

# GLOSSARY OF TERMS

## RELATED TO ISLAM AND MUSLIM COMMUNITIES IN INTER-REGIONAL SETTINGS

A product of the “Presenting Islam and Muslim Communities  
in Context” Workshop

Funded by a grant from the Social Sciences Research Council (SSRC)



**CENTER FOR MIDDLE EASTERN STUDIES, HARVARD UNIVERSITY**  
38 KIRKLAND STREET, CAMBRIDGE, MA 02138 USA  
TEL: (617) 495-4055 FAX: (617) 496-8584 CMES@FAS.HARVARD.EDU

Where this list of terms comes from:

This set of definitions is an attempt to create a contextualized list of important terms relating to Muslims and Islamic societies. It has been put together by people associated with the Presenting Islam and Muslim Communities in Context workshop, which was held at Harvard University on 14 and 15 November 2008. The authors recognize that on every issue involving religious questions a wide variety of opinions, translations and understandings of selected topics may be found. They have tried to acknowledge a variety of understandings in these definitions, however, any attempt to define is by its nature selective. The authors welcome suggestions from readers on any and all of these definitions. Please note that the definitions have not been peer reviewed but have been written in consideration of serving a diverse audience of media practitioners and have been contextualized as much as possible. The Associated Press Style Guide has been consulted for grammar and spelling.

Authorship is noted to be people associated with the Presenting Islam and Muslim Communities in Context workshop.

**GLOSSARY OF TERMS RELATED TO ISLAM AND MUSLIM  
COMMUNITIES IN INTER-REGIONAL SETTINGS**

# **CONTENTS\***

- 4** *Ahl al-Kitab*
- 5** *Ayatollah*
- 6** *Caliph/Caliphate*
- 7** *Hadith*
- 8** *Hajj*
- 9** *Hijab*
- 10** *Imam*
- 11** *Ismaili*
- 12** *Ithna Ashari (Twelver) Shia*
- 13** *Jihad*
- 14** *Kafir/Takfir*
- 15** *Pillars of Islam*
- 16** *Qur'an*
- 17** *Ramadan*
- 18** *Salat*
- 19** *Sawm*
- 20** *Shahadah*
- 21** *Shariah*
- 22** *Shia*
- 23** *Sufi/Sufi Order*
- 24** *Sunni*
- 25** *Ulama*
- 26** *Ummah*
- 27** *Wahhabi*
- 28** *Zakat*

\*Note: Arabic terms considered loanwords in English are shown in plain text.

# AHL AL-KITAB

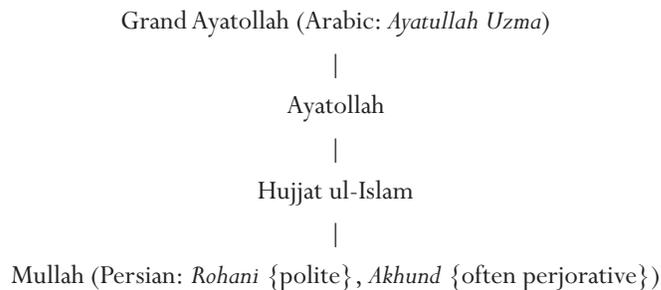
**DEFINITION** Literally, “People of the Book.” The term was originally an acknowledgement of the possession by Christians, Jews and Sabians of divinely-inspired religious scriptures. Later applied to other religious communities.

**DISCUSSION** The *Qur’an*, while predicting perdition for those who practice what it calls idolatry and rejection of God, at the same time contains passages that acknowledge the existence of groups outside of Muhammad’s community which possess religious scriptures and which believe in God. The *Qur’an* specifies Jews, Christians, and Sabians as belonging to this group, but is ambiguous or silent about other religions. As a fledgling Islamic state evolved in the Arabian peninsula and in Christian-majority areas under Muslim rule, the question of how to treat these non-Muslim believers was addressed by extending government toleration to these groups, so long as they paid a special head-tax, the *jizya*, and (at least in theory) observed a number of public restrictions on dress, public behavior, and public worship. In the early Islamic conquests of the seventh and eighth centuries C.E., and in the course of the later expansion and diffusion of Muslim communities around the world, Muslims came to rule over or to live in areas in which the majority of people practiced religions not specifically mentioned by the *Qur’an*. Examples include Iran and Central Asia, which were historically Zoroastrian, South and South-East Asia, with populations practicing Hinduism, Buddhism and indigenous faiths, and sub-Saharan Africa, with peoples practicing a wide variety of local religions. The question of how to deal with these various groups was answered differently by different regimes and rulers at different times, and varied from broad toleration and accommodation to persecution and hostility. Early Islamic histories include examples of destruction of non-Muslim religious edifices in some cities and areas, and protection of those in others. Some religious scholars ruled that Hindus, Zoroastrians, Buddhists, and others were *Ahl al-Kitab*, while others insisted that they were not. Notwithstanding disagreements between Muslim theologians about the definition of the term, most Islamic monarchies in historical practice extended recognition of this status to most or all non-Muslim groups living in their territory, along with widely varying degrees of privilege and restriction. Conditions for *Ahl al-Kitab* could change dramatically with the alternation of rulers and dynasties, with fluctuating economic conditions, and with the shifting attitudes of local Muslims. Over the course of the last two centuries, the advent of modern nation-states throughout the Muslim world has dramatically altered the situation, with ideas of citizenship replacing the category *Ahl al-Kitab*, as a basis for non-Muslim inclusion in society. Nevertheless, the concept remains alive, and has been used variously as the basis for inter-faith dialogues, as a justification for policies of tolerance, or as a pretext for individual and state persecution of religious minorities, e.g. the Bahais in Iran, the Ahmadiyya in Pakistan.

# AYATOLLAH\*

**DEFINITION** A title denoting a senior position in the hierarchy of the Shia Ithna Ashari (Twelver) clergy.

**DISCUSSION** In Ithna Ashari (Twelver) Shia Islam, the rank of ayatollah (Arabic *ayatullah*), literally meaning “Sign of God,” constitutes the upper level of the religious hierarchy. A greatly simplified schematic of this hierarchy would be:



The development of the title ayatollah is fairly recent, and did not appear in its current sense until the early 20th century C.E. With the establishment of an Islamic republic in Iran following the revolution of 1979, many Shia clergy found themselves in positions of considerable secular power and influence, a situation which was welcomed by some ayatollahs, but which was criticized by others, most notably by Grand Ayatollah Montazeri, who was placed under house arrest for his critique of the present implementation of Islamic government in Iran. In Iraq, Grand Ayatollah Ali Sistani has also rejected aspects of the Iranian approach to Shia Islamic government, particularly the concept of *vilayat-i faqih*, or rule by religious jurispudent.

**FOR FURTHER READING** Grand Ayatollah Khamenei’s official website  
<http://www.leader.ir/langs/en/>  
Grand Ayatollah Sistani’s website  
<http://www.sistani.org/local.php?modules=main>  
BBC article on Grand Ayatollah Montazeri  
[http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/middle\\_east/2699541.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/middle_east/2699541.stm)

\* *Persian and Arabic pronunciations of these terms differ. This article follows common English practice and uses Persian transcription for the term Ayatollah, and either Arabic or Persian for others, as noted.*

# CALIPH/CALIPHATE

**DEFINITION** Caliph; literally, “successor.” A political and/or religious title used by individuals who claim to be successors to Muhammad’s historical leadership over the early Islamic community or *ummah*, and who therefore possess theoretical authority over the *ummah* of their own time. The series of disputes arising over the question of succession resulted in the gradual formation of the Sunni and Shia variants of Islam.

