

## Islam

Islam is practiced by over 90% of the people in the Middle East and North Africa. It is also the predominant religion in Central Asia, Pakistan, Bangladesh and parts of Southeast Asia, the Sahel, and East Africa.

Islam forms a social foundation; it's a complete way of life. The crescent and color green, symbols of Islam, are found on the flags and currencies of many Islamic countries. There is no central controlling figure for Islam like the Pope for Catholics.

At **Mecca**, a trade crossroads in the desert, an Arab named Muhammad was born in A.D. 570. A thoughtful man who often prayed alone in the desert, Muhammad had a vision in which the angel Gabriel told him he was to become the "Messenger of God." After this vision, Muhammad came to see himself as a prophet whose central teaching was devotion to a single God – Allah in Arabic. He called on men and women to submit to the will of Allah – the literal meaning of Islam. The word Muslim means "one who submits."

At first, the new religion grew slowly. Some Arabs preferred their many gods to the monotheism preached by Muhammad. Muhammad was influenced by the monotheistic teachings of Judaism and Christianity. In A.D. 621, he took a trip to **Jerusalem** where, according to Muslims, Muhammad ascended to heaven on his "night's journey". There he met the significant prophets from the Judeo-Christian tradition. Today, the Dome of the Rock marks the site where this journey embarked.

As Islam won converts, some Meccans began to worry that Muhammad's monotheistic teaching would undercut the lucrative pilgrimage traffic to the shrines of the polytheistic Meccan deities and decided to kill him. In reaction, Muhammad secretly fled in A.D. 622 with the small band of believers for the neighboring town of **Medina**—an emigration, or *hejira*. Muslims date their calendar from this event. Eventually, Muhammad and his followers won control of Medina, and later returned to Mecca with 10,000 warriors and became the most powerful religious and political leader in Arabia.

Under Muhammad's leadership, the basic teachings of Islam were established, which are known as the Five Pillars of Islam. Every Muslim is expected to follow these rules to lead an ethical life:

- 1) **Confession of Faith:** the belief that "there is no God but Allah, and Muhammad is his messenger."
- 2) **Prayer:** Muslims must pray five times per day, facing toward Mecca.
- 3) **Charity:** Muslims must give alms to the poor and support the local mosque by giving a portion of their income.
- 4) **Fasting:** during Ramadan (9<sup>th</sup> month of calendar), all Muslims must fast during daylight hours, except the very young or sick.
- 5) **Pilgrimage:** If financially possible, each Muslim must make a *hajj*, or holy pilgrimage, to the city of Mecca.

In addition, some call the concept of *jihad*, or holy war, the "sixth pillar". The concept of *jihad* has different interpretations. A minority believes it means to conduct an aggressive war against non-believers and is often stereotyped as such in Western media. However, the vast majority of Muslims see *jihad* as an internal struggle to conduct yourself in a righteous manner in line with Muhammad's teachings.

The Qur'an emphasizes that men and women are equal before Allah. However, it also stresses that the genders should conform to traditional roles. Therefore, since the family is patriarchal; women and children must obey the male head of the family. In some stricter societies courtship is limited, teenage boys and girls are not allowed to socialize, marriages can be arranged and polygamy (up to four wives) is allowed. In these situations, and in more traditional, fundamentalist societies, women have few rights, and in some countries, they are still required to wear veils in public and practice seclusion in the home, which is called *purdah*.

## The Diffusion of Islam

As you can see from the following map, the hearth of Islam, is Mecca. As a universalizing religion, it sought to spread its message to others. After Muhammad's death in A.D. 632, the caliphs (chief political and religious leader of the Muslim world) carried on Muhammad's mission. Under the first four caliphs, Muhammad's teachings were compiled into the Muslim holy book known as the Qur'an (sometimes spelled Koran) and the new religion spread like wildfire. In just 20 years, Arab armies, skilled in desert warfare and enflamed with enthusiasm for *jihad* swept over the wide flat deserts of the Middle East and North Africa. Conquered people often converted to Islam because they were attracted to its belief that all people were equal in the eyes of Allah. They also adopted Arabic, the language of the conquerors, as their own.

