

Introduction to Islam & Arabs in the Middle East

by Susan L. Douglass*

The Middle East has had many names over time. It has been called: the Fertile Crescent, the Cradle of Civilization, the Holy Land, the Crossroads of Continents, the Orient, the Arab world, and the Near East. The names express the region's role in history and its strategic location. Most of what we call the Middle East lies in Southwest Asia, but parts of the region are also located in Africa and Europe. Its features range from the driest desert to the world's most fertile land, from the lowest spot on earth to snow-capped mountains. The origins of its people are as diverse as its names. Over thousands of years, many ethnic, religious, and cultural groups have mingled and mixed together. In this introduction, you will learn more about the vibrant history of this important world region.

Middle Eastern Geography, Culture, and Religion

The Nile and Tigris-Euphrates River valleys are joined by the Mediterranean coastline to form a fertile arc reaching from Africa to Asia. Over five thousand years ago, civilizations developed there, with the beginnings of agriculture, cities, complex societies, and empires. These places attracted peaceful and warlike migrants from across the surrounding mountains, seas, and deserts. They brought with them their languages and customs, goods, technologies, and ideas.

The desert played a special role in the region. One writer has said, "it breathed people in and out." The desert was harsh, but skilled specialists learned to live there with their herds of animals. Trade routes connecting Africa, Central Asia, and Arabia crossed the desert like a great sea. In times of peace and prosperity, desert people traded with settled people in the cities.

In times of war and disruption, tribes struggling to survive came out of the desert to settle or to raid the rich farmlands. Tough desert warriors served in the armies of empires. The desert was also a refuge, a place where people could find freedom from hectic and sometimes oppressive civilization.

Religious beliefs are common to people everywhere. More is probably known about the history of religion in Southwest Asia than anywhere else. This is partly because the story of religion was written down. It is also because religions that arose in the region have spread around the world. The story of monotheistic religion, or belief in the One God, is strongly linked to the region's history and culture. Though we speak about three monotheistic faiths—Judaism, Christianity, and Islam—it is difficult to speak about one without mentioning the others. They share many traditions, beliefs, and histories.

According to the scriptures, or holy books, the story of belief in one God begins with the creation of the world. All three monotheistic faiths teach that the first human beings, named Adam and Eve, came to know God. They teach that people often strayed from their belief in the one God, worshipping idols that represented natural forces and human characteristics, and that God sent prophets as messengers to call people back to faith. Some important prophets from the Fertile Crescent region were Noah, Job, Jonah, and Abraham. The story of Abraham especially links the region and the faiths.

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Rejecting the idols of Sumerian society in Mesopotamia, Abraham set out with his family into the refuge of the desert.

Abraham is a central figure in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. According to the sacred histories, he migrated with his family through parts of the Fertile Crescent, Egypt, and Arabia. He became the forefather of a long line of prophets mentioned in the Torah, the Bible, and the Qur'an—the holy books of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. Both the Hebrew and the Arab peoples claim Abraham as their forefather.

The history of monotheistic religion is woven like a thread through the history of civilizations and cultures in the Middle East. Assyria, Persia, Egypt, Greece, and Rome were some of the empires that ruled parts of the Holy Land, where the prophets carried out their missions, and where the ancient, sacred city of Jerusalem is located.¹ Each of these civilizations influenced the region's art and architecture, technology and science, language and literature. The monotheistic prophets and their followers often met with persecution because of their beliefs. They suffered at the hands of people who believed in many gods, and who often raised their rulers to the status of gods. Such was the case with the pharaohs of Egypt, the Assyrian kings, and some of the Roman emperors. Even after Emperor Constantine established Christianity as the official religion of the Roman Empire, the Church was strongly identified with the emperor and religious tolerance was not a matter of law. Jews still lived uneasily, and Christians whose ideas about Jesus and other matters differed from those of the official Church in Constantinople or Rome, feared for their lives and property. At that time, the law required people to follow the religious beliefs of the ruler.

Islam and the Growth of a World Civilization

Near the center of the Eastern Hemisphere, Arabia forms a large land bridge joining Africa and Asia. This land bridge is surrounded by water on four sides—by the Red Sea, the

¹ Modern-day Israel, Lebanon, Palestine, Jordan, and Syria are located in the area known as the Holy Land.

Mediterranean, the Persian (Arabian) Gulf, and the Indian Ocean. Arabia's location made it a crossroads of ancient land and sea routes. Ships from Africa and Asia came to its southern shores with the monsoon winds. Europeans and North Africans visited its Mediterranean ports. Caravans arrived in northern Arabian cities after their long journey on the Silk Road all the way from China. Though Arabia was three-fourths desert, Arab nomadic groups became skilled at herding camels and navigating desert trade routes. Desert nomadic and settled Arab groups in the towns cooperated for mutual survival.

