



WORLDVIEW MADE PRACTICAL

Volume 20 Number 45

December 3, 2025

What You Need to Know about Islam - Part 1

History of Islam

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It is amazing how widespread Islam is around the world, but also how little most people know about it. It does have its own reputation, but that only tells part of the story. Reputations are generalizations that tend to be rather shallow. They may reveal some of the “what” about a faith, but not much about the “why.”

This article is part one of a five part series to provide a more in-depth understanding. Here is what will be covered in each of the installments.

- Part One - The History of Islam
- Part Two - Islam's Authority Sources
- Part Three - Islam's Worldview Beliefs
- Part Four - Islam's Moral Beliefs
- Part Five - Islam's Beliefs about Christianity

What You Need to Know About Islam

History of Islam

Introduction

Islam is an intensely monotheistic religion whose primary name for God is *Allah*. The word “Islam” means surrender or submission. A Muslim (sometimes referred to as Moslem) then, is simply “one who submits” to the will of *Allah*.

Islam is strictly unitarian in its understanding of God, as opposed to the Trinitarian belief of Christianity. It combines elements from Judaism and Christianity in that it recognizes Noah, Abraham, Moses, David, Jesus, John, and certain other biblical figures as prophets. It claims, however, that its founder, Muhammad, was the last and greatest of the prophets.

Muhammad's Early Life

Muhammad was born in the city of Mecca in 570 A.D., in what is now the country of Saudi Arabia. His father died shortly before his birth, and his mother died when he was six years old. After that, his grandfather cared for him for a short time, but he was brought up primarily by his uncle. Muhammad had no formal education, which was the norm in that place and time, and was almost certainly illiterate. At the same time, he was recognized as highly intelligent, observant, and skilled in oral communication, leadership, and memory. Young Muhammad became a camel driver, and often took journeys with his uncle to places as far away as Syria and Egypt. On those caravans, he

encountered people of different religions and nationalities who later influenced his thinking.

When he was 25 years old, Muhammad was employed in the caravan trade by Kahdijah, a wealthy widow fifteen years his elder. He served so well in that capacity that she decided to marry him. None of their children survived to maturity except a daughter. As Kahdijah's husband, Muhammad no longer had to work, so he spent much time in meditation and reflecting on the meaning of life.

The Genesis of Islam

In that era, the Arabian people were polytheistic. *Allah* was simply the highest of a large pantheon of gods they worshiped. It was at this point that Muhammad's interaction with Jews and Christians came to the forefront as he and recognized the superiority of these monotheistic religions. In the process, he became disturbed by the idolatry of his countrymen and concluded that *Allah* was the one and only true God.

Based on his changing understanding of religion, he spent many hours meditating in a cave in Mt. Hira, near Mecca. In 610 A.D., when he was 40 years of age, Muhammad began to receive frightening visions from the angel Gabriel that were accompanied by violent seizures. In the midst of this, he came to believe that God was calling him to share the message of *Allah* with the world by reciting these revelations to his followers. After his death, his followers collected his recitations, which were later formed into the *Qur'an*, Islam's holy book. As *Allah's* prophet, Muhammad received visions for 23 years until his death in 632 A.D.

For several years after his call, Muhammad had little success attracting followers, and the ones he did attract were heavily persecuted. In fact, on July 16, 622, he barely managed to escape an attempt on his life. At that point, he fled to the nearby city of Yathrib, later renamed Medina. This escape was called the *Hegira* (flight) and marked the official beginning of Islam as a religion. Muslims reckon their calendars from that day using the designation A.H. (in the year of *Hegira*).

In due time, Muhammad became the magistrate of the city of Medina, and under his leadership most of the people became Muslims. He established a theocracy that combined politics with his new religion, with him as the king. For a time, he tried

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to win over the Jewish population. When they rejected him, he and his followers began to face Mecca to pray, instead of Jerusalem (which had been their previous practice).

Muhammad replenished the treasury of Medina by plundering the caravans of pilgrims heading to Mecca, and these attacks ultimately led to war. Eventually Muhammad prevailed, and many Arab tribes, as well as the city of Mecca itself, were captured. Under threat of death, those who were conquered were forced to adopt Islam.