Caliphate: A term referring to a type of Islamic state headed by a caliph.

**DISCUSSION** After the death of Muhammad in 632 C.E., the fledgling Islamic community in Arabia was faced with the task of appointing a successor to his leadership role. The first four caliphs appear to have been chosen by a consultative process, which was not accepted by all members of the community, some of whom argued that the title and office of caliph should be held by members of Muhammad’s family, beginning with his cousin and son-in-law Ali, the fourth caliph. These dissenters formed the nucleus of the future Shia community. Beginning with the fifth caliph, Muawiyah, the title became a hereditary and dynastic one. It was claimed first by the Umayyad dynasty based in Damascus, then the Abbasid dynasty based in Iraq, the Umayyad dynasty of Spain, and the Fatimid dynasty based in Egypt. At times the rulers of these dynasties wielded actual political and religious authority, at other times they were figureheads controlled by generals. After the downfall of the Umayyad and Fatimid dynasties in Spain and Egypt, and the destruction of the Abbasid Caliphate by the Mongols in 1258, no effective ruler held the title until the 16th century C.E., when it was taken by the Ottoman dynasty. The Ottoman emperors held the title until 1924, when it was abolished by the newly-formed Turkish Republic.

Apart from these dynasties, a number of individuals in various parts of the Islamic world have claimed the title of caliph or tried to establish a caliphate, e.g. the Sokoto Caliphate in Nigeria. No head of an internationally-recognized state has held the title of caliph since the early 20th century C.E. Nevertheless, the idea of a single caliph at the forefront of Islamic societies continues to appeal to certain Muslim thinkers and political parties. These individuals and movements differ widely in their opinions as to the function of a caliph as well as the methods used to select one. They have argued variously for democratic, authoritarian, liberal, conservative, or even purely symbolic caliphates.

**FOR FURTHER READING** U.S. News & World Report article on modern efforts to establish a caliphate  
<http://www.usnews.com/articles/news/world/2008/01/02/caliph-wanted.html>

# HADITH

**DEFINITION** A tradition which records statements or actions attributed to Muhammad, the founder of Islam.

**DISCUSSION** For approximately two centuries after the death of Muhammad, traditions recording his sayings and actions were passed down orally from one member of the early community to the next. During the ninth century C.E., a major effort was made by Muslim scholars to record these traditions and to establish, as far as possible, their authenticity. The resulting collections comprise, for many traditional Islamic jurists and thinkers, a source of information second in importance only to the Qur'an for formulating Islamic theology and law. Sunni and Shia groups make use of different *hadith* collections. Some modernist Islamic thinkers have downplayed the importance of *hadith* scholarship for contemporary Islamic communities, while others reject the *hadith* corpus entirely as antiquated or unreliable. Nevertheless, a very significant number of Muslim scholars and believers still study *hadith* collections and cite them when taking positions on legal, religious, or philosophical issues.

**FOR FURTHER READING** Ahmed, Shahab. "Hadith."  
Encyclopedia Iranica, 1996—  
<http://www.iranica.com/newsite/> (Look up alphabetically)  
  
Translated *hadith* texts at the USC Center for Muslim-Jewish Engagement  
<http://www.usc.edu/schools/college/crcc/engagement/resources/texts/muslim/hadith/>

# HAJJ

**DEFINITION** The annual pilgrimage to Mecca, held from the 7th through the 12th days of *Dhu al-Hijjah*, the twelfth month in the Islamic lunar calendar (the corresponding date on the Gregorian calendar changes from year to year).

**DISCUSSION** In pre-Islamic Arabia, pilgrims undertook annual journeys to Mecca in order to worship at the *Ka'aba*, a shrine dedicated to various local deities. After the advent of Islam, and beginning with the example of Muhammad, the annual pilgrimage to Mecca became a central event in Islamic societies. Making the *hajj* to Mecca at least once during one's life is widely considered to be a duty for any free, healthy, financially-able Muslim woman or man, and is often cited as one of the five pillars of Sunni Islam (see Pillars of Islam). Pilgrimages to Mecca which are performed at other times of the year are considered meritorious, but of secondary importance to the *hajj*. Pilgrims wear a special white garment during the *hajj*, known as an *ihram*. During the *hajj*, pilgrims perform a variety of rituals, some of which include:

- Circling the *Ka'aba* seven times
- Making a circuit of seven walks or runs between the two hills of *al-Safa* and *al-Marwah* and drinking from the *Zamzam* well
- Ascending and holding a vigil on Mount Arafat
- A ritual stoning of Satan at *Muzdafilah*
- The sacrifice of a sheep or cow, with distribution of the meat to the poor (This sacrifice is celebrated around the world on the same day by Muslims who are not making the *hajj*.)

A pilgrim who has completed the *hajj* may be known by the honorific title *al-Hajj/Hajji* (male), or *Hajja* (female). In addition to its religious ceremonies, the *hajj* has often been an occasion for commerce and cultural exchange, since it involves a convergence of Muslims from all over the world. It involves risk, historically from banditry, piracy, disease, shortages of food and water, and storms. More recently, deaths and injuries have been caused by fires and stampedes, brought about in part by over-crowding at the pilgrimage sites. The *hajj* has also been an occasion for political conflict, as in 1987, when clashes between Iranian pilgrims and Saudi security forces led to a large number of casualties.

**FOR FURTHER READING** PBS multimedia site on the *hajj*  
<http://www.pbs.org/muhammad/virtualhajj.shtml>

Boston Globe Photo Essay on the *hajj* and Eid al-Adha  
[http://www.boston.com/bigpicture/2008/12/the\\_hajj\\_and\\_eid\\_aladha.html](http://www.boston.com/bigpicture/2008/12/the_hajj_and_eid_aladha.html)

BBC article on challenges involved in making the *hajj*  
[http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/middle\\_east/4180965.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/middle_east/4180965.stm)

# HIJAB

**DEFINITION** Literally, “partition.” Originally referred to a curtain or hanging separating two spaces, or a veil concealing something. Popularly refers to a variety of garments worn by some Muslim women for the sake of modesty.

**DISCUSSION** The use of headscarves and veils by both women and men in various societies pre-dates the advent of Islam. The *Qur’an* does not specifically call for the veiling of the head or face, enjoining rather that men and women dress modestly. The concept of veiling was elaborated more fully in later *hadith* collections, and in legal rulings. Until the 19th century C.E., the wearing of the *hijab*, along with the seclusion of women, tended to be associated with urban elites, with aristocracy, and with the families of clergy. In rural areas and among nomadic groups, use of the *hijab* was often more limited. The form and practice of *hijab*-wearing in Islamic societies varies widely between countries, between regions within countries, and often between individuals within the same community or family. It may take the form of veiling the entire face, or it may be a transparent headscarf worn over part of the hair. Men in Tuareg communities often veil their faces. Some Muslim women make use of the *hijab* in some public spaces, but not in others.

Perhaps no other set of issues in contemporary Islamic societies has been as contentious or as politicized as those surrounding the wearing of the *hijab*. The governments of some Muslim-majority countries, such as Iran and Saudi Arabia, have mandated the wearing of their local version of the *hijab*, and have used law enforcement agencies to force women to comply with their regulations. In certain other countries, such as Turkey and Tunisia, the wearing of the *hijab* in government spaces is discouraged and restricted. Religious fundamentalists and traditionalists in a large number of countries have often tried to encourage the wearing of various forms of *hijab*, while secular modernists and reformers have often fought against it. Feminist thinkers have alternately resisted or promoted the *hijab*, depending on the specific background, outlook, and agenda of the individual in question.

