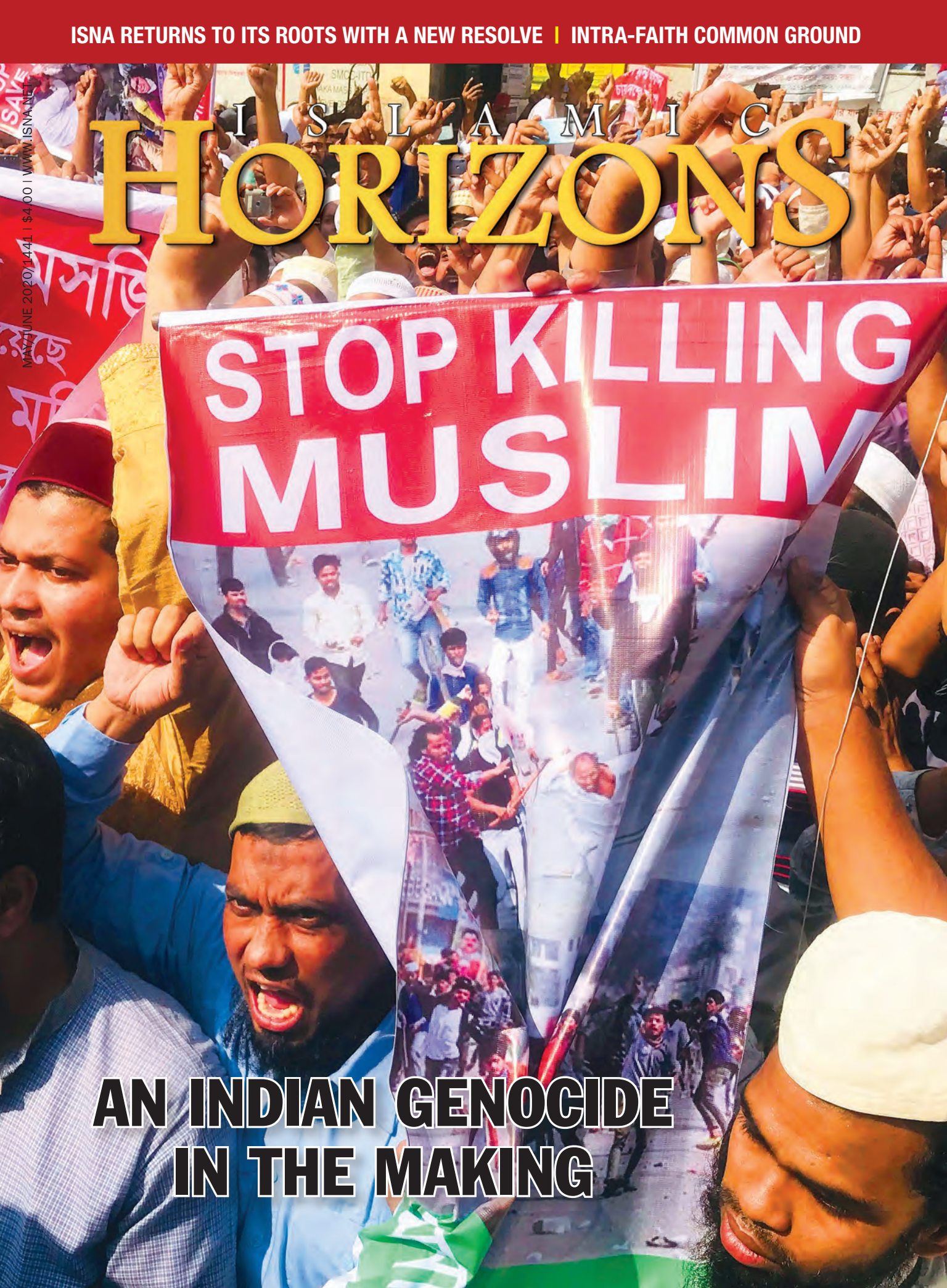


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# Exceptional Individuals with Dreams

## A decade of Eid organizing festivities for children with disabilities

BY SARA SWETZOFF

**V**IRGINIA RESIDENT, RASHA Abulohom who has an MA in Special Education, wants a world where every Muslim child with disabilities — plus their parents, siblings, and other loved ones — can enjoy the spiritual benefits of the Eid celebration and prayer tailored to meet their special needs. After hearing glowing reviews of her annual event from friends in the Washington, D.C. area, I called Rasha on behalf of Islamic Horizons to learn more about her organization: Exceptional Individuals with Dreams (Special E.I.D.; <https://www.specialeid.org>).

