

CRS Report for Congress

Received through the CRS Web

Islam: A Primer

Clyde Mark
Specialist in Middle Eastern Affairs
Foreign Affairs, Defense, and Trade Division

Summary

There are about one billion Muslims in the world, concentrated primarily in North Africa, the Middle East, and South and Southeast Asia. Islam teaches that Allah selected Muhammad, a merchant from Mecca, as the last of the prophets following Adam, Moses, Jesus, and others, to deliver God's message to mankind. The report includes short descriptions of the historical background, the tenets of Islam, jihad, the status of women in Islam, and other aspects of Islam. The report will not be updated.

Historical Background

According to Islamic belief, in 610 A.D., Muhammad, a 40-year-old merchant of the Quraysh tribe in Mecca, in the Arabian desert (now eastern Saudi Arabia), was commanded by the angel Gabriel to "recite" the message of Allah (Arabic for God). Gabriel said mankind had lost sight of Allah's previous messages to earlier prophets, Adam, Noah, Abraham, Moses, Solomon, and Jesus, among others, and that Muhammad was to spread Allah's message to all people so that mankind would know how to live, how to show respect for Allah, and how to prepare for the judgement day. The message to Muhammad was to be God's last; Muhammad was the "seal of the prophets."

Muhammad won some converts to Islam, but his monotheist preaching threatened to undermine the profitable polytheist pilgrim traffic supporting many Meccan merchants. In 622 A.D., the merchants drove Muhammad and his followers out of Mecca to the city of Yathrib (later renamed Medina, or city - as in the city of the prophet). This flight (*hijra*) from Mecca to Medina marks the beginning of the Muslim lunar calendar, and is celebrated each year in the *hajj*, the pilgrimage to Mecca. After a series of battles between the Meccans and Muhammad's forces in Medina, Mecca finally succumbed, converted to Islam, and welcomed the prophet back to the city in 630.

Muhammad died in 632. Tribal elders elected Abu Bakr to be Muhammad's successor, or Caliph (*Khalifa*). Abu Bakr united the tribes of the Arabian peninsula during his two years as head of the new faith. Upon his death, the elders elected Umar ibn al-Khattab the next Caliph. During Umar's ten year reign, Islam spread into Egypt, Syria, Palestine, Iraq, and parts of Iran. Umar was assassinated by a Persian in 644, and

was succeeded by Uthman ibn Affan, who spread Islam into North Africa, Cyprus, Iran, Afghanistan, and parts of India and Pakistan. Over the next two centuries, Islam expanded into sub-Saharan Africa, Spain, Southeast and Central Asia, and Turkey.

Divisions Within Islam

Uthman was assassinated in 656 A.D. by soldiers who then installed Ali ibn Abu Talib, Muhammad's son-in-law, as Caliph. Ali's followers believed Muhammad had chosen Ali to be Muhammad's heir, and had disagreed with the selections of Abu Bakr, Umar, and Uthman as Caliphs. Ali's claim to the position was challenged by Muawiyah, a kinsman of the murdered Uthman. Five years later, Ali was assassinated by Kharjites, religious dissidents who broke away from the main body of Muslims because they rejected Ali's accepting arbitration to resolve his leadership dispute with Muawiyah. Ali's supporters, or the Shiah al-Ali (or Shiat Ali, partisans of Ali) believed that Ali was the true Caliph and was, in part, divinely inspired. Ali's sons, Hassan and Husayn followed as Shia Caliphs, Hassan dying in 669 or 670 A.D., possibly by poisoning, and Husayn slain by soldiers of his rival, the Sunni Caliph Yazid, in 680 A.D.

The Shia Muslim community has divided further as followers coalesced around several of Ali's descendants or successors, called Imams. The "twelvers," predominant in Iran, believe the twelfth Imam is in hiding and will reveal himself just before judgement day. Ismailis rejected the seventh Imam and practice a spirituality that seeks hidden meaning in scripture. Ismailis ruled much of North Africa as the Fatimid dynasty of Egypt in the tenth through the twelfth centuries, and today are found primarily in Pakistan, Afghanistan, and India. The Sunni majority reject the premise that men can be divine, including Muhammad, Ali, or Jesus, and did not accept any of the Imams who followed Ali. Sunnis remain more committed to traditions and less inclined to accept Shia mysticism. Today, about 15% of the world's one billion Muslims are Shia and 85% are orthodox Sunni.