By the 500s CE, Makkah (Mecca) had become an important trading town on the Red Sea route that led from Asia and the lands around the Indian Ocean to the Mediterranean. Makkah had another claim to fame as well. It was the site of a simple stone building called the *Ka'aba*, a house of worship that the Arabs traced back to Abraham. Arab tribes made pilgrimage to the house Abraham had dedicated to the one God, but over time, they brought idol worship to the sacred place. Makkah grew rich from trade and pilgrimage journeys to its barren valley.

Muhammad, the Prophet of Islam, was born in Makkah in CE 570. At the age of forty, Muslims believe he received the first revelations from God through the Angel Gabriel. Over the next twenty-three years, the revelations continued and were collected into the Qur'an, the holy book of Islam. Muslims believe that the Qur'an represents the direct word of God, called *Allah* in Arabic. According to the Qur'an, the central message of Islam is, "There is no god but God." The teachings of Muhammad reflected this central message.

Leaders of Makkah feared giving up idol worship and persecuted the Muslims. After thirteen years, a group of Muslims from Madinah, a nearby town, invited the Muslims of Makkah to come there to live, with Muhammad as leader of the city. This journey, called the *hijrah*, marks the beginning of the Muslim calendar.² After trying to defeat the Muslims in

² The Islamic, or *hijrah* calendar is lunar. Each year contains twelve months, and each month starts with the new moon. The *hijrah* year is about eleven days shorter than the solar calendar year, which is based on the rotation of the earth around the sun.

diplomacy and battle, the Makkans made their peace with Muhammad and accepted Islam. Makkah became part of a Muslim state that ruled most of Arabia by the time of the Prophet's death in CE 632. Muhammad's successors, the caliphs (*khaleefa*, pl. *khulafaa* in Arabic), continued to bring more lands under Muslim rule. One hundred years later, Muslims ruled territory stretching from the Atlantic Ocean to the borders of India and China.

Unlike many empires before them, Muslims gave Jews and Christians religious tolerance. According to Islamic law, Jews and Christians were allowed to worship and live according to their faiths, and in practice, this tolerance was often extended to other groups. Jews and Christians also served as officials of the Muslim state. Arabic spread as the language of government and society. Muslims, Jews, and Christians cooperated in education and science, translating important books from Greek, Persian, Latin, and Sanskrit into Arabic, and building vast libraries. Over the centuries, Islam gradually became the majority faith, but the earlier cultural and religious traditions contributed to the development of Muslim civilization. Arab Christians and Sephardic Jews, have continued to live among Muslims in the Middle East to the present day.

As Muslim civilization developed, common beliefs, practices, and teachings resulted in the establishment of similar traditions and social institutions in diverse Muslim lands. The evolution of a common culture stemmed partly from Muslims' upholding of the Five Pillars—or basic beliefs and practices—of Islam:

1. *Shahaadah* (Testimony, or bearing witness)—Muslims testify that there is no god but the One God, and Muhammad was His messenger. Muslims everywhere accept this universal creed and a universal holy book—the Qur'an— that encourages learning and scholarship.
2. *Salaat* (Prayer)—Muslims are instructed to pray five times daily. They pray in Arabic while facing Makkah, the location of the Ka`aba. Muslim houses of worship, called mosques (in Arabic, *masjid*, pl. *masajid*) were built throughout Muslim lands and Arabic

spread as a universal language. Scientific knowledge was used to set times and direction for prayers.

3. *Zakaat* (Charity)—Muslims must give a portion of their wealth to help needy people. Charities were established to build schools, colleges, hospitals, and to meet travelers' needs.
4. *Sawm* (Fasting)—the annual month-long fast of Ramadan encourages discipline, compassion for the hungry, and a sense of community. Mathematics and astronomy were used to help predict the lunar calendar.
5. *Hajj* (Pilgrimage)—All Muslims strive to make the pilgrimage to Makkah at least once in their lifetimes. Muslim governments tried to make pilgrim routes safe and easy, which also contributed to increased trade and scholarship.

A Legacy of Interaction Among Many Cultures

From the 700s onward, Islam continued to spread from the Middle East outward into Africa, Europe, and the rest of Asia. Merchants, migrants, pilgrims, scholars, soldiers, and other travelers carried its message and culture with them. Cities grew rapidly in the expanding Muslim lands, and with them, trade and manufacturing, technology and farming, and art and architecture also developed.

Over the past thousand years of history, this vast Muslim territory has acted as a hinge linking the eastern and western reaches of the Eastern Hemisphere. Trade, pilgrimage, migration, and even war brought many inventions, goods, and ideas from the Far East, Southeast Asia, India, and East and West Africa. From the Indian Ocean to the Mediterranean, from the Black Sea up and down the Russian rivers to the North Sea, traders of many faiths and cultures exchanged luxury goods like spices, furs, jewels, metals, glass and ceramics, medicines, and fabrics. Over these routes, inventions like paper and steel, silk looms, compasses, waterwheels and windmills, as well as crops like sugar, cotton, rice, oranges, tea, and coffee, were passed along to Europe.