Reactions to the veil in non-Muslim areas also vary widely. In some countries, such as France, the wearing of *hijab* by public-school students is prohibited, as are crosses and other religious symbols. In the United States, no such restrictions exist. The *hijab* has been criticized by some non-Muslims as a symbol of patriarchal repression and social backwardness. In popular culture, it has often been depicted as part of literary, artistic, and sexual fantasies involving a mysterious and forbidden Orient.

The *hijab* is referred to by different names in different languages, and these names often refer to locally distinct garments. In the language of Sufi mysticism, the *hijab* may refer to a partition which separates the divine essence and the human worshipper, a barrier which the mystic strives through various practices to overcome.

**FOR FURTHER READING** Comprehensive BBC article about *hijab* customs and traditions  
[http://www.bbc.co.uk/religion/religions/islam/beliefs/hijab\\_1.shtml](http://www.bbc.co.uk/religion/religions/islam/beliefs/hijab_1.shtml)

# IMAM

**DEFINITION** In Sunni Islam, a prayer leader or the leader of the Islamic community.

In *Ithna Ashari* (Twelver) Shia Islam, the divinely-sanctioned leader of the Islamic community, believed to be in occultation or concealment since the ninth century C.E. and destined to return before the end of time.

In Ismaili Shia Islam, the divinely-sanctioned leader of the Islamic community, currently represented by Aga Khan IV.

**DISCUSSION** In Sunni Islam, and according to the opinions of most scholars belonging to the four Sunni *madhabs*, or schools of religious law, the model *imams* or leaders of the Muslim community are represented by the first four caliphs to have succeeded to the leadership of Muhammad (see Caliph/Caliphate). The Muslim *ummah* is obliged to select a leader for the community, and in theory there may only be one such leader at a time. In practice, there has been no entirely unified Muslim community since the time of Ali, the fourth caliph, in the middle of the seventh century C.E., although many leaders have claimed the title. In everyday parlance, an imam is the designated prayer-leader at a mosque.

In *Ithna Ashari* (Twelver) Shia Islam, an *imam* is a divinely-sanctioned leader whose hereditary appointment is designated by the preceding *imam*. Muhammad, as a prophet, designated Ali as the first *imam*, and the title, position, and divine guidance associated with the position passed down through his descendants until the twelfth *imam*, Muhammad ibn al-Hassan, went into occultation, or state of concealment, around the middle of the ninth century C.E. According to Twelver doctrine, he will return at the end of time as the Mahdi, a figure associated with the revival of Islam before the Day of Judgment (see *Ithna Ashari* (Twelver) Shia Islam).

In Ismaili Shia Islam, the *imam* is also a divinely-sanctioned leader, and as in Twelver Islam, he is designated by the previous *imam* and is a descendant of Ali. However, the Ismaili line of *imams* and that of the future Twelvers diverged after the imamate of Ja'far al-Sadiq in c. 765 C.E. Whereas for Twelvers the line of *imams* came to an end with the occultation or concealment of Muhammad Ibn al-Hassan, the line of *imams* followed by the Ismailis continues to the present day, with the position currently held by the fourth Aga Khan (see Ismaili Shia Islam).

**FOR FURTHER READING** Ismaili website on Aga Khan IV, the 49th Ismaili *imam*  
<http://www.theismaili.org/cms/14/The-Aga-Khan>

Article on *imams*, from a Twelver Shia point of view  
<http://www.al-islam.org/imamate/>

# ISMAILI

**DEFINITION** A member of the Ismaili branch of Shia Islam.

**DISCUSSION** The Ismaili Shia branch of Islam includes a number of different groups. This article only deals with the largest of those groups, the *Nizari* or *Aga Khani Ismailis*, who acknowledge the fourth Aga Khan as their religious leader. Ismailis, like other Shia, ultimately base their loyalty to their *imam* on the belief that Muhammad appointed Ali as his successor, who in turn appointed his successor, and so on throughout Islamic history (see *Imam*). A primary difference between Ismaili and *Ithna Ashari* (Twelver) Shia, is that whereas the Twelvers believe their *imam* to be in a state of concealment, and that he will return before the end of time, the Ismailis have maintained their line of *imams* to the present day. The present head of the Ismaili Imamate, H.R.H. Karim al-Husayni, Aga Khan IV, is the 49th *imam* in this line.

The Ismailis are heirs simultaneously to long-standing intellectual, cultural, and political traditions, and also to a history of persecution and suffering inflicted upon them by states and individuals. The Fatimid empire in 10th and 11th-century C.E. Egypt was a high-water mark of Ismaili political ascendancy, while the activities of the so-called *Hashashin* or Assassins (pejorative terms applied by enemies of the Ismailis), who were active during the era of the Crusades, reflects a tradition of resistance to persecution in Ismaili history. Some members of contemporary militant Sunni Muslim groups deny that Ismaili or Shia Muslims in general are Muslims (see *Takfir*).

Ismailis live in a global diaspora encompassing more than two dozen countries, and notable Ismaili communities can be found in West, Central and South Asia, East Africa, Europe and North America. Despite their relatively small numbers (about 15 million) within the global Islamic community, the Ismaili branch of Islam has gained a reputation for volunteerism, social work and philanthropy, due in part to the activities of the Aga Khan Development Network of NGOs.

**FOR FURTHER READING** The Official Website of the Ismaili Community  
<http://www.theismaili.org/>

The Official Website of the Aga Khan Development Network  
<http://www.akdn.org/>

# ITHNA ASHARI (TWELVER) SHIA

**DEFINITION** A member of the *Ithna Ashari* (Twelver) branch of Shia Islam

**DISCUSSION** The Twelvers form the largest group within the broader category of Shia Islam. As with the Ismailis and smaller Shia groups, Twelvers base their identity upon the belief that Muhammad personally selected Ali to succeed him as leader of the Islamic community, the *ummah*, and that Ali, in turn, selected his successor, and so on. Unlike the Ismailis, who have a living *imam* at the head of their community, Twelvers hold that the line of *imams* continued only until the twelfth *imam*, who went into a state of concealment or occultation in the ninth century CE. He will remain in concealment, alive but unseen, until returning to lead the *ummah* before the Day of Judgment. Until the return of the *imam*, religious (and according to some, political) leadership of the community is in theory entrusted to Shia religious scholars.

Although Twelver Shia Muslims constitute a minority within Islamic societies in general, they form local majorities in Iran, Azerbaijan, Iraq, and Bahrain. Elsewhere in Southwest Asia, significant Twelver communities may be found in Lebanon, Kuwait, and Saudi Arabia. In South Asia, India, Pakistan and Afghanistan also have considerable Twelver Shia populations.

Twelvers constitute about 89% of the population of Iran. As well as being the state religion, Iran is unique in that the chief of state is an *ayatollah*, or senior Twelver clergyman, who rules under the principle of *vilayat-i faqih*, or rule by religious jurisprudent, a doctrine developed by the late Ayatollah Khomeini. Although Khomeini's ideas about the political supremacy of the Shia clergy formed the basis for the establishment of a theocratic republic in Iran, not all Twelver Shia political leaders agree with the validity of the doctrine, e.g. Grand Ayatollah Ali Sistani in Iraq.