There are other factions within Islam. Sufis, a name apparently taken from the wool garments they wear, developed around mystical practices and trance-induced revelations. Sufis are found today in Turkey, Syria, and parts of Africa. Other movements have taken reform tracks, such as the Unitarians of Saudi Arabia, also called Wahhabis after their 18th century reformist founder Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahhab. The conservative Wahhabis are found today in Saudi Arabia and Qatar. Some critics would argue that the Taliban of Afghanistan took conservative reform to an extreme. Other sects or break-away groups include, among others, the Alawis found in Syria and Turkey, the Druze in Lebanon, Syria, Jordan, and Israel, the Ibadhis (Kharjites) in Oman and Africa, the Ahmadiya of Pakistan, and the Zaydis of Yemen.

Religious Guidance

During his lifetime, Muhammad's companions memorized and later transcribed the verses (surras) of the *Quran* as they had been dictated to Muhammad. The Caliph Uthman collected and codified the various versions of the surrahs into one written *Quran* that became the standard Arabic text used by the world's Muslims today. Present-day Muslims look first to the *Quran* as a guide to life, then to the Sunnah, or the way of the Prophet (his life as an example for others) as recorded by his early companions, and then

to the *Hadith*, a collection of the Prophet's sayings, comments, advice, and descriptions. Frequently, Muslims disagreed over how to interpret certain passages in the *Quran*, the *Sunnah*, or the *Hadith* in their search for the ideal life and perfect path to heaven. From these interpretations Sunni Muslims developed four schools of law, or interpretations of law, named after their founders or early leaders: the Hanbali, considered the most strict school and predominant today in Saudi Arabia; Shafi, the school of widest acceptance, found in Egypt, parts of Palestine-Syria, south Arabia, and the Far East; Maliki, prevalent in North Africa, Sudan, and Nigeria; and Hanafi, considered the most moderate school, predominant in Ottoman Turkey and today found primarily on the Levant and Indian subcontinent. Frequently, Muslim countries have two separate legal systems, one for civil, criminal, or commercial law, and a second, and separate, system for religious law. Religious courts and their judges (*qadis*) might handle issues dealing with marriage, divorce, child custody, inheritance, religious education, charitable or religious property (*Waqf*), or family matters. Among Middle Eastern countries, Iraq, Israel, Jordan, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Syria, the United Arab Emirates, and Yemen have Shariah courts serving alongside their secular courts or have adopted Shariah (Islamic law) as the basis of their legal systems.

Clergy. Sunni Islam does not have a priesthood or clerical hierarchy to conduct religious services or interpret scripture, but it does have prayer leaders, called *Imams*, and religious scholars, called *Ulama*, who often are educated men familiar with the *Quran* and able to offer commentaries on Quranic verses. Sunni Muslims also respect the teachings and interpretations of scholars, judges, and academics who may interpret laws, write treatises on *Sharia* (religious law) or *Hadith*, and issue *Fatwas*, religious declarations intended to enlighten or guide Muslims.

Shia Islam has a hierarchy that resembles a priesthood. *Mullahs* are prayer leaders, but usually do not interpret religious law. *Mujtahids* are religious scholars who may interpret law or passages from the *Quran* or *Hadith*. The lower order of Mujtahids are called *Hojjatolislam*. Ayat Allah (literally sign of God, also Ayatollah) is a higher order of Mujtahid who may issue *Fatwas*, or religious edicts, in addition to leading Islamic schools, interpreting religious law and the *Quran*, and offering sermons or discourses on proper Islamic behavior.

Tenets of Islam

Islam means submission to the will of God; those who submit are Muslims. Islam has five basic tenets, often called the five pillars of Islam:

- recite the creed (*shahadah*) “There is no God but Allah, and Muhammad is the prophet of Allah”;
- pray (*salat*) five times each day;
- give alms (*zakat*) to the poor;
- fast (*sawm*) from dawn to sunset during the month of Ramadan; and
- go on pilgrimage (*hajj*) to Mecca once during your lifetime if you are physically and financially able.

