

**Islam Fact Sheet**  
**January 2018**

**Alexander Barna and Hannah Porter**  
**University of Chicago – Center for Middle Eastern Studies**

- What does it mean to be a Muslim? What is Islam?
  - A Muslim is a person that follows the religion of Islam. The words “Muslim” and “Islam” are derived from the same Arabic root. Islam is best translated as “a commitment to live according to God’s will” and a Muslim is an individual who has made this commitment. Often, Islam is understood to mean “submission to God’s will” but we think the word “submission” does not properly convey the idea of agency on the part of the individual Muslim in her observance of Islam.
  - Allah is the Arabic word for God. A literal translation of *allāh* is “the god” and for Muslims, Allah refers to the one, true God. Arabic speaking Jews and Christians use Allah in reference to God as well. Allah does not refer to a separate Muslim deity.
  - Islam is a monotheistic religion, meaning that Muslims believe in only one god. The final and most important prophet in Islam is Muhammad.
  
- Islam’s Origins and Sacred Texts
  - According to Muslim tradition, the Prophet Muhammad is God’s final messenger. Muhammad was born in the year 570 CE in the city of Mecca, in a region of western Arabia called the Hijāz, which today is part of Saudi Arabia.
  - Islam’s holy book, the Qur’ān, is considered by Muslims to be divine revelation (i.e. something God revealed to humankind through a special person or people) like the Jewish Torah and the Christian Gospels. Muslims believe the Qur’ān is God’s speech transmitted in Arabic to Muhammad via the Angel Gabriel and revealed to Muhammad over the course of 23 years, from 610 - 632 CE. The word “Qur’ān” comes from the Arabic root meaning to read or recite; a literal translation is “recitation.”
  - In addition to the Qur’ān, Islam has an additional body of sacred literature known as Hadīth. Hadīth could be translated as “report”, “account,” or “narrative” (plural: Ahādīth). Ahādīth have been assembled into various collections, and these texts preserve in writing the words and deeds of Muhammad, whose behavior all Muslims are encouraged to emulate.
  
- What are the basic beliefs and practices of Muslims?
  - Most introductory texts outline five obligatory duties for all Muslims. Within the tradition they are called *arkān al-islām* – the pillars of Islam – and are more widely known as the Five Pillars. They are:
    - Declaration of faith (*shahāda*), a basic creed in which Muslims profess their belief in God’s oneness and their acceptance of Muhammad as God’s messenger. The precise phrasing of the declaration of faith,

translated from Arabic, is: "I believe there is no god but God and Muhammad is the messenger of God." An overlooked element of the *shahāda* is intention; one must sincerely believe in the declaration of faith for it to count.

- Prayer (*ṣalāt*). Muslims are required to pray five times a day. Each prayer takes about 5-10 minutes and can be performed privately at home, in a mosque (a Muslim place of worship), or at work or school. On Fridays, Muslims gather in mosques and perform the midday prayer together.
  - Charity / almsgiving (*zakāt*). Donating money and food to the poor is important in Islam. Muslims are required to donate a percentage of their yearly income to those in need.
  - Fasting (*ṣawm*). During Ramadan, the ninth month of the Islamic calendar, Muslims are required to abstain from food and drink during daylight hours. Children, pregnant women, the elderly, the sick, and those who are traveling are not required to fast. It was during the month of Ramadan that the Qur'ān was first revealed to Muhammad. Fasting during Ramadan commemorates this special event. The Islamic calendar is a lunar calendar, approximately ten days shorter than the western solar calendar. Thus, the western solar calendar dates for the start and end of Ramadan change from year to year.
  - Pilgrimage (*ḥajj*). All Muslims who are physically and financially able are required to make pilgrimage at least once in their life to the Great Mosque of Mecca, Islam's holiest site, during the last month of the Islamic calendar.
  - Jews and Christians also believe in one God and in divine revelation through prophecy, have their own forms of ritual prayer, are required to give to charity, fast during special religious holidays, and perform pilgrimage to holy sites.
- Are all Muslims Arab? Are all Arabs Muslims?
    - "Arab" refers to an ethnicity or race, while "Muslim" refers to the follower of a religion (Islam). Arabs can be Muslims, but they can also be Christians, Jews, or followers of any other religion.
  - What ethnicities are Muslims? What languages do they speak?
    - The majority of the world's Muslims are *not* Arabs. Over half of the world's Muslim population lives in Pakistan, India, Bangladesh, Malaysia, and Indonesia, which is the world's largest Muslim country. Many more Muslims live in other non-Arab countries such as Iran, Afghanistan, Turkey, and China.
    - Approximately 20% (one fifth, 1/5) of the world's Muslims are Arab. The most populous Arab Muslim country is Egypt, which also has a large Christian population. 80% of Muslims (four fifths, 4/5) are *not* Arab.
    - Muslim communities worldwide speak a wide variety of languages. Some of the most common include Arabic, Persian, Turkish, Urdu, Bengali, Malay, Swahili, English, French, Chinese and dozens of others.