As a minority group within the Islamic world, and in common with other Shia branches, Twelver Shia communities have suffered a long history of persecution under imperial, nationalist, and religious regimes. Most recently in Afghanistan, the radical Taliban movement mounted several ethnic cleansing operations aimed at the Hazara Twelver Shia minority. The sense of persecution of the Shia at different periods in history is reflected in several Twelver religious practices, such as the *taziyeh* passion plays, or processions on the day of *Ashura* (the 10th of *Muharram*, the first month in the Islamic calendar) in which some mourners engage in self-flagellation in commemoration of the death of *Imam* Hussein in battle against the forces of the Umayyad Caliph Yazid in the seventh century C.E.

**FOR FURTHER READING** Twelver Shi'ism in Iran according to a U.S. Government country study  
<http://countrystudies.us/iran/55.htm>

BBC article on Ashura

[http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/middle\\_east/4274749.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/middle_east/4274749.stm)

# JIHAD

**DEFINITION** Literally, “struggle.” *Jihad* is a term referring to various Islamic concepts of religious struggle against oneself or against external forces.

**DISCUSSION** The term *jihad* has a wide variety of meanings both within and outside of Islamic societies. Any attempt to reduce the word to a single meaning is by definition a partisan act. The present discussion of *jihad* will focus on some of the more common ways in which the word is understood in contemporary Islamic societies, without presenting any particular text or point of view as authoritative.

Used in a restricted sense, *jihad* may refer to a defensive military action undertaken to protect a Muslim community from an armed aggressor, generally understood to be non-Muslim. This interpretation of *jihad* tends to strictly forbid the killing of non-combatants, and to mandate cessation of hostilities as soon as the aggressor chooses to cease fighting. This type of defensive *jihad* is often cited by modernist Muslim thinkers as the sole legitimate form of armed *jihad*.

Historically, in the context of royal and imperial ideologies, *jihad* often refers to an aggressive military campaign aimed at expanding territory or acquiring plunder from the pretended or actual enemies of a particular dynasty or kingdom. In such cases, the enemy might well be another Muslim community or dynasty, the objections of some religious scholars to this type of practice notwithstanding.

In the language of some contemporary militant Islamist groups, *jihad* may refer to unrestricted warfare against anyone deemed an enemy or a non-believer. According to this definition of *jihad*, anyone who fails to adopt the particular group’s objectives or definitions of Islam may be targeted. In the most extreme version of this definition, non-combatant civilians may be killed, either deliberately or as a result of collateral damage.

Yet another definition of *jihad* defines military *jihad* as the “lesser *jihad*,” and struggle against evil within oneself as the “greater *jihad*.” According to this view, armed *jihad* against an external enemy may be a duty in cases of necessity, but is secondary to the obligation to rid oneself of undesirable thoughts, words, and actions.

In modern contexts, the word *jihad* may be used to refer to a governmental or private campaign of a non-military type, for example the Iranian government’s *Jihad-i Sazandagi*, or “Construction *jihad*,” which aimed at improving civil infrastructure. It may also refer to acts of non-violent civil resistance.

**FOR FURTHER READING** Note: Internet sources on *jihad* tend to be either highly polemical or overtly apologist in nature, and must be approached with caution. A general rule of thumb is to treat them all as presenting subjective opinions on an issue of current public debate, even when they claim neutrality or scholarly authority.

A BBC article on *jihad*

[http://www.bbc.co.uk/religion/religions/islam/beliefs/jihad\\_1.shtml](http://www.bbc.co.uk/religion/religions/islam/beliefs/jihad_1.shtml)

# KAFIR/TAKFIR

**DEFINITION** *Kafir*: literally, “one who is ungrateful.” Unbeliever, infidel.

*Takfir*: the act of declaring a person or group of persons to be *kafirs*.

**DISCUSSION** As a monotheistic faith, the Qur’an enjoins belief in a single God, and promises punishment for those who reject God and are ungrateful to him. The Qur’anic term for such a person is “*kafir*.” Beyond the most basic definition of a *kafir* as somebody who rejects God, there has been little historical consensus within Islamic societies, past and present, as to what actually makes a person a *kafir*. To cite one example, some Muslim scholars consider Hindus, Buddhists, and Zoroastrians to be *kafirs*, while others consider them to be practitioners of divinely inspired religions (see *Ahl al-Kitab*). Inclusive definitions of Muslim may encompass people regarded by other Muslims as *kafirs*. In the most exclusivist views of various Muslim extremists, everyone is a *kafir*, except for the particular subgroup of Muslims doing the excluding. The use of “*takfir*,” declaring another person, especially another Muslim, to be a *kafir*, was and is discouraged by many Muslim scholars, who consider a false accusation of unbelief to be a grave sin. Nevertheless, the concepts of *kafir* and *takfir* have been used on many occasions as political weapons. Historically *takfir* was used by imperial governments to justify the conquest of non-Muslim groups or to justify the suppression of movements considered heretical. In modern times *takfir* has been used by totalitarian governments seeking to suppress real or perceived enemies. Radical groups intent on establishing a dominant position over other Muslims have invoked these terms as a preamble to attacks on their co-religionists. In its most extreme form, groups have used the concepts of *kafir* and *takfir* to justify actions which are expressly forbidden in the Qur’an, such as the indiscriminate killing of non-combatants, e.g. in suicide bombings.

**FOR FURTHER READING** The Amman Message- an international declaration by Islamic scholars forbidding *takfir*  
<http://www.ammanmessage.com/>

# PILLARS OF ISLAM

**DEFINITION** In Sunni interpretations of Islam, a set of five practices that encompass the basic outer or exoteric obligations of a Muslim.

In *Ithna Ashari* (Twelver) Shia Islam, a set of ten obligations.

**DISCUSSION** The concept of a set of “pillars” or duties within Islam is an old one, but such a list is not found in the Qur’an. In most contemporary understandings of Sunni Islam, the five pillars are said to consist of:

- *Shahadah*—Bearing witness to the unity of God and the prophethood of Muhammad
- *Salat*—Ritual prayers
- *Hajj*—Pilgrimage to Mecca
- *Zakat*—Charity
- *Sawm*—Fasting during Ramadan

*Ithna Ashari* (Twelver) Shia Islam does not have such a set of “pillars,” but all five of these obligations are enumerated in a list of ten obligations for Twelver Shia Muslims. The additional obligations are *khums* (tithing), *jihad*, enjoining good/forbidding evil, love for the descendents of Muhammad, and enmity for their opponents. The Ismaili list of seven pillars employs similar terminology, but with considerably different meanings, e.g. *hajj* as a pilgrimage to the Ismaili Imam rather than to Mecca, *jihad* as a peaceful rather than a military struggle.

Sufi interpretations of the pillars often acquire esoteric or mystical significance, e.g. the concept of the true *hajj* being a journey to one’s innermost being, where the essence of the divine may be found (see Sufi/Sufi Order).