**IH:** What was your original inspiration for the Eid event?

**RA:** My younger brother, who has autism, is my inspiration. Eleven years ago, while attending a large Eid celebration held at a park, I wanted my brother, who we always take everywhere, to experience a moon bounce for the first time. I knew standing in a long line would give him anxiety. Being familiar with accessibility and access, as well as a special educator, I asked the volunteer monitor if we could have easy access to go in briefly.

Many individuals with autism may not look like they have a disability to someone unfamiliar with autism. Some of the families, who hadn't heard what I'd said, started objecting. It hurt to have to explain myself that this kind of accommodation is part of my brother's disability rights. I remember telling the volunteer, "You know I can go to Six Flags and Kings Dominion, and he's accommodated because he has a disability, and it hurts that I'm in a Muslim space and I am made to feel guilty for asking."

To their credit, some of the families heard me and encouraged us to come back. But at that point I was emotionally discouraged. I convinced myself that he probably wouldn't have enjoyed it. But that was the point: I wanted him to have the experience. So that's where the idea for a special Eid came from; an event exclusively for children with special needs.

Individuals with special needs have the right to be included in everything. But not everything is accessible or accommodating to their needs. What would I want if I were to do my own event to meet the needs of the families and their children? I already knew many families would benefit — I work for Fairfax County, which has a lot of Muslims. So where are they, and where do they celebrate Eid? I wanted to reach them and bring them together.

**IH:** Since disabilities are diverse and society does not educate us



▲ Rasha Abulohom and her brother Mohammed, who is autistic

about disability, can you explain more about the kids we are talking about?

**RA:** The target audience — and I put this on the flyer every year — is kids with intellectual disabilities, autism, Down syndrome, physical disabilities, visually impaired and cerebral palsy. Of course it's not limited to these disabilities, but these are the ones that I mention by name to encourage families. To serve families better, on the registration form I ask about any behavioral needs that the caretaker might be concerned about and how we can support them.

**IH:** What were your first steps in planning the event and getting the support you needed to make it a success?

**RA:** I contacted the Muslim American Society (MAS; <https://www.muslim-american-society.org>). At that time I was one of their community service volunteers; later on I became a youth director. The president of the Washington, D.C., chapter said, "You can have the whole center. We can give you the space, so go

from there." Knowing that I had the larger community's support and the venue encouraged me the most.

As I didn't want the event to be affiliated with just one place, I reached out to other mosques and Muslim organizations, such as Islamic Relief, who were excited to support the initiative. I wanted families to feel like their mosque was a stakeholder and endorsed its importance. After the first couple of events, more mosques offered support.

**IH:** So what is the turnout for the annual Eid celebration event?

**RA:** I limit it to 50 children, because making it too big defeats the purpose. Some kids and families have been coming for some years. Sometimes new ones show up.

The first event was designed to test the waters, so I sought to avoid overcrowding by not allowing [typically-abled] siblings to attend. I did include them the next year, however, because I wanted them to be aware of this celebration, to know that there are events for their siblings and that they can have fun too. I wanted them to know there are advantages to having a child or sibling with special needs, whether other people see it or not, that it's nothing to be ashamed of and that there are other families like theirs.

**IH:** How does your experience as a special educator shape the event and its activities?

**RA:** Working with my younger brother and as an education professional helps me know what works for most families. First, I

see what he likes and is interested in. Second, because I'm a teacher, I think of my students and their needs.

The event has both indoors and outdoors components. Inside the building are different activities such as arts and crafts, a sensory room, a calming area and each year I have a special activity such as making little cardboard Kaaba replicas, or sheep using cotton balls. Outside, in addition to the moonbounce there is a petting zoo, pony rides, a sandbox and water table for a sensory experience.

I also offer a photo booth and a resource table. I contact organizations and ask for their support. They either send materials or bring someone to talk about what they do, with their own table and pamphlets. Special dental clinics, therapeutic recreation centers, and so on — anything that benefits the parents.

## “...KIDS WITH SPECIAL NEEDS HAVE THE SAME RIGHTS AS KIDS WITHOUT DISABILITIES, BUT NOT ONLY FOR ACCESSIBILITY PURPOSES ...”