Spread of Islam

The primary spread of Islam through the centuries involved both administrative and cultural elements, but its primary method was violent military expansion that imposed Islamic rule over Christians, Jews, and others. After Muhammad's death, his successors continued Muhammad's model of using war to spread the religion. Thus, war was the primary means by which Islam imposed itself across the world.

Expansion during Muhammad's Lifetime (610-632 A.D.)

Muhammad's conquests within Arabia included battles, executions, and tribal coercion to establish Muslim political dominance. The main battles during Muhammad's rule included:

- Battle of Badr (624)
- Battle of Uhud (625)
- Battle of the Trench (Medina) (627)
- Conquest of Mecca (630)
- Tabuk Expedition (632)

Rashidun Conquests - (632-661)

Following Muhammad's death, the Rashidun Caliphate emerged and launched military campaigns into Byzantine and Sasanian territories. They also conquered Arabia, Syria, Egypt, and Persia. The Rashidun Caliphate relied heavily on military conquest, often with high casualties, enslavement, and forced submission. Their key battles were extremely violent.

As the Muslims conquered other countries, non-Muslims (particularly Jews and Christians) were sometimes given a choice to convert, pay jizya (a tax on people who refused to convert to Islam), or face death. In practice, refusal generally led to enslavement, exile, or massacre. While Islam theoretically allowed religious tolerance, in many of its military campaigns, violence and intimidation were central to submission.

- Battle of Yarmouk (636)
- Siege of Ctesiphon (637)
- Capture of Egypt, Syria, and Mesopotamia (634-638)

Umayyad Conquests (661-750)

Islam's expansion during this era included North Africa, Spain, Central Asia, and In-

dia. Umayyad conquests expanded Islam west into Spain and east into India using aggressive military campaigns, with mass killings and enslavement as common elements. Some of the major battles included:

- Conquest of Sindh (711)
- Battle of Tours (732)

Abbasid Caliphate (750-1258)

Abbasid expansion relied more on consolidation than new conquest, but rebellions and local resistance were met with lethal force.

- 750- 800 - There were consolidation campaigns in Persia and Central Asia where local uprisings were violently suppressed.
- 800-900 - Berber revolts were suppressed in North Africa where rebels were executed and forced submission was imposed.

Seljuk Conquests (1037 - 1157)

During this period, the Muslims conquered Persia, Iraq, Mesopotamia, Anatolia, and Syria.

- 1037-1063 - The Great Seljuk Empire in Persia was established.
- 1063-1092 - The Muslims defeated the Byzantines and expanded into eastern Anatolia.
- 1092-1157 - This period represented the peak of Seljuk power as the Muslims expanded into Syria, Mesopotamia, and parts of the Caucasus.
- 1250s - The Mamluk campaigns conquered Egypt and Levant with heavy fighting against the Crusaders and Mongols. Captured cities saw massacres of resisting troops.

Ottoman Conquests (1299 - 1683)

Early Ottoman conquests were highly militarized and involved large-scale massacres, forced Islamization, and enslavement – especially in the Balkans.

- 1299 - 1453 - Ottoman expansion moved into the Balkans and Anatolia, and absorbed neighboring Turkish principalities including Karasids and Germiyanids. Killings and enslavement were prominent parts of the conquest. In 1354, Gallipoli, Turkey was captured and became the first Muslim foothold in Europe.
- 1453 - Constantinople was conquered by Mehmed II and renamed Istanbul.
- 1514 - 1517 - Selim I conquered Egypt and the Levant (Syria, Palestine, Lebanon). He also gained control of Hejaz (Mecca and Medina), becoming the protector of Islamic holy sites.
- 1516 - 1574 - The Muslims conquered coastal North Africa, including Algiers, Tunisia, and Tripoli.
- 1683 - Vienna, Austria was conquered marking the northernmost Muslim expansion into Central Europe.

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Mughal Conquests (1526-1857)

The Mughal conquests refer to military campaigns by which the Mughal Empire established and expanded its rule over most of the Indian subcontinent. Mughal expansion often involved brutal battles, with massacres of resisting populations.