**FOR FURTHER READING** BBC overview of the pillars, from a Sunni point of view:  
<http://www.bbc.co.uk/religion/religions/islam/practices/fivepillars.shtml>

# QUR'AN

**DEFINITION** Literally, “recitation.” The primary sacred text of Islam.

**DISCUSSION** The Qur'an is the text upon which the Islamic faith is ultimately based. Along with the *hadith* collections, it was the basic textual source used by most early Muslim jurists to derive religious law (see *Shariah*, Sunni). Originally an oral text, it was probably committed to writing around 633 C.E., shortly after the death of Muhammad. The copyists who committed the Qur'an to writing organized its 114 chapters (Arabic: *surah*), in a generally descending order, from the longest *surahs* to shortest. A front-to-back recitation of the Qur'an therefore does not follow chronological order. The first five verses of *Surah 96*, for example are generally considered to be the first part of the Qur'an to be revealed to Muhammad. According to traditional Muslim belief, the Qur'an was transmitted to Muhammad over a period of many years via the medium of the angel Gabriel. Major themes of the Qur'an include warnings of the imminent approach of the Day of Judgment, summons to submit to and believe in a single God, a rejection of the worship of idols, affirmation of the existence of previous prophets, and calls to human beings to establish a just and equitable society. Some scholars divide the Qur'an into early *surahs* which Muhammad recited at Mecca, and later *surahs* which he recited in Medina. Because the first Islamic state took shape in Medina, many Medinan *surahs* deal with problems of society, law, and war.

Debates over the nature, purpose, and ways to interpret the Qur'an date back to the seventh century C.E. During the period of the Abbasid Caliphate, a major controversy arose over whether the Qur'an was co-eternal with God, or whether it was created by God in time and space. At the heart of this debate was the question of whether or not the Qur'an's meanings could be contextualized and interpreted according to changes in human history. Although this debate was largely resolved by medieval thinkers, echoes of it persist in contemporary Muslim societies, where some thinkers, while acknowledging the Qur'an's divine origin, believe that many of the Medinan *surahs* dealing with questions of slavery, apostasy, marriage laws, etc., were valid in the seventh century C.E., but cannot be applied in a literalist sense in modern times. Other thinkers insist that the entire Qur'an must be read literally, without human interpretations. The language of the Qur'an is Arabic, and this language, along with the surviving corpus of pre-Islamic Arabic poetry, forms the basis of Classical Arabic. Some Muslims believe that the Qur'an is untranslatable, and will refer to renderings of the Qur'an into other languages as interpretations or commentaries. This idea has not been without its dissenters, however, and the text of the Qur'an is available in a wide variety of languages. Nevertheless, Qur'an recitation is nearly always in the original Arabic, and prestige has been traditionally attached to people who memorize the Qur'an in its entirety.

**FOR FURTHER READING** Qur'ans from around the world at the British Library  
<http://www.bl.uk/onlinegallery/sacredtexts/sacredthemesionly.html>

Qur'an recitations and translations from a Muslim website  
<http://www.quranexplorer.com/>

# RAMADAN

**DEFINITION** The ninth month of the Islamic calendar, which is set aside for fasting and a number of special religious observances.

**DISCUSSION** Ramadan is one of the months of the traditional Islamic lunar calendar. Due to the structure of this 354-day calendar, the month of Ramadan moves from year to year, and may fall on any month of the Gregorian calendar. This of course means that the practices and ceremonies associated with the month may occur during any season. Ramadan begins with the sighting of the new moon at the opening of the month.

The observance of a holy month in Arabia predates the advent of Muhammad's preaching. With the coming of Islam, Ramadan became a sacred month dedicated to the new religion, during which believers are obligated to perform a daylight fast (for details of the fast, see *Sawm*). This fast begins at dawn and lasts until sunset, when it is followed by a special meal known as the *iftar*. *Iftars* are often marked by the preparation of special holiday foods, which vary from country to country. Since during Ramadan, an emphasis is placed on charitable acts, such as feeding the poor, public *iftars* are held in many places, at which the needy can have a full meal. In addition to the fast, many Muslims dedicate extra time during Ramadan to prayer and recitations of the Qur'an.

In Islamic countries, depending on local laws and the attitude of individuals, many restaurants, shops, and businesses may close during the day and reopen at night, after the fast has been broken. The last ten days of Ramadan are especially important for many pious Muslims, since *Laylat al-Qadr* ("The Night of Power"), or the night during which the first Qur'anic verses were recited by Muhammad, is widely held to have occurred during this period (the 27th of Ramadan is thought by many to have been the date). Some Muslims mark this particular night with prayer vigils. The month of Ramadan concludes with the sighting of the new moon and the fast-breaking festival of *Eid al-Fitr*, generally marked by the donning of new clothes, home and community decoration, acts of charity, and visits with friends and family.

**FOR FURTHER READING** Time Magazine photo essays on Ramadan and *Eid al-Fitr*  
<http://www.time.com/time/photogallery/0,29307,1663022,00.html>  
[http://www.time.com/time/photogallery/0,29307,1846218\\_1774766,00.html](http://www.time.com/time/photogallery/0,29307,1846218_1774766,00.html)  
A website with various materials on Ramadan from IslamiCity.com  
<http://www.islamicity.com/Ramadan/>

# SALAT

**DEFINITION** The Islamic ritual prayers, generally referring to the five daily prayers that constitute a basic obligation for observant Muslims. *Salat* is often referred to as *namaz* in Persian-speaking countries or in countries strongly influenced by Persian culture.

**DISCUSSION** The term *salat* refers collectively to the ritual, preferably communal prayers which are generally performed five times per day by observant Muslims. The description of *salat* in this article focuses on, unless otherwise noted, traditionalist Sunni practices.

*Salat* is, as noted, performed five times per day. Each of these prayers is referred to by a different name:

1. The Dawn Prayer: *Salat al-Fajr*
2. The Midday Prayer: *Salat al-Zuhr*
3. The Afternoon Prayer: *Salat al-Asr*
4. The Sunset Prayer: *Salat al-Maghrib*
5. The Night Prayer: *Salat al-Isha*

In areas where there is a mosque, prayer times are announced by a distinctive call (*azan*) to prayer, which are given by a *muezzin*. Preceding prayer, shoes are removed and a number of ablutions are performed, known as *wudhu*. In former times the call to prayer was announced by a *muezzin* from the top of a minaret, but at present, loudspeakers attached to minarets with pre-recorded calls to prayer are often used. Each of these prayers is accompanied by a prescribed number of prostrations and hand gestures, known as a *rakat*.

A very large body of literature was written by Muslim jurists in the early centuries of the Islamic era to define and delimit prayer practices, although some regional and sectarian differences do exist today in prayers.

**FOR FURTHER READING** Introductory BBC article on *salat*, with visual and audio demonstrations  
<http://www.bbc.co.uk/religion/religions/islam/practices/salat.shtml>

# SAWM

**DEFINITION** Fasting. Fasting during the month of Ramadan is one of the obligations for an observant Muslim. (See Pillars of Islam)

**DISCUSSION** In common with many other religions around the world, ritual fasting is part of Islamic practice. The obligation to fast during the daylight hours of the month of Ramadan was established with the formation of the early Islamic community, and is still practiced by observant Muslims in countries around the world. In areas with large Muslim populations or majorities, restaurants often close during the daytime in order to facilitate the fast. For many, fasting during Ramadan is a way to atone for transgressions committed over the course of the year. For others, it focuses the mind on the sufferings of the poor and the hungry. Sufis such as al-Ghazzali described the fast as a means of acquiring self-control over one's urges and impulses.

During the fast hours in Ramadan, those undertaking the fast refrain from a number of activities, principally eating, drinking, smoking, and sex. Pre-adolescent children, women who are menstruating, pregnant, or nursing, travelers, soldiers on active service, and the very ill or infirm are often excused from the obligation to fast, although they are advised to compensate by either making up these lost fast days in the future, or by contributing extra sums to charity.