During medieval times, contact with Muslim and Arab cultures was important to the development of European civilization. Europe had many contacts with the Middle East. Import and export trade helped European towns grow and prosper. Europe's artisans learned new ways to manufacture metal, fabrics, glass, leather, ceramics—even books and paper—through direct contact with Muslim artisans. Merchants from Italy who traded at Muslim ports around the Mediterranean Sea learned how to use Arabic numbers instead of Roman numerals in their account books. Instead of cash, they used letters of credit, or “checks”—itself a word of Arabic origin.

The transmission of philosophical and scientific knowledge was an important and long-lasting result of Europe's contact with Muslim lands. Muslims ruled Spain (which they called al-Andalus) for about 700 years, until 1492. Muslim culture also flourished in Sicily. Europeans who came there enjoyed new foods, fabrics and furniture, music and poetry, architecture and decoration. Like other Muslim lands, Spain and Sicily were home to large libraries, with thousands of books on the sciences and philosophy, literature, and religious subjects. Centuries earlier, knowledge from ancient Greece, Rome, Persia, and India had been gathered and translated into Arabic. Ancient works on mathematics, astronomy, medicine, geography, and other sciences were eagerly read by scholars in Baghdad, Damascus, Cairo, Cordoba, Toledo, and other cities. Writing within Arabic and Islamic tradition, scholars advanced these sciences further. They wrote tens of thousands of books that Muslim, Christian, and Jewish scholars translated in places as diverse as Asia, Africa, Spain, and Sicily. As word of this wealth of knowledge spread, European scholars flocked to Spain and Sicily, and carried the books back to Northern Europe where they were instrumental in developing the new European universities. The development of the printing press in the fifteenth century helped more Europeans read these works.

The contacts described above were mostly of a very peaceful kind. During medieval times, however, the Crusades also took place. From 1095 to 1291, the Christian Church in Rome

launched efforts to take Jerusalem and the Holy Land away from Muslim rulers. European kings and commoners answered the Pope's call. They traveled toward the Middle East in ships and on foot. Many battles were fought, and many lives were lost along the way. Europeans also settled on the eastern Mediterranean coast. They intermarried with local people and adopted Middle Eastern ways of life. Ideas for building castles and new types of weapons were taken back to Europe. At that time, Europe failed to retain control over the region, but the Crusades did expand Europeans' geographic horizons and probably boosted trade over the long run. Elsewhere, Christian kingdoms did gain control of territory. In the Iberian Peninsula, the long process called the *Reconquista* established Christian control over the entire area now called Spain and Portugal by 1492. Almost 800 years of Muslim presence in the region ended after 1495, when most Muslims as well as Jews were either expelled or converted to Christianity. In Sicily, Muslim reign was brief, but even after the Norman kings established their rule, Muslim cultural, economic, and intellectual influences continued for several centuries.

One result of the fighting in Spain, Sicily, and the Holy Land was that competition between Christian Europe and the Muslim Middle East for land and religion overshadowed more peaceful kinds of interaction. Later, wars with the Turkish Ottoman Empire compounded this problem. During the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, expansion into Muslim territory by European empire-builders added to the legacy of hatred and mistrust on both sides. In the process, the positive outcomes of cultural exchange between the West and the Middle East were largely forgotten. Years of patient scholarship are restoring awareness of the legacy of cooperation in arts, literature, science, and technology, but cultural and religious misunderstandings remain. The technology of our era—in communications and transportation in particular—gives us all an unprecedented opportunity to interact with people from other cultures. In the process, we will undoubtedly find much that is different. Yet, as the Arab teenagers in *Young Voices* demonstrate, we will also find much that is the same.



“Introduction to Islam and Arabs” by Susan L. Douglass is excerpted from the guidebook that accompanies AMIDEAST’s educational video *Young Voices from the Arab World: The Lives and Times of Five Teenagers*. This award-winning video conveys everyday aspects of Arab culture and society through the lives of five young people from Jordan, Lebanon, Egypt, Kuwait, and Morocco. They take you into their homes, schools, places of worship, and favorite entertainment spots. Narration by noted radio personality Casey Kasem provides historical, geographical, and other background information. This excellent introduction to the Arab world was developed especially for classroom use in grades five through eight, but its lively presentation will appeal to a much broader audience.

The teacher’s guidebook includes the script, a video summary, country data and statistics, informational handouts on topics introduced in the video, an annotated bibliography of selected print and internet resources, regional recipes, a glossary of terms, and other supplementary information.

Established in 1951, AMIDEAST is a private, nonprofit organization that seeks to improve understanding and cooperation between the peoples of the Middle East/North Africa and the United States. Programs and services include the production and distribution of educational materials, educational exchange between the Middle East and the United States, and development assistance in the region. Headquartered in Washington, DC, AMIDEAST maintains offices in Morocco, Tunisia, Egypt, West Bank/Gaza, Jordan, Lebanon, Syria, Kuwait, the United Arab Emirates, and Yemen.



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