were held to accommodate the number of worshipers.

“There’s still more people coming. There’s still more people outside,” Makkaoui said, standing inside the stadium gates between services. “Some people got stuck on the highway — a lot of traffic.”

The event was a collaboration among more than 20 local mosques, including the Islamic Center of Passaic County, one of the largest mosques in the state.

Local gatherings historically draw large turnouts, Makkaoui said, but Sunday’s was exceptionally large.

Shazia Shailch, who attended the celebration with around 15 family members, said she had never experienced an event so big.

“I enjoyed it,” said Shailch, a Pakistani native who lives in Passaic. “It’s nice to see so many different cultures. It’s a very nice experience.”

Eid, the second of two Muslim holidays observed globally, celebrates Abraham's readiness to sacrifice his son, Isaac, at God's bidding before a messenger stops him.

The story is a common one among Muslim, Christian and Jewish faiths.

"It's a festival of sacrifice," Makkaoui said. He teared up as he recounted the story. "Forgive me — sometimes I get emotional."

Eid is about "families getting together and rekindling the bonds of friendship and family," Patel said. "It's so important to have that ability to just gather in a communal space.

"There's a lot of happy, happy families," he added.

**MUSLIM AMERICANS** to gather for prayers at MetLife Stadium in 'monumental' event

**ANTI-MUSLIM SENTIMENTS:** Outrage in Ocean County but not in Sussex County?

Many paused before and after the prayer service to take selfies on the field, which is home to the New York Giants and New York Jets. The stadium hosted the Super Bowl in 2014.

"It was a beautiful experience, honestly," said Fidea Al-Abed, who traveled an hour to the celebration from Montgomery, New York. "It was a very nice feeling. It's a feeling of acceptance. I like it."

Patel said his father immigrated to the U.S. in 1969 and celebrated his first Eid in New York with around 50 other people.

"In my father's own lifetime, he's seen it go from one room in Manhattan to something that's not only filling an entire stadium, but it could have filled the stadium three times over," Patel said. "Seeing a community that has grown to this size in one's lifetime, I think, is — it brings a lot of peace and contentment to one's heart."

Joy, not fear, radiated through the crowds, even as the nation continues grappling with mass shootings that killed 22 last week in El Paso, Texas, and Dayton, Ohio.

Attendees passed through metal detectors and had their bags checked, just as they would at any other stadium event.

Security personnel and armed police officers were dispersed throughout the crowds inside the gates and on the field.

“Security, this is always an issue,” Makkaoui said. “But this is a holy occasion. We’ve got to come. If it is your time, it’s your time. You can’t hide.”

Patel said security was the last thing on his mind.

“We have a lot of faith in our law enforcement,” he said. “I have no doubt that they are doing their job and we are protected.”

Patel also praised New Jersey Gov. Phil Murphy and the state Legislature for supporting minority communities.

He added: “If there’s anything that’s going to happen, the way we see it is that it’s the will of God. It wouldn’t happen without God’s permission, according to our theology.”