The Geography of Islam

 

THERE IS NO

GOD BUT ALLAH

**Islam is one of the three great monotheistic faiths, which has had an impact upon the world and history that is immeasurable. It was Islam, which preserved many of the great texts of Greek knowledge from which the West would later learn. Islam produced great scientists and philosophers. Islamic mathematicians developed the numbering system we use today including algebra. Muslim explorers and traders traveled the world, bringing their faith with them, as their exchanged the goods and ideas.**

**Islam is a universalizing religion and is made up of a large portion of ethnic groups and nations found in the East Hemisphere. Although the Arabs make up a large portion of believers and were the first believers, they no longer constitute a majority of believers. The Muslim world extends from Morocco on the Atlantic Ocean eastward to China in Asia; in fact, it generally lies between 15 degrees and 45 degrees north latitude; the only fully Muslim land which straddles the Equator is Indonesia. Southwest Asia up to the Caucasus Mountains is largely Muslim. From Central Asia in the North it reaches southward through India and has spread to numerous islands of the Indian Ocean at its neighboring seas, such as Indonesia, the Philippines, Maldives, and Comorros. In Africa it extends across the Sahara to the West African steppe and Sahel (it stops at the forest regions) and down along the East African coast. Within Europe Muslim countries include Bosnia and Albania, while Bulgaria, Macedonia, and Serbia (Kosovo) have large Muslim populations.**

**The single most important teaching of Islam is the confession of faith known as the *shahada*: There is no God but Allah, and Mohammed is his prophet. These are the first words spoken into the ears of a newly born child, and the last uttered at death. Allah is the creator of the universe and is just and merciful. Allah revealed his word to sinful man to guide him back to a life of sinlessness and an eternity in Paradise. God subsequently gave the earth to mankind in order to finish the task of creation. And this has meant the transformation and development of the land and wilderness. Failure to use the land properly is a sin and Satan leads men to sin. If men do not repent, they will spend eternity burning in the flames of Hell. Other important teachings include the Five Pillars of Islam and obedience to the laws of Islam (*the Shari'a*).**

**Islam is an Arabic verb meaning to submit and a Muslim is one who submits. Islam is the religion of submission to God. Islam does not agree with concept of a chosen people found in Judaism nor with the Christian abandonment of strict monotheism in the doctrine of the trinity. For Islam, God is one and He alone is worthy of worship. The basics of Islam may be summed up in the Five Pillars:**

1. **The daily confession that there is one God and Mohammed is His prophet**
2. **The conduct of prayer five times daily, facing Mecca**
3. **The month-long fast of Ramadan**
4. **Zakat or giving alms to the poor (ideally ¼ of the Muslim's income)**
5. **Making the hajj or the pilgrimage to Mecca at least once in a Muslim’s life**

**The *Koran* is the major scripture holy to all Muslims. It is the collection of revelations given by the angel Gabriel to the prophet Mohammed, which is the final authoritative revelation given by God to the world. The "Old" and "New" Testaments of the Jews and Christians are considered to have been corrupted at some time in the past. For instance, in that Christians believe Jesus to be the Son of God and worship him (whom Muslims believe is a man and prophet), Muslims feel Christians have perverted the word of God. Owing to the beauty of the Arabic prose in which it is written, Muslims believe that it is impossible to translate the Koran to another language. The only thing that can be done is the translation of the meaning of the Koran. Thus, Muslims are encouraged to learn to read Arabic. Also important is a collection of traditions about the Prophet known as the *Hadith*. Sufi mystics use other collections of traditions. While there are other collections of books and teaching about Islam, which are respected, only the Koran is considered the inspired word of God. Additionally, because the Muslims have the first Korans, there is little conflict over original meaning, unlike the Christians and Jews, who do not have their original holy books.**

**The Islamic year starts with the Day of Hijra, where the prophet Mohammed departed from Mecca with his followers and migrated north to Medina in 622 CE. The year of the Hijra is also the start of the Muslim calendar from which the years are counted. The next festival is the Birth of the Prophet, celebrated during the month of Rabi I. Next is Laila Al-Bar'h or the Night of Forgiveness, observed in preparation for Ramadan, in which Muslims seek the forgiveness from each other. Ramadan is observed for the whole month, in which all food and drink are withheld during daylight hours. Light meals are then permitted after nightfall. Then comes Lailat Al-Qadr or the Night of Power, to celebrate the revelation of the Koran to the Prophet Mohammed. 'Id Al-Fitr or the Little Festival is the celebration of the end of the Ramadan fast, where gifts are given to children and the poor. Dhu Al-Hijja is the Month of the Pilgrimage when the hajj or the pilgrimage to Mecca occurs. Finally, the 'Id Al-Adha is the Festival of Sacrifice, coinciding with the end of the hajj, is observed with animal sacrifices and the distribution of the meat to the poor.**