**IH:** *Can you describe the spiritual component of the event?*

**RA:** The reason why it's an Eid event is because we do the Eid prayer during the last part of the day. Families gather in the prayer room, we talk about Eid and its importance and then the imam talks about prayer. At that point I explain — from my perspective — the importance of teaching disabled kids about their religion. Not because they'll be held accountable for it, because, *subhan Allah* (Praise be to God), how can they be held accountable if they don't have the mindset to know the consequences, but because it's their right to know their religion to which religious community they belong.

So the point of the prayer is to tell parents that just because their kids aren't saying anything doesn't mean that they don't understand. I bring up my brother and we do a little prayer together. I demonstrate how to physically prompt children, how to show them the steps and their willingness to join with the group.

Then the imam announces that we're going to do two rakats. He explains that one can teach this to others by saying everything out loud during *dhikr* and *sujood*. So we have everyone line up and he does that. Volunteers stay, as needed, with the kids to make it easy for the parents by helping to prompt them through the steps.

We follow that with a mock hajj where we have a mini replica of the Kaaba, and the kids go around it with the imam. It's just for the sake of practice. Many families enjoy these activities.

**IH:** *I appreciate your point that people with all kinds of disabilities deserve and enjoy spiritual lives.*

**RA:** That's what I believe. My brother loves to listen to certain suras. And *subhan Allah*, I remember listening to those suras a lot when he was little. He was so young plus having special needs, so I didn't realize he was paying attention. But eventually I noticed that when I turned on recitation he would always request to listen to Surah al-Mu'minun (Chap. 23) in particular. After showing him the number, he remembered it. Now he opens the Quran app on his iPad, finds his favorite reciter by choosing the Sheikh's photo and then scrolls down to listen.

When he was younger, he loved the *adhan*. I never paid attention to its last phrases. But he would always say, right before its ends, “Allahu Akbar” and ask me to rewind it. So he's aware of when it begins and ends and, *subhan Allah*, he brought certain details to my attention.

The other aspect [of these kids' spiritual life] is community. Even if they don't realize it or understand it, they do belong to a community and should know that “these are my people.” Thus the prayer is one of the most important things we do at the Eid event. We have had several non-Muslims attend the event, and *subhan Allah*, one non-Muslim family has been coming for about ten years so her son can participate, because she understands the value of feeling like you are part of a spiritual community.

**IH:** *That's really beautiful that your event brings people from other faiths closer to Islam. Do you have any other thoughts on the values of accommodation and inclusion from an Islamic perspective?*

**RA:** I'm not a scholar, so what I know is basically common knowledge. We are all God's creation. We all have a right to learn and to be given the opportunity to learn. It

may seem challenging, but it is possible to provide accommodations to those who need them. As a teacher, I continue to learn about new accommodations that are available. Kids with special needs have the same rights as kids without disabilities. Accessible bathrooms, rails, visuals, reading materials ... all these things are important. You need to allocate the money for that, because then you are welcoming everyone.

**IH:** *Is it true that this event is the only Eid celebration for disabled kids in the U.S.? I read that in a 2014 article.*


**RA:** From my research, I think it is. Some people drive over two hours for the event. I have had other people from other states asked me to expand to their communities. One day I hope to have the opportunity and funding to expand to other states nationwide.

**IH:** *Before we wrap up, is there anything else you want to add?*

**RA:** Prophet Muhammad (*salla Allahu 'alayhi wa sallam*) said, “He who does not thank people, does not thank God” (“Sahih Muslim,” hadith no. 1955). I truly thank MAS (<https://www.muslim-americansociety.org>) and Islamic Relief (<http://irusa.org>). They have been supporting this event from day one. Their support of Eid, the venue and other assistance has helped make this an annual success.

I also want to thank all the families that come and the volunteers who dedicate their time to help on the day of the event to ensure that Special E.I.D. is a day that the children with special needs feel like the VIPs they deserve to be.

Thanks to all their support, I was able to eventually launch an independent organization (Special E.I.D.) — an organization that is associated with bringing joy to those with special needs and able to provide parents with the resources to assist them, insha' Allah. I encourage other Islamic organizations to provide similar support to disability justice initiatives.

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Sara Swetoff is a doctoral researcher at Howard University and mother to a DeafBlind child. Her family uses tactile sign language and large-print digital texts to meet their daughter's accessibility needs.