Public regulations concerning the fast differ from country to country, and the decision about whether to fast or not is often a personal choice. Inasmuch as the fast lasts during daylight hours for a month, people observing it often stay up late at night, eating and socializing, and then sleep for part of the day.

Fasts may be undertaken on days other than those within the month of Ramadan, but these are either compensatory or voluntary in nature, and do not form part of the annual communal fast of Ramadan.

**FOR FURTHER READING** BBC article on *sawm*

<http://www.bbc.co.uk/religion/religions/islam/practices/sawm.shtml>

An essay on mystical aspects of *sawm*

<http://www.islamfrominside.com/Pages/Articles/Fast%20until%20the%20night%20%28Ramadan%29.html>

# SHAHADAH

**DEFINITION** Literally, “bearing witness.” A proclamation asserting the uniqueness of God and that Muhammad is a prophet of God. The *shahadah* is an obligation for a believing Muslim (see Pillars of Islam).

**DISCUSSION** The *shahadah* is a proclamation that signals devotion to Islam. Although it is not explicitly mentioned in the Qur’an, the formula has come to be recognized as a sign of conversion to Islam, and as a reaffirmation of faith. An approximation of the *shahadah* in Romanized script would be:

*Ashahadu an la ilaha illa Allah, wa ashahadu anna Muhammada-rasul Allah*

In English:

*“I witness that there is no god but God and I witness that Muhammad is the messenger of God.”*

Some Shia Muslims may add an additional phrase, saying:

*Ashahadu anna la ilaha illa Allah, wa ashahadu anna Muhammada-rasul Allah wa Aliyun wali Allah*

In English:

*“I witness that there is no god but God and I witness that Muhammad is the prophet of God and Ali is the (appointed) guardian of God.”*

A sincere recitation of the *shahadah* before Muslim witnesses historically constituted a valid conversion in the eyes of most jurists.

**FOR FURTHER READING** One Muslim’s interpretation of the *shahadah* at Islam.com  
<http://www.islam.com/shahadah.htm>

# SHARIAH

**DEFINITION** A religious system, Islamic or otherwise.

A body of Islamic religious law.

**DISCUSSION** The understanding of *shariah* in the sense most often encountered in contemporary political and social discourse, that of “Islamic law,” has its roots in the formation of the traditional Sunni Islamic schools of *fiqh* (jurisprudence) in the eighth and ninth centuries C.E. (see Sunni). The development of a comprehensive corpus of law and precedent cases was a long process. Despite the theoretical roots of Islamic law in the Qur’an and *hadith*, the interpretation of these sources did not take place in isolation, being influenced by local practice, customary law, law predating the advent of Islam, and the personal world-views and attitudes of the scholars who developed the corpus. These law codes, developed in the eighth and ninth centuries C.E., reflect the social, political, and environmental conditions of the period in which they were written. Up until the colonial period, this kind of *shariah* formed a substantial part of the basis for law in many Islamic states and empires, alongside of or in varying degrees of integration with other forms of law. In the 20th century C.E., a wide variety of systems were used as the basis for the civil and criminal codes of new Muslim-majority nation-states. These codes were largely based on Western European or Soviet models with some influence from traditional *shariah*. Very few governments attempted to implement traditional Islamic law. The appearance of radical Islamic groups in the late 20th century C.E. was accompanied by demands for the implementation of *shariah* in various countries. However, what these groups usually had in mind was not the traditional system of jurisprudence developed in the eighth and ninth centuries C.E., but rather new systems based on radical and selective interpretations of the Qur’an and *hadith*, ignoring the intervening corpus of Islamic jurisprudence. In Iran, an Islamic republic, a legal system has emerged based in part on an *Ithna Ashari* (Twelver) Shia understanding of *shariah*. In Ismaili Shia Islam, the presence of a living *imam* at the head of the community has made it possible for Ismailis to update their religious precepts in response to the exigencies of time and place. An emphasis on female education and the abrogation of polygamy are examples of this process. Attempts to implement *shariah* in the late-20th and early-21st centuries C.E., in places such as Aceh, Northern Nigeria, and Afghanistan have caused much controversy. Critics of these attempts have maintained that the forms of *shariah* being implemented fall far short of international standards for human rights. Muslim critics of such attempts, in addition to protesting human rights violations, have questioned the competency of pro-*shariah* groups and persons to implement Islamic laws, noting that many advocates of *shariah* lack the rigorous education expected of a traditional jurist.

**FOR FURTHER READING** A comprehensive introduction to the development of Islamic law  
<http://www.uga.edu/islam/shariah.html#law>

An introduction to *shariah* and *shariah* controversies from the BBC  
[http://www.bbc.co.uk/religion/religions/islam/beliefs/sharia\\_1.shtml](http://www.bbc.co.uk/religion/religions/islam/beliefs/sharia_1.shtml)

# SHIA

**DEFINITION** Literally: “Party.” Adherents of the *Shia* or party which holds Ali and his successors to be the rightful inheritors of leadership over the Islamic community.

**DISCUSSION** Shia Muslims constitute, after Sunni Muslims, the largest branch of Islam. Shia Muslims account for approximately 15% of the world’s Muslim population.\* Significant Shia populations can be found in many parts of the Muslim world. They comprise the majority population in the core areas of the former Shia Safavid Empire—Iran, Azerbaijan, Iraq, and Bahrain. Elsewhere in Southwest Asia, significant Shia populations also exist in Lebanon, Turkey, Syria, Yemen, Kuwait, and Saudi Arabia. In South and Central Asia, large Shia minorities can also be found in India, Pakistan, Afghanistan, and Tajikistan. North/West Africa and Southeast Asia tend to be overwhelmingly Sunni, although the Ismaili Shia community has been historically prominent in parts of East Africa. In the 21st century, Shia communities can be found in most parts of the world. The origins of Shia Islam can be traced to a dispute that broke out over the question of who would succeed Muhammad as leader of the early Islamic community. While many Muslims chose to follow leaders chosen by consensus, a dissenting minority held that Muhammad’s son-in-law Ali had been specifically designated by the prophet to succeed him (see also Caliph, *Imam*). Disputes over the succession finally led to open civil war during the early years of the Caliphate, and Ali came to blows with a faction led by Muawiyah of the Umayyad family, who would become the first caliph of the Umayyad dynasty. Although Ali opted for arbitration in the dispute with Muawiyah over leadership, he was killed soon after, and Muawiyah was generally acknowledged as Caliph. Muawiyah’s son and successor Yazid was opposed first by Hassan and then by Hussain, both grandsons of Muhammad. Hasan died under suspicious circumstances after renouncing his claim to the caliphate, and Hussain died in battle against Yazid’s forces at the battle of Karbala on the 10th of Muharram, 680 C.E. This latter event proved to be a traumatic and lasting watershed in the history of the early Muslim community. It permanently divided the Muslim community of believers into competing factions, although the notions of Shia and Sunni as separate branches of a single religion did not really crystallize until the 10th century C.E. Gradually, the *Ithna Ashari* (Twelver), and Ismaili movements became the most prominent branches within Shia Islam (see *Ithna Ashari* (Twelver) Shia, Ismaili). The various branches of Shia Islam went on to develop distinct theological, legal and political positions that widened the differences between them and the co-evolving Sunni *madhabs*, or schools of religious law. With the notable exceptions of the Ismaili Fatimid Caliphate based in Egypt (10th-11th centuries C.E.), and the *Ithna Ashari* (Twelver) Safavid Empire based in Iran (16th-18th centuries C.E.), Shia Islam has seldom been a state religion. The Islamic Republic of Iran is the only example of a Shia state in modern times.