From 661 to 750, a dynasty of caliphs directed the Muslim empire from **Damascus** in what is now Syria. Under their leadership, a second wave of military conquests shook the world. Parts of Central Asia and India came under Islamic control. Then the Muslims crossed the Strait of Gibraltar and pushed into Spain and southern France. One hundred miles outside of Paris, the Muslim warriors were stopped in the Battle of Tours (Poitiers) and pushed back into Spain (Andalusia).

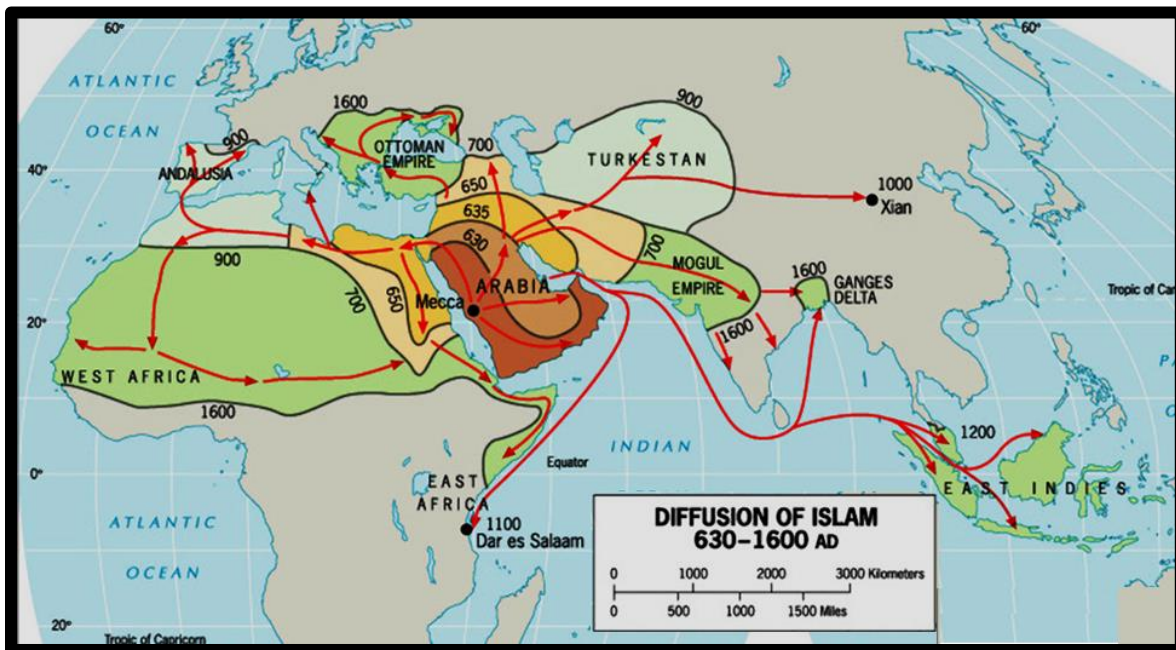


Figure 1: The Diffusion of Islam  
**The Golden Age of Islam and Beyond**

In 750, a new dynasty of caliphs—the Abbasids—shifted the capital once again, this time to Baghdad in modern-day Iraq. For the next 500 years, while European culture was in decline during the Dark Ages, the Abbasids preserved—and translated into Arabic—Greek science and philosophy and Persian literature and history. In addition, they made significant contributions of their own, especially in the field of mathematics, astronomy, architecture, medicine, and geography (Oh, yes!)

During this cultural flowering, Islam continued to spread to ever more distant realms. Now, however, it was transmitted more often through trade than by conquest. Camel caravans carried the faith across the Sahara Desert to Mali, Songhai and Bornu in West Africa (the Sahel). Merchant ships transmitted it to East Africa and those parts of Southeast Asia today known as Malaysia and Indonesia.