- Statistics on the Muslim population in the U.S. and worldwide
  - Islam is the second largest and fastest growing religion in the world.
  - At least 1.6 billion people in the world are Muslims, or about 23% of the world's population.
  - In the United States, there are approximately 3.3 million Muslims. They make up roughly 1% of the American population.
  - The American Muslim community includes all different races, ethnicities, and social classes. Some have lived in the US for many generations while others are recent immigrants. Many come from Muslim families, but others chose to become Muslims and converted to Islam.
  
- Shi'i and Sunni – Islam's two main branches
  - Islam is a diverse religion with different sects and schools of thought. Nearly all Muslims recognize the centrality of the Five Pillars discussed above, but some communities have additional obligatory duties and organize these duties under a different scheme. In contemporary society, there continue to be disputes in Muslim communities over law, leadership, ethics, and interpretation of Islam's sacred texts.
  - One of the most important, and oldest, divisions in Islam is between Sunni and Shi'i Muslims. The split between the two groups arose as a political dispute that occurred after the death of Muhammad in the first half of the 7th century CE. The original dispute was over the question of who should succeed Muhammad as the leader of the Muslim community (*umma*): Should the mantle of leadership pass to a close relative of the Prophet and stay in his family (what became the Shi'i view); or should the community or representatives of the community nominate a successor, with each successor's leadership ratified through the swearing of an oath of allegiance to that person (what became the Sunni view)?
  
- Some similarities and differences with Christianity and Judaism
  - Like Christianity and Judaism, Islam is a monotheistic (belief in one god) religious faith. These three religions recognize the Prophet Abraham as an inaugural figure and are sometimes grouped together as the "Abrahamic" faiths. Judaism, Christianity and Islam share other prophets like Noah, Joseph, Moses, and David. These central Biblical figures, as well as many others, also appear in the Qur'ān. Muslims understand the Qur'ān to be a continuation and culmination of Jewish and Christian prophecy.
  - **For educators:** Islam and Judaism articulate analogous notions of an "all-encompassing Divine Law that is partially revealed in a written scripture and partially oral in form and that is conceived of as the path one follows" – what is known as *Halakha* in Judaism and *Shari'a* in Islam (quotation taken from *The Convergence of Judaism and Islam*, 2011, p. 13).
  - Like Jews, Muslims believe in God's absolute unity and oneness. Thus, Muslims and Jews do not believe that Jesus was an incarnation of God, which is a central doctrine of Christianity. Muslims do believe, however, that Jesus was God's

prophet and messenger, that he was born of a virgin, and that he will reappear in the end times. The Qur'ān calls Jesus both "the word of God" and "the spirit from God." Jesus' mother, Mary (Maryam in Arabic), is mentioned more times in the Qur'ān than the Christian New Testament. The Qur'ān says that Maryam is the greatest of all women.