**FOR FURTHER READING** A chart showing various branches of Shia Islam, with summary articles on each <http://philtar.ucsm.ac.uk/encyclopedia/islam/shia/index.html>

\*Wars, population displacement, and biased official census figures make it difficult to assess the exact number.

# SUFI/SUFI ORDER

**DEFINITION** A person who practices *Tasawwuf* (Islamic forms of mysticism).

An organized order of Muslim mystics.

**DISCUSSION** Opinions vary on the origins of mysticism in Islam. Some Sufis trace their origins to Muhammad. Others claim that Sufi mysticism predates the advent of Islam in Arabia, instead associating Sufism with earlier prophets and religious movements. Most scholars trace the appearance of recognizably Sufi groups and individuals to the seventh and eighth centuries C.E., although the organization of most of today's existing Sufi orders took place after the 11th century C.E.

Sufis are concerned with the esoteric meanings of the Qur'an and Islam, and place varying degrees of importance on the exoteric or outer practices of Islamic life. The classic goal of the Sufi is to achieve a mystical, love-based, union with God. They believe that this ecstatic state can be attained by a variety of practices aimed at annihilation of the egoistic self. Opinions differ as to the extent and nature of Sunni, Shia, Christian, Gnostic, Buddhist, and Hindu influences on the many varieties of Sufi thought and practice. What can be said with certainty is that Sufi practitioners developed their doctrines in dialogue with the societies in which they lived, preached, and worked. Out of these dialogues came a wide variety of creative syntheses. Despite occasional persecution by certain legalistic members of the *ulama*, who were uncomfortable with the Sufi emphasis on esoteric and individual paths to the divine, Sufi orders and individual mystics established followings throughout the pre-modern Islamic world. Some Sufi orders were militant and involved themselves in empire-building. Others were pacifist and emphasized the renunciation of wealth and power. The conversion to Islam of Central, South and Southeast Asia, as well as Africa, was largely brought about by the efforts of Sufis. Sufis developed a vast body of Islamic music, literature and art in a wide variety of languages. Sufi shrines and pilgrimage sites can be found from the Atlantic coast of West Africa to the Pacific islands of Indonesia and the Philippines. Some scholars assert that Sufism constituted the dominant force in Islamic societies from the 13th to the 18th centuries C.E.

Since the 18th century C.E., Sufi movements have faced a variety of challenges to this dominant position. The collapse of Muslim kingdoms and empires deprived many Sufi orders of their most powerful sources of patronage. In much of the colonial and post-colonial world, many Muslim nationalist, secularist, and Marxist thinkers and governments rejected Sufism as an obstacle to modernization. In 18th-century C.E. Arabia, Sufi ideas and practices came under attack from militant Wahhabis, who tended to be hostile to any form of Islamic practice different from their own. More recent radical Islamic movements such as those of al-Qaeda and the Taliban have violently persecuted Sufis, insisting that they are heretics and apostates. Nevertheless, Sufism remains an important force within most Islamic societies, and translations of Sufi poetry, as well as Sufi music have been gaining in popularity in Western Europe and North America since the 1960s C.E.

**FOR FURTHER READING** A comprehensive introduction to Sufism, with links to other sites  
<http://www.uga.edu/islam/Sufism.html>

# SUNNI

**DEFINITION** A term referring to those Muslims who do not advocate the right of the descendants to lead the Muslim community.

A reference to any affiliate with the four major surviving Sunni *madhabs* (schools of religious law) founded and developed in the eighth and ninth centuries C.E.

**DISCUSSION** In Sunni Islam, the development of law was undertaken by religious jurists, who in the eighth century C.E. began to compile and evaluate traditions regarding the practices of Muhammad and the early Islamic community. Out of this process, a number of schools of religious jurisprudence emerged, four of which, the *Hanafi*, the *Shafii*, the *Maliki*, and the *Hanbali* survive to the present day. The scholars of these four major Sunni schools traditionally relied upon four sources for the formulation of law. These sources are the Qur'an, *hadith*, *ijma* (consensus), and *qiyas* (reasoning by analogy). The main differences between the schools arose over their attitudes towards these four sources, and their methods of achieving legal rulings. The *Hanafi madhab* is claimed by many to have a particularly flexible approach towards jurisprudence, and early *Hanafi* jurists made use of analogical reasoning to reach legal decisions. The *Hanbali* system, by contrast, is considered by many to be more literalist. While conflicts can and have arisen historically between adherents of these schools, a broad toleration generally exists between the four schools. For many Muslims, the four *madhabs* are not mutually exclusive systems, and many individuals practice traditions stemming from several of the schools.

The *Hanafi madhab* is probably the largest of the four Sunni *madhabs* in terms of numbers of adherents, and is widely followed in many lands of the former Ottoman and Mughal Empires, i.e. Turkey, the Levant, the Balkans, Iraq, India, Pakistan, Afghanistan, and Bangladesh, as well as in Central Asia and China. The *Shafi'i madhab* is most prominent in Egypt, Yemen, Malaysia, Indonesia, Brunei, Thailand, and the Philippines, and is the second largest of the schools. The *Maliki madhab* tends to be most popular in North and West Africa, for example in Morocco, Tunisia, Algeria, Mauritania, Senegal, Mali, and Nigeria. The *Hanbali madhab* is followed by many Muslims in Saudi Arabia, and *Hanbali* thought has strongly influenced the *Wahhabi* movement. Not all *Hanbali* scholars have historically agreed with *Wahhabi* leaders, making the simple identification of Wahhabism with the *Hanbali* tradition problematic. (See *Wahhabi*)

These regional affiliations are far from absolute, and any Muslim country may include large populations or individual followers of any of the four *madhabs*. With the global diffusion of Muslims, adherents of all four schools may be found throughout the world.

**FOR FURTHER READING** A chart of present and past Sunni *madhabs*, with brief articles on each  
<http://philtar.ucsm.ac.uk/encyclopedia/islam/sunni/index.html>

A North-American Sunni organization  
<http://www.sunnah.org/>

# ULAMA

**DEFINITION** Literally, “Learned Ones.” An Arabic plural form used to describe bodies of Muslim scholars who are specialists in Islamic religious literature and traditions.

**DISCUSSION** In the years immediately following the death of Muhammad, knowledge of both the Qur’an and the *hadith* was preserved by individuals who had been companions or relatives of the Prophet, who in turn passed these traditions along to others. The Qur’an was committed to writing fairly quickly, but this seems not to have been the case with the *hadith*. Although some of those who had memorized *hadith* remained in Mecca and Medina, the rapid expansion of the Islamic empire in the first century C.E. after the death of Muhammad dispersed many of the Companions of the Prophet over a vast area outside of the Arabian Peninsula. Since the elaboration of early Islamic law used both the Qur’an and *hadith*, efforts were made over the following two centuries to collect and write down as many of these traditions as possible, to determine which ones could be reliably attributed to Muhammad and which were spurious. At the same time, scholars began to formulate legal rulings based on these sources of knowledge. Out of these efforts, there arose a new class of specialist scholars who gradually came to dominate the interpretation of Islamic law. These scholars formed the nucleus of the emerging Sunni branches of Islam. Shia scholars also produced a large body of legal literature, but the authority of the *imam*, at least in theory, superseded that of the scholars (see *Shariah*, Sunni, Shia). These scholars collectively came to be known as the *ulama*. Many members of the *ulama* carried out scholarship in areas far beyond *shariah* studies, in fields as diverse as grammar, rhetoric, literature, history, philosophy, geography, and the physical sciences.