The word Muslim is a religious term while the word Arab is a cultural term dealing mainly with language. Historically Islam has been associated with Arab culture. Mecca is in Saudi Arabia, Mohammad was an Arab and the Qur’an was not allowed to be translated out of Arabic for fear that the words of Allah would be corrupted. Most Arabs are Muslims but most Muslims are not Arabs! The country with the largest Muslim population is not an Arab country in the Middle East but is Indonesia in Southeast Asia.

In time, several non-Arabic ethnic groups embraced Islam and forged their own Muslim empires: the Mughals in India; the Safavids in Persia (now Iran); the Ottoman Turks in Asia Minor and southeastern Europe. These empires made contributions to Islamic culture and their impact is still felt today. The Ottomans helped spread Islam into southeastern Europe (Albania, Bosnia), the Safavids adopted Shi’a Islam making Persia/Iran the center of that branch and the Mughals represent presence of Islam in South Asia. The Taj Mahal, often considered the world’s most beautiful building and a symbol of India, was a mausoleum built by a Mughal emperor who was Muslim not Hindu.



Figure 2: The Taj Mahal

According to some estimates, it is the fastest growing religion in the world. Today, Islam has no central authority like the caliphs of the past.. Since this authority is absent, the secular state in Islamic societies often corresponds with the religious authority and administers religious institutions, as well as, interpreting Islamic law and running charitable programs.

Today the era of vast empires unified by Islam has passed. Yet Islam remains the heart of most Middle Eastern cultures. And outside this core region, the Muslim faith continues to expand.

### Islamic Branches

Shortly after the death of Muhammad, the Islamic world experienced a split into branches that still affects Muslims and the broader world today. Some followers of Muhammad believed that the only legitimate successor of the prophet as caliph should be a relative of Muhammad. His closest male relative was Ali, a cousin and son-in-law (he was married to Muhammad’s daughter, Fatima). The supporters of Ali developed into the Shi’a branch of Islam. This is the minority branch consisting of approximately 15% of all Muslims. The majority branch, Sunni, consists of the other 85%. They believe that any righteous Muslim (or follower of the “Sunna” hence Sunni) can become the caliph.

Eventually, the Sunni and Shi’a developed different systems of religious interpretation and political authority.

While the Sunni branch is the most widespread (see diffusion of Islam above), the Shi’a branch has a more clustered distribution. The center of influence within Shi’a Islam is the country of Iran, which is a theocracy (government by religion) ruled by Shi’a clergy. Iran is over 90% Shi’a. Other majority Shi’a countries include Iraq (65%), Bahrain (70%) and Azerbaijan (55%). Shi’a Muslims make up significant minorities in Yemen (40%), Lebanon (31%), Kuwait (25%), Pakistan (15%), Afghanistan (15%) and Syria (13%).

Today, across the Muslim world the Sunni and Shi’a branches are frequently in conflict. Differences between the branches underpin conflicts in Syria, Lebanon and Yemen. A geopolitical rivalry exists between Sunni-dominated Saudi Arabia and Shi’a dominated Iran.



Figure 3: Distribution of Sunni and Shi'a Branches of Islam

### Impact on the Cultural Landscape

Like other religions, one of the most obvious effects on the cultural landscape of Islam is their place of worship. Muslims worship in a mosque. The architecture of mosques, in traditionally Islamic countries, reflect a belief found in the “five pillars.” Located at each corner at the base of the mosque, you would see a minaret (tower). Five times a day a muezzin (“crier”) would climb the minaret to call the faithful to prayer.