- 1526 - Babur defeated Ibrahim Lodi at Panipat and establishes Mughal rule.
- 1527 - Battle of Khanwa - Babur defeated the Rajput confederacy under Rana Sanga.
- 1530 - 1605 - Akbar gradually conquered Rajasthan, Gujarat, Bengal, Malwa, and Bengal.
- 1590s - 1680s - Gradual campaigns were carried out that subdued the Deccan sultanates.
- After 1680, the empire was largely in decline, but still existed.

Modern Era (18th-21st Century)

By the modern era, Islamic expansion shifted to become mostly political or cultural, with much of it carried out through immigration – though even today some militant Islamist groups continue their attempts to forcefully spread Islam.

The word *jihad* literally means “struggle” in Arabic. There are two forms of jihad:

- Greater jihad is the personal spiritual struggle to live righteously.
- Lesser jihad is the use of armed struggle to expand Islam.

Groups like Al-Qaeda, ISIS, and Boko Haram interpret jihad as an obligation to establish Islamic rule (sometimes called a caliphate) and enforce Sharia law worldwide. They frame their actions as fulfilling a religious duty to expand Islam and “defend” it from perceived enemies – both Muslim and non-Muslim.

The goal of modern jihadist groups is to reestablish a caliphate. ISIS declared a caliphate in 2014 over Iraq and Syria, but was defeated by a U.S. coalition in 2019. Al-Qaeda envisions a global Islamic state replacing the secular governments in Muslim-majority countries.

These groups attempt to implement strict Islamic law in territories they control. That involves punishing perceived apostates, heretics, and non-Muslims. They also have a goal of combating Western influence. They view the U.S., Europe, and various regional governments as corrosive to Muslim societies. To achieve their goals, they target civilians, as well as military and economic infrastructure. They justify this as a “defense of Islam.” Historically, expansionist jihad was carried out by state actors using military expansion. In modern times, the militant Islamists tend to be loose-knit organizations that use terror tactics.

The Formation of Islamic Sects

Many people don't realize it, but Islam consists of numerous denominations that are similar in their basic beliefs, but with different approaches to theology and law. The largest of these denominations are the *Sunni* and the *Shia*, and because of that are the most well known.

Though it is hard to get exact numbers, approximately 85% of the world's Muslims are *Sunni*, about 12% are *Shia*, and the other 3% fall into various smaller sects. The division between the *Sunni* and *Shia* branches is particularly strong, and many wars have been fought between them over doctrinal issues.

Sunni

For *Sunni* Muslims, The *Sunnah* (the verbally transmitted record of the actual teachings, deeds, sayings, permissions, and disapprovals of Muhammad), and the *Hadith* (explanations attributed to Muhammad – as opposed to the words written in the *Qur'an*) are the main foundations of religious doctrine. *Sunnis* believe that the first four *caliphs* (religious leaders who succeeded Muhammad as rulers of the Muslim world) were the rightful successors to Muhammad. They supposedly held all Muhammad's powers except that of prophecy. Controversy over the selection of the fourth *caliph* ultimately split Islam into the *Sunni* and *Shiite* branches. *Sunnis* believe that since the *Qur'an* did not specify any particular leaders to succeed Muhammad, subsequent *caliphs* should be elected.

Shia

The *Shia* sect maintains that the leaders of Islam must be descendants of the fourth *caliph* – Muhammad's cousin and son-in law, Ali Talib. To the *Shia*, the *Imam* rules by divine appointment, and holds absolute spiritual authority on matters of doctrine and revelation. Most *Shia* consider Ali the first real *Imam* (religious leader), and reject the legitimacy of the previous three *caliphs*.

This belief led to divisions over which descendants were the rightful leaders, and it gave rise to three primary branches of Shi'ism – Twelver, Zaidi, and Ismaili.

Twelvers are dominant in Iran, Iraq, and parts of Lebanon. They believe there have been twelve divinely appointed Imams, the last being Muhammad al-Mahdi. He is believed to have gone into a hidden state (occultation) in the 9th century, and will one day return. It has been prophesied that the Mahdi will defeat injustice and establish a global Islamic kingdom which will usher in an era of peace and justice. In the meantime, the highest-ranking Shi'a scholars, known as Ayatollahs, are selected to provide religious and legal guidance.