The five daily prayers are said just before dawn, noon, mid afternoon, just after sunset, and at bedtime. The Friday noon prayer usually is performed at a mosque, where the faithful gather to pray together to reinforce the spirit of the Muslim community (*ummah*). Men and women pray separately in the mosque, with a women's section off to

one side or on a balcony. The *Quran* does not obligate women to pray five times each day if their household or motherly duties intercede, and women are encouraged to pray at home rather than at the mosque on Fridays.

Ramadan commemorates the month when the angel Gabriel dictated the *Quran* to Muhammad. Observant Muslims do not eat, drink, smoke, or have sexual relations during the daylight hours of Ramadan.

The hajj, or pilgrimage, to Mecca also is a reaffirmation of Islam's principle of equality, when Muslims from Asia, the Middle East, Africa, the Americas, or Europe, wearing similar seamless white garments, perform the same rituals and ceremonies under the same conditions without regard to their wealth, nationality, position, or background. The hajj that began on February 20, 2002, drew 2.5 million pilgrims to Saudi Arabia.

Other Aspects of Islam

Jihad. *Jihad* is the “effort” or “struggle” each Muslim faces in the everyday trials of life, such as the effort to get better grades in school, or the striving to achieve better results from a job, or the struggle to avoid sinful temptations. Jihad also can be applied to warfare; participating in jihad in Allah's cause was the third most important good deed listed in the *Hadith*, after prayer and honoring one's parents.¹ Jihad often was a rallying cry for the military spread of Islam in the seventh through tenth centuries. Many Westerners are familiar only with the characterization in the popular press of jihad as warfare against Christians and Jews. Most Muslims would not apply jihad to Christians and Jews, believing them to be “people of the book” (see below) rather than infidels.

Osama bin Laden and Fundamentalists. Bin Laden has stated that Islam is at war with the United States and its allies.² Some observers maintain that the number of Muslims who believe as bin Laden does is growing, and others go further to suggest that all “fundamentalist” Muslims are enemies of the West.³ But other observers differentiate between the very conservative “fundamentalists” and the “extremists” who follow bin Laden or other terrorists. These observers suggest that the fundamentalists disagree with bin Laden as much as do Westerners.

People of the Book. Christians and Jews are called “people of the Book” (the Old and New Testaments) and are accorded protection, respect, and consideration as the predecessors to the Muslims.⁴ Many have noted Islam's connections to Judaism and

¹ Salih Bukhari translation, *Hadith*, vol. 4, Book 52, number 41. May be found at [<http://usc.edu/dept/MSA/fundamentals/hadithsunnah/bukhari/052.sbt.html>]

² See [<http://www.fas.org/irp/world/para/docs/980223-fatwa.htm>]

³ See, for example, *Bin Laden Is a Fundamentalist*, by Daniel Pipes, *National Review Online*, [<http://www.nationalreview.com/comment/comment-pipes102201.shtml>]

⁴ See *Quran* 2:62, “Those who believe (in the *Qur'an*), and those who follow the Jewish (scriptures), and the Christians and the Sabians, any who believe in Allah and the Last Day, and work righteousness, shall have their reward with their Lord; on them shall be no fear, nor shall they grieve.” Christians, Jews, and Sabians are considered “Dhimmi,” or protected people. The

Christianity, how closely many Quranic passages follow similar passages in the Old and New Testaments, and some suggest that Muhammad and the early Muslims borrowed much of the faith from its two monotheistic predecessors. Muslims do not deny the close ties between the *Quran* and the Old and New Testaments and suggest that the ties further demonstrate that Muhammad extends the line of succession that began with the prophets of Judaism and Christianity.

Women in Islam. For the most part, the *Quran* treats men and women equally, applies the same injunctions and prohibitions to men and women, and grants many of the same privileges and benefits, such as divorce, property ownership, or inheritance. But women are treated separately in certain instances. For example, women are required to “... draw their outer garments around them ... that they may be known (to be Muslims) and not annoyed (by men).” (*Quran* 33:59) Covering the head and body in public (*hijab*) is viewed by many Muslim women as a protection of their modesty, a way to discourage men’s covetous eyes. The principle of *hijab* is applied in different ways: a small scarf around the head and regular “street clothes” may be voluntary and acceptable in Cairo or Damascus but a full length opaque “Burqa” was enforced in Taliban Afghanistan. The treatment of women may depend upon rural or urban settings, educational level, society norms, tradition, or other factors.