Figure 4: Minarets

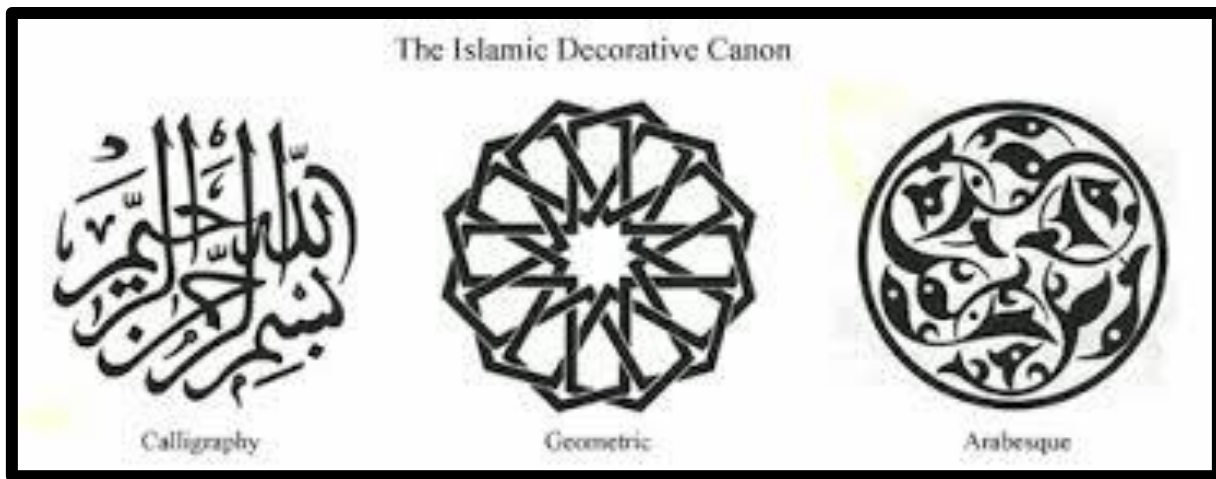


Figure 5: Islamic Decorative Styles (instead of figurative art depicting humans and animals)

To prevent idol worship (Islam is strictly iconoclastic), Islamic law forbids its followers from drawing figurative images (this is not absolute). This means that few statues or pictures adorn mosques. Instead, mosques and homes are decorated with beautiful scripts called calligraphy and geometric patterns called arabesques. Below are pictures of the Alhambra Palace in Southern Spain which reflects the Muslim presence in that area for 700 years.



Figure 6: Alhambra Palace in Southern Spain



Figure 7: Alhambra Palace in Southern Spain

One especially significant aspect of conservative Islam is “purdah”. Purdah refers to the seclusion of women in Muslim (and some Hindu) communities. Purdah can take two forms which include the physical segregation of the genders and requirement that women cover their bodies to conceal their bodily form.

As a result, Muslims are segregated by gender within mosques during worship and through the use of walls and screens in buildings. Neighborhoods in conservative Muslim societies would not have open porches and exterior yards, rather families (and consequently their female members) would achieve privacy behind tall exterior walls and would socialize in private interior courtyards.



Figure 8: Islamic Streetscapes guarantee privacy



Figure 9: Islamic House Architecture



Figure 10: Interior Courtyards

Another way the concept of “purdah” can be reflected is through the concealment of the female body under distinctive Islamic clothing. This can come in a variety of forms as shown below. This generally correlates with how conservative an interpretation of Islam the society has. One of the most severe applications of purdah was the requirement of women under the fundamentalist Taliban government in Afghanistan to be completely covered in the burqa.