**There are two major divisions in Islam today. The first and largest is the Sunni, comprising of 90% of all Muslims. Most Muslims the world over are Sunni. They developed the *Shari'a*, or community law, which governs most actions in everyday life. Sunnis believed that prophetic succession passed through the caliphs after the death of the Prophet. The teachings of the caliphs together with those of the Prophet comprise the Sunna or custom of all Muslims. In practice the Sunni are usually more orthodox and tolerant. For example, Sunni are generally not suspicious of outside ideas or change provided they do not conflict openly with the Quran. The other major division is the Shia. Since Muhammad had no direct male heir, the Shiites believe his authority passed to Ali, his nearest male cousin and his son-in-law. After the descent became muddled through murder and lost history, Shiites believe that the 12 imams, or perfect teachers, still guide faithful Muslims from Paradise. Shiaism tends toward the ecstatic and emotional, and this has led to great clashes with the Sunnis. They are also quite reactionary when it is believed a foreign idea or change contradicts or conflicts with Islam. The Shia live largely in Iraq, Iran, and Yemen. There are some smaller sects, but they tend not to be significant to Islam in general. Sufism is the mystical tradition of Islam and believes in a special inner revelation from God.**

**Islam was delivered to the Prophet Mohammed, peace be upon him, by the angel Gabriel, beginning in the year 622 CE at Medina on the Arabian Peninsula. Nevertheless, Muslims consider the biblical patriarch Abraham and his son Ishmael as the first true Muslims. Consequently, there are many early contacts with Jewish merchants in not only Arabia but also the surrounding lands of the Fertile Crescent. The Prophet Mohammad, peace be upon him, was a member of the Quraysh tribe, the ruling tribe of Mecca in the sixth century CE. Mecca was even then the most important town of western Arabia. According to tradition, Abraham had established a there a pre-Islamic pilgrimage, making Mecca an important economic and trade center. It was at Mecca in 610 CE on Mount Hira' that Mohammed received his first revelations at the age of forty. Because of the economic consequences in the pre-Islamic pagan society, only the closest associates of Mohammed converted. Due to extreme persecution, Mohammed and his followers migrated north to Medina in 622 CE; this is now known as the hijra and the year is numbered 1 H.E.**

**Mohammed gained more converts in Medina and later returned to Mecca, winning two military campaigns in 624 and 627. His generous treatment of the Meccans helped him gain adherents in high political positions. Almost immediately, Mohammed sent forces south into what is now Oman, commanding the rulers there to embrace Islam. Once possession of the port of Suhar was gained, one of the greatest religious expansions in history began.**

**Islam was spread through two major methods: through religious or mercantile contacts or through force. By 750 CE, Islam stretched from the Atlantic Ocean east to China. They crossed over the Straits of Gibraltar in 711 and remained until 1492. Although Arabic and Islamic armies entered the Indus Valley, it was not until the 11th century CE that Muslims pushed further into the Indian Subcontinent. Later empires especially the Ottoman Empire pushed the realm of Islam into Europe. The military expansion of Islam into non-Arab territory also increased the number of adherents, mainly during the rule of the Ottoman Empire. Suleiman the Magnificent ruled from 1520-1564 during which Islam reached its greatest penetration into Western Europe, taking Belgrade and Vienna. For its early history, the great caliphs or successors to the prophet reigned. Ummah, or Muslim communities, were formed throughout this vast territory. Later, as Islam aged, the empire fragmented and numerous Muslim states arose.**

**At the same time, Muslim merchants, who often functioned as missionaries carried Islam to West and East Africa, and throughout the islands and peninsulas of Southeast Asia. There these people settled and became locally involved in business. They usually married local women and raised their children as Muslims. Often successful merchants married local chiefs or nobles, and converted their families as well to Islam. In this manner, clearly devoid of military force, Islam penetrated Sub-Saharan Africa, portions of China, and Indonesia. There are generally two accepted reasons for the success of Islam upon which scholars agree. The first is religious fervor, or the idea that a religion unites and strengthens a people to help them accomplish goals that seemed impossible in the past. The other explanation is the systematic use of religious tolerance, which did two things: made way for peaceful conversion and allowed different religious beliefs to co-exist. Throughout the Muslim Empire, the dhimmi or a system of protected peoples was instituted granting Jewish and Christian populations the right to keep their property and profess their religion, provided that they paid their taxes. It was this type of religious tolerance that kept the great majority of India Hindu after many years of Muslim rule.**

**All Muslims are equal before Allah and in the laws of the Quran irrespective of their previous status or race. And because Islam prohibited a tax on followers (Muslims tithed), millions of peasants converted to the egalitarian message of Islam. Additionally, Muslims encourage economic acumen and Allah rewards a successful merchant. Early Christianity discouraged economic success – profit making was considered a sin; Islam does not and many Christian merchants around the Mediterranean converted to Islam. Then, too, the religiously mistreated such as the Christian Monophysites of Southwest Asia, the Balkan Bogomils persecuted by Catholic and Orthodox Christians alike, and the lower castes of India, saw in Islam toleration and acceptance.**