The Zaidi are located mostly in Yemen, and believe any pious descendant of Hasan or Husayn who rises to claim leadership and meets the conditions of knowledge and justice can be Imam.

The Ismailis believe the Imamate continued through a visible line of Imams, culminating today in the Aga Khan. They do not have just one single national base, but are scattered around the world due to persecution and migration. They are primarily found in Pakistan, India, Tajikistan, and East Africa, with active diaspora communities in North America and Europe.

Sufi

The *Sufi* movement is a mystical form of Islam that arose in the 8th and 9th centuries A.D. As an ascetic movement, they have traditionally taken vows of poverty and celibacy and seek after divine truth and love through direct encounters with God. Most *Sufis* are *Sunni*, though, there are also pockets of *Shia* believers. The word itself is believed by many to refer to the coarse woolen garments *Sufis* wore as a mark of their rejection of worldly things.

Sufi practice involves strict self-control for the purpose of gaining both psychological and mystical insights. Their practices promote a "loss of self" for the purpose of generating a mystical union with God.

The *Sufi* movement is built around fraternal orders where the leaders train and assist disciples to help them master Sufi philosophical principles and ritual practices. These rituals and practices include writing and reciting poetry and hymns, ritual prayer, and dancing. It is this group that is famous for the "Whirling Dervishes," a Turkish fraternal order that practices meditation and contemplation through spinning.

Ahmadiyya

Ahmadiyya Islam is a reform movement with *Sunni* roots. It was founded in Punjab, British India, in 1889 by Mirza Ghulam Ahmad (1835-1908). Ahmad claimed to be the fulfillment of the prophecies in the *Qur'an* about a reformer who would bring about the final triumph of Islam. He claimed to have been divinely appointed as the promised *Mujaddid* (renewer/messiah) of Islam who was awaited by Muslims.

Ahmadi teaches that Islam is the most complete, perfect, and final expression of religion, and that all other major world religions were a progressive part of *Allah's* plan to ultimately establish Islam as the final religion. They believe this progression was necessary because all other religions had drifted away from their original form and became corrupted.

The *Ahmadis* believe that Ahmad appeared in the likeness of Jesus in order to end religious wars, condemn bloodshed, and reinstitute morality, justice, and peace. Ahmad's calling was to remove fanatical beliefs and practices that were corrupting Islam, and restore Islam's true teachings as given by Muhammad and the early Muslim community. Thus, *Ahmadis* see themselves as a reform movement.

Ahmadis accept The Five Pillars of Islam and The Six Articles of Islamic Faith. They recognize the *Qur'an* as their holy book, practice the *Sunnah*, face toward Mecca during prayer, and accept the authority of *Sunni Hadiths*.

Since Ahmad's death, the *Ahmadis* have been led by various *caliphs* and have expanded into over 200 countries and territories around the world. It is currently practiced worldwide by 10 to 20 million Muslims.

Kharijite

The *Kharijite* denomination is a fundamentalist group, and is the earliest Islamic sect. It traces its origin to a controversy over the *caliphate*. After the murder of the third *caliph* (Uthman), and the succession of Ali Talib (Muhammad's son-in-law) as the fourth *caliph*, the governor of Syria sought to avenge Uthman's murder. After engaging in battle, Ali Talib was forced to agree to arbitration. With this, his followers objected because they believed that decision belonged to God alone. A small number of these followers, then, withdrew (*khariju*) to the village of Aarura and became known as the *Kharijite* (those who have withdrawn).

The *Kharijites* were opposed to both sides of the arbitration agreement and engaged in campaigns of harassment and terror against both sides. In the Battle of *Nahrawan*, in 658, most of the *Kharijites* were killed. Still, the *Kharijite* movement persisted, and resulted in a series of uprisings. They were finally subdued and were dormant for a time.

The *Kharijites'* constant harassment of the various Muslim governments was mostly based on a practical expression of their sincere religious beliefs. They believed that God's judgment concerning who should be the *caliph* could only be expressed through the free choice of the entire Muslim community, and they fought to uphold that principle.