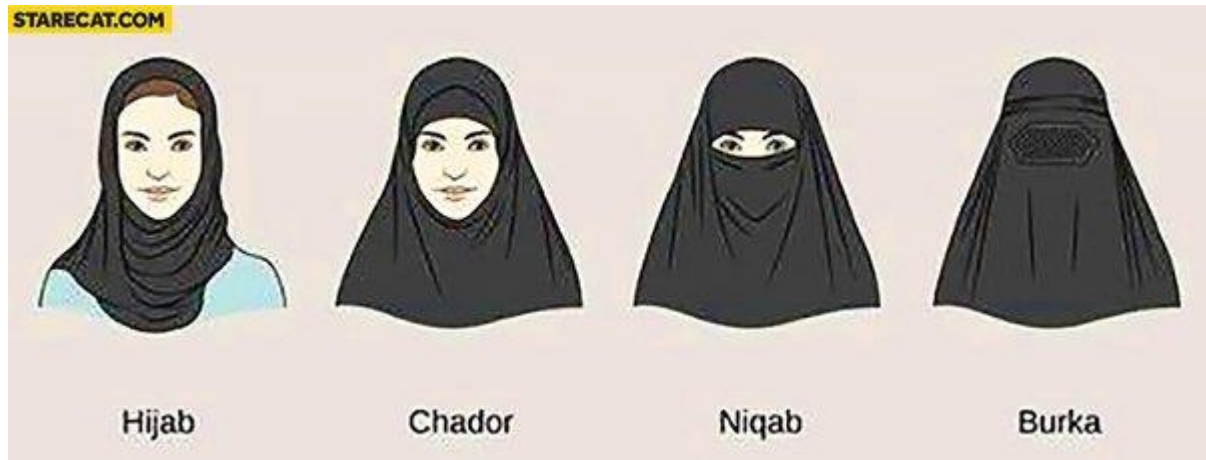


Figure 11: Various forms of female concealment under Islam

The three holiest sites in Islam are related to the life of Muhammad.

- 1) Mecca, which is the place of Muhammad’s birth, is the holiest place in Islam. It is in Saudi Arabia which gives that country a special influence in the Muslim world. It is home to the Kaaba, a stone building containing the Black Stone, which is housed in the Grand Mosque. The Black Stone supposedly fell from heaven to show Adam and Eve where to build an altar. Able-bodied Muslims are required to make a pilgrimage, or hajj, to Mecca where followers circle the Kaaba seven times counterclockwise representing the unity of all Muslims.



Figure 12: Muslims circling the Kaaba during the Hajj

Mecca receives over 15 million visitors a year: peaking at over two million pilgrims during the week of the hajj. This has necessitated the Saudi government investing in a modernization of the formerly small desert crossroads.

Hotels, restaurants, water treatment and desalinization plants have been constructed to accommodate the massive influx of visitors. An example is the Clock Towers complex of seven hotels which towers over the grand Mosque.

An airport (at Jeddah), rail transit and highways have been constructed to bring pilgrims into Mecca and help them get around once in the city.

The pilgrimage also puts a strain on the environment. Visitors produce an enormous amount of food wrapper and plastic waste. Pilgrims wear disposable white shrouds (this helps make social class differences less noticeable) but results in an excess of solid waste as they are discarded at the end of the hajj.



Figure 13: The Clock Tower Complex provides housing and restaurants to pilgrims visiting Mecca.

2) Medina, the city to which Muhammad fled during the hejira, or exile, is the second holiest site in Islam.

3) The Dome of the Rock in Jerusalem is the third holiest site in Islam. It is a mosque constructed on the site where Muhammad embarked on his night journey to paradise. It was built on top of the Temple Mount which is where the Western or Wailing Wall (a remnant of the Second Jewish Temple) is found. The Western Wall is considered the holiest place in Judaism. These locations of these sacred sites, with one right on top of the other, is a source of conflict between Jews and Muslims.



*Figure 14: The Dome of the Rock is built on top of the Temple Mount in Jerusalem. This was the site of the Second Temple of Judaism which was destroyed by the Romans (see Judaism)*

The cultural landscape can also be marked by what is absent and not shown. For example, strict Muslims are prohibited from eating pork or drinking alcohol. Therefore, you would see an absence of those items in markets or on restaurant menus.

Please remember that Islam is an Abrahamic religion. Many of the traditions and narrative found in the Qur'an closely relate to those found in the Torah (Jewish holy text) and Bible (Christian holy text). Like other Abrahamic religions, Muslims bury their dead. They also believe the Jewish patriarchs including Abraham (Ibrahim in Islam) and Moses (Musa) were prophets. They believe that Jesus (Isa) was a prophet (although not the son of God) and the Virgin Mary (Miriam) is highly revered. Miriam is cited more times in the Qur'an than Mary is cited in the Bible. The key difference to remember is that Muslims believe that Muhammad is the final and greatest prophet. And that he relayed to words of Allah. Muhammad, however, is not worshipped, only Allah is worshipped!!

In fact, throughout most of Islamic history, Jews and Christians enjoyed a tolerance in Islamic societies not reciprocated in Christian societies. They were classified as "people of the book" (followers of monotheism) and protected from persecution. They were, however, made to pay a "non-believer" tax.