**In the practice of Islam, the mosque is the place of public worship and contact. While the mosque itself is important, it is not critical except as a communal meeting place. Muslims are encouraged to pray at home or wherever the find themselves. And generally only larger towns and cities had mosques. And the mosque is not sanctified. It must have a minaret from which Muslims are called to prayer and be oriented toward Mecca. And it will have a central open-air courtyard, weather permitting because Muslims are encouraged to pray out in the open and under the stars. Space outside the mosque is organized according to religious law and social custom, and all mosques are supposed to have a school and washing facilities for the faithful. This spacial organization is equally true of the home, towns, and markets, for which the Quran has many pronouncements. Muslim towns are organized by religion and divided into quarters. Jerusalem has its Muslim, Jewish, Latin, and Armenian sections, and all towns, which are not fully Muslim, followed this practice.**

**Tradition teaches that the Temple Mount in Jerusalem was the "farthest mosque" visited by Mohammed in the night journey spoken of in the Koran (Surah 17.1). The site is now marked by the Dome of the Rock and the Mosque of Hadhrat 'Umar. The issue of control over the temple mount is a current source of contention between Islam and Judaism, and the Arabs, who are usually Muslims and the Israelis have fought numerous wars since 1948 for control of Jerusalem and the Holy Land. Mecca is the holiest site in Islam, being the place where the Kaa'ba is located. Medina is the second holiest site and Jerusalem is the third. More important in Islamic world are places of pilgrimage. The Fifth Pillar mentions the pilgrimage to Mekka but there are other holy sites for Muslims. The Shia maintain holy cities and other groups venerate the tombs of great Muslim leaders. Around these sites have grown up whole towns and intellectual centers. Timbuktu in Mali is an example.**

**Muslims, too, attach religious significance to the land. Allah made the world and gave it to his followers; they, too, must be fruitful and multiply to fill the world. Religiously, they divide the world into the world of Islam and the world of non-believers. But all Muslims believe the world will eventually become Muslim. Once a land has become Muslim, it, like a person who has converted, cannot be allowed to revert back to its previous religious status. This is apostasy and prohibited by the Quran. The jihad or holy war to protect Islam against assault is frequently invoked to prevent this; it has also been used to spread the faith to distant lands. Today, Muslims battle Christians and Jews not only for the more famous Dome of the Rock in Jerusalem, but for lands in the Balkans, the Caucasus Mountains, Lebanese valleys, the Indian sub-continent, and islands of the Philippines. And any non-believer who visits Mecca or Medina can be killed for profaning the sacred space.**

**POV GIST**

**Dr. Abdulla Omar Nasserf, former head of the Muslim World League, from his Muslim Declaration on Nature, 2001**

“For the Muslim, mankind’s role on earth is that of vice-regent or trustee of God. We are God’s stewards and agents on Earth. We are not masters of this Earth; it does not belong to us to do what we wish. It belongs to God and He has entrusted us with its safekeeping. Our function as vice-regent of God is only to oversee the trust. The overseer is answerable for his or her actions; for the way in which he or she uses or abuses the trust of God.

It is these values which led Muhammad, the prophet of Islam to say: ‘Whoever plants a tree and diligently looks after it until it matures and bears fruit is rewarded.’ And ‘If a Muslim plants a tree or sows a field and men and beats and birds eat from it, all of it is charity on his part,’ and again ‘ The world is green and beautiful and God appointed you his stewards over it.’ Environment consciousness is born when such values are adopted and become an intrinsic part of our mental and physical make up.”

**The Geography of Islam Questions**

1. **How did Islam preserve Greek knowledge?**
2. **What is a universalizing religion?**
3. **How large is the Muslim world?**
4. **What is the single most important Islamic teaching?**
5. **How does a Muslim reach salvation and hell?**
6. **What does Islam mean in Arabic?**
7. **What does monotheism mean?**
8. **What are the 5 pillars of faith?**

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1. **What is the Koran? How do Muslims feel about translation?**
2. **What is the Hadith and who is the Prophet?**
3. **What is the start date of Islam?**
4. **Describe Ramadan.**
5. **Describe in detail the two major divisions is Islam.**

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| **Division** | **Description** |
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1. **How was Islam created?**
2. **Describe how Mohammed gained followers.**
3. **What two methods spread Islam?**
4. **What did Suleiman do?**
5. **What are the two reasons for the success of Islam?**
6. **Give an example of how Islam is egalitarian (equal).**
7. **What does Islam teach about merchants?**
8. **What role does the mosque play?**
9. **Why is Mecca the holiest site for Muslims?**