Muslim women’s status is controversial. Some critics claim that Muslim men oppress Muslim women by compelling them to remain hidden behind the veil, sequestered in the home, and ignorant of the world by denying them access to education and worldly opportunities. Defenders of some practices suggest that many of them, such as the veil, are cultural traditions that pre-date Islam and are intended to protect, not constrict, women, or that many Muslim women adopt the life style of the veil voluntarily. There are Muslim women who agree and disagree with the critics.

Mecca, Medina, and Jerusalem. Muhammad’s home city of Mecca was the site of his earliest preaching and conversions, and is the location of the Kaaba, traditionally held to be the foundation stone of the first mosque built by Adam and later restored by Abraham, and now the focus of the annual pilgrimage (*hajj*). Some historians suggest that the Kaaba, a black stone probably meteoric in origin, was venerated by pre-Islamic polytheistic religions.

At first, Jerusalem was Islam’s holy city and the focus of prayers, but Mecca became the center of Islam after Muhammad’s return in 630. Medina, because of its early association with Muhammad and as the site of Muhammad’s tomb, is second in importance to Mecca. Jerusalem is revered by Muslims as the site of Solomon’s temple, Abraham’s near sacrifice of his son Ismail,⁵ and the scene of Muhammad’s miraculous midnight journey, the latter two now enshrined in the Dome of the Rock mosque. According to the *Quran* (Surrah 17:1, Isra) and *Hadith*, Muhammad and Gabriel were

⁴ (...continued)

Sabian Mandaean are followers of an ancient religion from Iraq and Iran, believe in a single deity, are baptized, include among their prophets Adam and Noah, and may number about 100,000 today. [<http://www.mandaeans.org/aboutthemandaeans.htm>]

⁵ Muslims believe Allah commanded Abraham to sacrifice his first son, Ismail, but Christians and Jews believe it was Isaac, the second son, who nearly was sacrificed.

taken on winged mules from Mecca to Jerusalem, where they ascended through the seven heavens to the presence of Allah. During the visit, Muhammad learned, among other points, that Muslims were to pray five times each day and to honor Abraham, Moses, Jesus, and the other prophets.

Restrictions. Observant Muslims are not supposed to eat pork and in general do not have dogs as pets; both swine and canines are considered unclean. Muslims are proscribed from drinking alcoholic beverages. Observant Muslims do not collect or pay interest.

Non-Muslim Practices. Some practices have been associated with Islam because they occur in Islamic countries, but actually are not a part of Islam. For example, female circumcision is not mentioned in the *Quran*, but is mentioned in *Hadith* as an “honorable” but not obligatory condition.⁶ It is a pre-Islamic tradition in parts of sub-Saharan Africa and the Arab world, notably in Eritrea, Yemen, and Egypt. Another example of a practice that has been associated incorrectly with Islam is honor killing, in which a brother, father, or uncle “restores” or “defends” a family’s honor by killing the sister, daughter, or niece that dishonored the family through unmarried pregnancy or promiscuous behavior. The “honor killing” is more ancient and possibly tribal in origin.

For Further Reference

Armstrong, Karen. *Islam: A Short History*. New York, Modern Library, 2002. 230 p.

— *Muhammad: A Biography of the Prophet*. San Francisco, Harper, 1992. 290 p.

Esposito, John L. *Islam: The Straight Path*. 3rd ed. New York, Oxford University Press, 1998. 286 p.

Lewis, Bernard. *What Went Wrong: Western Impact and Middle Eastern Response*. New York, Oxford University Press, 2002. 180 p.

Murphy, Caryle. *Passion for Islam: Shaping the Modern Middle East; the Egyptian Experience*. New York, Scribner, 2002. 358 p.

Nasr, Seyyad Hossein. *The Heart of Islam: Enduring Value for Humanity*. San Francisco, Harper-Collins, 2002. 338 p.

Islam Page [<http://www.islamworld.net>]

Al-Islam [<http://www.al-islam.com>]

Other Sources on Islam [<http://www.usc.edu/dept/MSA/othersites/>]

⁶ See Muslim Women’s League at [http://www.mwlnusa.org/pub_fgm.html] or Amnesty International at [<http://www.amnesty.org/ailib/intcam/femgen/fgm1.htm>]