- **Anti-Muslim sentiment in the U.S. (for educators)**
  - The U.S. Federal Bureau of Investigation's hate crimes statistics show there have been on average five times as many victims of anti-Muslim hate crimes in the years following September 11, 2001 as compared to the years prior. These data also show the number of Muslim victims of hate crimes in 2015 (307) has nearly doubled since 2012 (115). <https://ucr.fbi.gov/hate-crime/2015>
  - Other organizations, like the ACLU, the Southern Poverty Law Center, and the Council on American-Islamic Relations (CAIR), also track anti-Muslim sentiment and activity. The following news article describes the findings in CAIR's report on anti-Muslim activity in the U.S. in the first-half of 2017: <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/2017/07/cair-hate-crimes-muslims-spike-trump-win-170718034249621.html>
  - While we cannot say precisely what causes anti-Muslim sentiment, harassment, and violence, it is safe to assume this form of intolerance is shaped by a complex of: 1) internal characteristics and temperament of the individual perpetrator and 2) external circumstances and situational factors. There is no one cause and thus no single solution.
  - While ignorance alone cannot explain anti-Muslim sentiment, it appears that ignorance of who Muslims are, what Islam teaches, and how Islam and Muslim societies have changed over time routinely coincide with **reductionism** and **negative stereotyping**.
  - **Reductionism** can be defined as "a procedure or theory that reduces complex phenomena to simple terms." Examples of reductionist ideas in relation to Islam and Muslims include: Islamic doctrine and practice does not vary across space or change over time, Muslims all hold identical beliefs, religion dominates a Muslim's life and is the principal determinant of a Muslim's individual, social, and political behavior, and Islam imposes a kind of cultural homogeneity onto its adherents. Reductionism can lead some to believe that all Muslims, past and present, share the same notions of right and wrong and good and bad; that there is only one correct way to interpret the Qur'an or other sacred texts; that all Muslims subscribe to this single interpretation or know they should; and that they all observe the same customs and traditions etc.
  - A **stereotype** can be defined as an inadequate deduction that involves defining something *before* it is experienced, and stereotypes can lead to a distorted image of something in a person's mind. If these distorted mental images are shared and passed from generation to generation, they can have deep cultural roots and be accepted without question. A **negative stereotype** is simply a stereotype with negative connotations. A few examples of negative stereotypes

vis-à-vis Islam and Muslims include: Islam is inherently extremist and Muslims are inherently violent; Islam unequivocally teaches intolerance of others; Islam professes the inferiority of women and enjoins Muslim men to abuse and mistreat them.

- *Not all reductionism amounts to a negative stereotype, but a negative stereotype is a type of reductionism.* Negative stereotyping and anti-Muslim sentiment go hand-in-hand.
- Reductive ideas about Islam and Muslims, whether they are innocent oversimplifications or malicious negative stereotypes, overlook the varied and complex lives that Muslims lead and efface a Muslim's essential personhood.
- An acceptance of reductionist thought is a necessary precursor to negative stereotyping. *However, if someone is unwilling to reduce and oversimplify Islam and Muslims, then it is likely she would question or reject negative stereotypes about them. Thus, if educators can complicate their students' understanding of who Muslims are, what Muslims think and believe, and what Muslims do, then educators are well-positioned to disrupt the formation of anti-Muslim sentiment at the individual level.*
- Many Americans overlook the commonsense reality that Muslims, just like Christians or Jews or Buddhists or Hindus, can find motivation or justification for their actions in their religion, in non-religious ideas and experiences, or in a matrix of both (which is almost always the case).
- To address the mistaken idea of Muslim homogeneity, please refer to the visual aids accompanying this fact sheet. These images provide a starting point for understanding the diversity of ethnicity, language, and religious belief among the world's 1.6 billion Muslims. By giving educators resources for appreciating the overwhelming diversity in Islam, we hope they are better equipped to address the intertwined problems of ignorance, reductionism, negative stereotyping, and anti-Muslim sentiment with their students.