Scattered as they were throughout Islamic lands, often lacking state support, and following a variety of Sunni, Shia, and Sufi interpretations of Islam, the *ulama* seldom managed to coalesce into rigid hierarchical organizations. While members of the *ulama* were at times influential in politics and courts, their coercive power was far exceeded by that of the state, and it was not uncommon for caliphs and other Islamic rulers to come into conflict with religious scholars. Nevertheless, the *ulama* as a body remained important and generally respected until the expansion of European empires. Like the Sufi orders, the *ulama* were deprived of their richest patrons when Islamic empires were replaced or subordinated by colonial authorities. The traditional role of the *ulama* as judges was undermined by the institution of modern law codes. In the 20th century C.E., secular nationalists and communists heavily persecuted the members of the *ulama* in a large number of countries. Around the same time, radical Islamist groups appeared whose members claimed that Islamic law could be formulated via a direct and literalist reading of the Qur’an, ignoring the approach of the traditional *ulama*. In spite of these challenges, *ulama* trained in traditional Sunni seminaries, such as *al-Azhar* in Cairo, continue to exert varying degrees of influence over Sunni Muslims.

**FOR FURTHER READING** History of the *al-Azhar* seminary  
[http://www.sunnah.org/history/Scholars/mashaykh\\_azhar.htm](http://www.sunnah.org/history/Scholars/mashaykh_azhar.htm)

# UMMAH

**DEFINITION** A community sharing a common religious identity.

The Islamic community of believers.

**DISCUSSION** The idea of the *ummah* is grounded in the Qur'an, where it can mean any community of human beings, whether a tribe, city, or kingdom. The Qur'an maintains that a divine revelation has been sent to each *ummah*, and so the term can be interpreted as referring to religious and/or ethnic communities. In modern Arabic usage, the word *ummah* can be used in the sense of a nation-state. As the fledgling Islamic caliphate took shape in Medina, the concept of the *ummah*, or the Muslim community, developed, superseding, in theory, tribal and kin relations. The reality of a unified community of believers did not last beyond the fourth caliph Ali, when disputes over succession to the caliphate arose (see Shia, Caliph). With the formation of an Islamic empire under the Umayyad dynasty, serious problems arose over the question of whether increasing numbers of non-Arab converts would have the same status within the *ummah* as Arab converts. Other political divisions appeared in the *ummah* as Islamic societies began to form in different parts of the world, exacerbated by linguistic, cultural, theological, and economic differences. In spite of these conflicts, the idea of a united *ummah* of Muslims has remained compelling for many down to the present day. Institutions such as that of the annual pilgrimage to Mecca, sectarian loyalties that transcend recently-established borders, and the theory of common membership in the *ummah* have all been counterweights to the forces of nationalism that have divided Muslim nation-states from each other.

Islamist groups, whether liberal, moderate, traditional, or radical, have at times invoked the concept of the *ummah* to justify their particular political programs. Democratic-minded reformers have pointed to the European Union as a potential model for Muslim states to follow. Militant Islamists have invoked the term as part of a campaign to undermine the authority of both nation-states and other Muslim groups, often insisting that the *ummah* can only be led by individuals practicing their own particular radical interpretation of Islam.

**FOR FURTHER READING** A survey of Muslim populations around the world, with links to related articles  
<http://www.uga.edu/islam/countries.html>

An article exploring the limits of the *ummah* concept in the modern world  
[http://www.opendemocracy.net/globalization/umma\\_2904.jsp](http://www.opendemocracy.net/globalization/umma_2904.jsp)

# WAHHABI

**DEFINITION** A follower of the teachings of Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahhab. *Wahhabis* seldom refer to themselves as such, instead self-identifying as *Hanbali* Muslims.

**DISCUSSION** Wahhabism is an interpretation of *Hanbali* Sunni Islam. The movement's founder, Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahhab believed that literalist readings of the Qur'an and the *hadith* should constitute the sole basis of Islamic thought. He criticized Sufi and Shia theology as forms of polytheism. Abd al-Wahhab was particularly hostile to the veneration of shrines and saints. The *Wahhabi* movement began in 1745 C.E. in Arabia, as a rebellion against the Ottoman Empire. It was defeated in the early 19th century C.E. by the Egyptian ruler and modernizer, Muhammad Ali Pasha. The Saudi family allied itself with *Wahhabi* religious scholars in the 18th century C.E., and the two groups maintained a political alliance over the next two centuries, which eventually led to the creation of present day Saudi Arabia. The 20th-century C.E. evolution of Wahhabism is tied to political power struggles in the Middle East region and the rise of oil as an important global commodity. During the turmoil of World War I, and with assistance from the British Empire, the Saudi family established the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. This new state gained international attention for its generally Wahhabist interpretation of Islamic law. Although the *Wahhabi* movement is historically associated with the Saudi monarchy, it must be stressed that not all Saudi citizens or members of the royal family are in agreement with *Wahhabi* precepts. Within Wahhabism itself, there are disagreements concerning the interpretation and implementation of Islamic law.

**FOR FURTHER READING** Materials from a PBS documentary on Saudi Arabia and the *Wahhabi* movement  
<http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/shows/saudi/analyses>

# ZAKAT

**DEFINITION** The obligatory charitable contribution of one's income in Islam. One of the five pillars of Sunni Islam. Distinct from *sadaqa* (voluntary contributions).

**DISCUSSION** Charitable giving is an obligation incumbent upon all believers, and is established in the Qur'an. In the first centuries after the foundation of the Islamic empire, an extensive body of *hadith* literature was collected on the subject, and jurists developed a corpus of literature detailing what exactly was required to fulfill the obligations. In a simplified sense, the *zakat* is calculated at a rate of 2.5% on money and items acquired commercially. Livestock, agricultural produce, and the income generated by mines are taxed differently.

The different Sunni *madhabs*, or schools of religious law, developed different regulations on *zakat*. Twelver and Ismaili Shia also created distinct systems for the collection of the tax. *Sadaqa*, or voluntary contributions, are not part of the *zakat* tax, but pious Muslims often donate extra income as *sadaqa*, inasmuch as generosity to the poor is considered a highly meritorious act. Believers are enjoined in the Qur'an to give *zakat* and warned that failure to pay is a grave sin. The obligation of the collector to distribute the collections fairly is also stressed in Islamic law. Nevertheless, implementation of *zakat* was historically problematic, both because of occasional evasion but also due to a widespread perception that the agents of the monarchies collecting the *zakat* were corrupt. Only about a half-dozen modern Islamic countries include provisions for *zakat* in their tax codes, and doubts as to governmental interpretations of Islamic law have in some cases led to widespread non-compliance. In spite of these problems, a great many pious Muslims fulfill their *zakat* obligations by contributing to non-governmental charities. Although in most cases these donations go to support poverty relief operations, there have been a few instances where *zakat* or *sadaqa* donations were diverted to support the activities of militant organizations. In the Ismaili Shia community, the charitable donation (including *zakat*) is called *dasond*, and is assessed at a rate of 12.5%.

**FOR FURTHER READING** Information from a Muslim website on *zakat*  
<http://www.dawanet.com/nonmuslim/intro/islam/charity.html>