Besides their democratic theory of the *Caliphate*, the *Kharijites* were known for their puritanism and fanaticism. Any Muslim who committed a major sin was considered an apostate. Luxury, music, games, and concubinage without the consent of wives were forbidden. Intermarriage and relations with other Muslim groups was strongly discouraged, and they insisted upon a literal interpretation of the *Qur'an*.

Within the *Kharijite* movement, two primary groups formed – an extremist group and a more moderate group (*Ibadi*). The more extreme group was mostly eliminated by wars, but the *Ibadis* have survived into the present.

The *Ibadi* name is derived from Abdullah Ibn Ibad, the person responsible for *Ibadis* breaking off from the wider *Kharijite* movement. It is a small Muslim denomination that is most prominent in the country of Oman. It was founded 20 years after Muhammad's death, making it older than both the *Sunni* and *Shia* denominations.

There are roughly 2.72 million *Ibadis* worldwide, with roughly 75% of those living in Oman. Oman is the only country in the Muslim world with an *Ibadi* majority.

Theologically, *Ibadis* did not like the violence expressed by their fellow *Kharijites*, so they split off and formed their own group. They select their *Imams* by elections.

Mahdavia

Mahdavia is a *Mahdiist* Muslim sect that was founded in India by Syed Muhammad Jaunpuri in the late 15th century. Jaunpuri was a descendent of Ali and Fatima, and was, thus, a direct descendent of Muhammad. He declared himself to be the Promised *Imam Mahdi* in 901 A.D. while living in Mecca. He was initially ignored by the authorities in Mecca, but later gained a group of followers and established a line of *Caliphs* who led the movement after his death.

After Jaunpuri's death, the *Mahdavi* movement went through a militant period that lasted through the first five *Mahdavi Caliphs*. They faced a great deal of persecution and nearly died out in the 18th century.

In a general sense, *Mahdavi* Muslims are *Sunni* in that they strictly follow the *Sunnah* – though they are distinct enough as to not be considered a part of the *Sunni* denomination. They believe in the oneness of *Allah*, and that Muhammad was *Allah's* last messenger. They also consider the *Qur'an* to be their holy book. *Mahdavis* strictly adhere to the five pillars of Islam, the *Sunnah* tradition, and *Sharia*.

The number of *Mahdavis* is not known with any confidence. Current estimates have them between 200,000 and 750,000. They are found in most parts of India, several parts of Pakistan, Afghanistan, Iran, and some parts of central Asia.

Qur'anism

Qur'anism represents a segment of the Muslim faith that rejects the *Hadith* and accepts the *Qur'an* as its only authority. This group believes that the message of the *Qur'an* is clear and complete and does not need to reference the *Hadith* in order to be understood. They accept that the *Qur'an* was written by God, and that Muslims should follow it only. They consider the *Hadiths* to be a form of idol worship, and typically believe that the *Hadith* literature was a forgery written 190 years after Muhammad's death. They also note that the *Hadith* is not mentioned in the *Qur'an*, and assert that it contains internal errors and contradictions.

Qur'anists are not a monolithic sect. There are some organized groups, but there is a lot of individualism within this segment of the religion, as well. It should also be noted that *Qur'anists* tend to be more liberal in many ways than either *Sunnis* or *Shiites*, as it is the *Hadith* that contains many of the beliefs that tend toward strict Muslim beliefs.

Because of the individualist nature of *Qur'anism*, it is difficult to know exactly how many *Qur'anists* there are in the world.

Conclusion

The vast majority of Muslims reject violence as a means of spreading the faith. It is estimated that only 1-5% would be considered active militants and/or militant sympathizers. However, as there are just under 2 billion Muslims in the world, that still constitutes a massive number of people – somewhere between 19 to 95 million people worldwide.

That said, there are some massive immigration movements, particularly into Europe and the U.S. that are being used as a means of spreading Islam into new places. These immigrants are very resistant to assimilation into their new homes which is creating a great deal of conflict. As the number of Muslims increase in these places, the influence of the religion is also increasing and in many cases is already causing much societal upheaval.

Islam is a false religion, and there are many reasons for coming to that conclusion as we will see in future articles. The foundation for that is seen in its history as explained above. At the same time, God is doing a work among various Muslim populations and we should be praying for them, as well as preparing ourselves to share the truth if and when opportunities arise.

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