

Kazan: Muslim Athletes Juggle Faith, Sport as Ramadan Begins

By [The Moscow Times](#)

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As Muslims around the world begin the Ramadan fast, Ahmed al-Mahruqi and Ayman al-Jahwari, tennis doubles partners from Oman, are sweating out a practice session on a side court at the Tennis Academy in Kazan, the capital of Russia's republic of Tatarstan.

If they were back home in Oman's capital, Muscat, they would be preparing themselves for the start of Ramadan's 29-day observance period, when Muslims worldwide abstain from eating and drinking during daylight hours — a purification ritual considered one of the holiest in Islam.

But here, at the 2013 World University Games, how the pair will approach Ramadan, which this year began over the July 9–11 period, is less certain. Indeed, the grind of daily practice and competition means many of the hundreds of Muslims who have arrived in this heavily Muslim city will skip the fast.

"I think it would be better if it wasn't during Ramadan," al-Mahruqi, 20, said of the University Games. "It would be better for me because I feel better when I fast during Ramadan."

The number of Muslims at the biennial University Games is unknown, but there are more than 20 countries — out of 162 — with predominantly Muslim populations, and Russia itself is home to roughly 16 million Muslims, according to the country's 2010 census.

In much of the Islamic world — including Tatarstan, where about 55 percent of the 3.8 million population is Muslim, according to official statistics — lifestyles change to suit Ramadan's routine, with adjusted working hours and sleeping times.

Similar accommodations are hard to manage at an international event like the University Games, which has 27 sports running on firmly set schedules.

And compounding the difficulty are Kazan's extremely long daylight hours. A time zone east of Moscow, the sun starts to rise around 3:30 a.m. and sets close to 10 p.m., meaning observers would have to fast for roughly 18 hours. By comparison, Omer al-Ameri, a basketball player from the United Arab Emirates, estimated the fast period back home to be around 14 hours.

"You can't compete without drinking water for 17 hours," said Mithak Shehab, deputy head of Lebanon's 23-athlete delegation, which is about 45-percent Muslim.

"I think no one is going to fast. It's impossible."

Al-Jahwari, the Omani tennis player, for one, said he will wait until after the Games end on July 17 to begin his fast, pointing to an exception in the Quran that says Muslims can abstain if they are traveling outside their home country, or ill, so long as they make up the days later in the year. The Quran dictates that Muslims should not cause themselves physical harm through fasting.

Khalid Ahmad, a 21-year-old forward on the United Arab Emirates basketball team, acknowledged the challenge of playing a 40-minute game without sustenance — "we won't have the power to play," he said — but sometimes religion simply trumps sports.

"Me and my friends decided to try to fast for a few days," Ahmad said after the UAE's 137-43 loss to Canada on Monday.

"We'll try it," he chuckled, before explaining he'll probably stop and pick up the fast when he returns to the UAE.

According to al-Mahruqi, half of Oman's 25-athlete, all-male delegation is planning to fast. Earlier Tuesday, he and his partner lost 6-0, 6-0 to Lebanon and the tiny Persian Gulf nation's basketball team has suffered major blowouts at the hands of Russia, Korea and Germany — so whether the fast will tilt fortune out of Oman's favor remains to be seen.

In Oman, Al-Mahruqi said tennis matches during Ramadan are always planned for after the sun goes down. But now, even though he wants to fast, he has a decision to make.

"If I can't, I will not," he said. "If I have a match, maybe I'll think about it. If I'm free, I'll fast,

God willing."

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