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FAST FACTS: Islam and Muslims

Islam and Muslims

Islam (pronounced is-lahm) is the world's second largest religion, with nearly 1.5 billion followers globally. Today Islam is the world's fastest growing religion. The majority of the world's Muslims live in South and Central Asia, the Middle East and North Africa. Indonesia has the world's largest Muslim population, followed by Pakistan, Bangladesh, India, Turkey, Iran, Egypt, Nigeria, China, and Algeria. In both India and China, Muslims are large minorities among other religions.

Like Christianity and Judaism, Islam was founded in the Middle East. Islam's message was preached by the **Prophet Muhammad** in the 7th century as a continuation of the monotheistic tradition taught by Abraham, Moses and Jesus. Muslims worship the same god that Christians and Jews worship. According to Islamic belief, Muhammad was God's last prophet and messenger to humanity.

A central principle of the Islamic faith is respect for all religions, based on the belief that humankind universally worships the same God. The word "**Allah**" is Arabic for God. The word Islam comes from "salaam," which literally means "peace," Islam encourages Muslims to live a life guided by equity, kindness, honesty, charity, reflection, respect and humility.

A Muslim (pronounced muhs-lim) is a person who submits to God and follows the teachings of Islam as found in the **Holy Qur'an**, which Muslims consider to be the book of divine revelation of "the Word of God."

Many people confuse the terms "**Muslim**" and "**Arab**," although they have different meanings. A Muslim refers to someone who follows the teachings of Islam. An Arab refers to a person of Arab heritage who speaks Arabic. Approximately 10% of the Arab world is not Muslim, and the majority of Muslims are not Arab. In fact, Arabs make up less than 20% of the world's Muslim Population.

The Five Pillars of Islam

According to the Qur'an, there are **five pillars**, or central guiding principles, of Islam that Muslims must uphold. Briefly, they are:

Shahada is the profession of faith, the declaration that “There is only One God, and Muhammad is his Messenger.”

Salat calls for Muslims to perform five, brief daily prayers at dawn, mid-day, late afternoon, dusk, and late evening.

Zakat is giving to charity and is based on the principle that all things belong to God. Zakat calls on Muslims to share 2.5 percent of their net worth, annually, with the needy. Wealthy people are encouraged to give more.

Sawm, is fasting during Ramadan, the ninth month of the Islamic calendar. The moon determines the beginning of Ramadan. When the moon reaches its crescent shape, fasting begins. All Muslims, except children, the elderly, the sick and pregnant women, are expected to fast from sunup to sundown during the entire month. Fasting purifies the body and soul and strengthens bonds among people. The concept of Ramadan is similar to Christianity’s Lent and Judaism’s Day of Atonement.

Hajj is the pilgrimage that Muslims are required to make to Mecca at least once in their life, if they have the means to do so. The Hajji or Muslim pilgrim treats this journey toward self-betterment as a time for spiritual reflection.

The Two Major Branches of Islam

The two main branches of Islam are **Sunni** and **Shia**. Like Catholics and Protestants, Shia and Sunni Muslims share common core beliefs, but differ on key points of interpretation.

The main difference between the Sunni and the Shia dates to the beginning of Islam, when a dispute over the succession to the Prophet Muhammad split the religion into two sects. After Muhammad’s death in 632, one part of the community, later called the Sunni, gathered to choose a successor, a trusted leader who became known as a Caliph. Another group – the Shia – believed the Prophet’s descendents, his bloodline, should provide the future leaders of Islam.

Today, the majority of Muslims worldwide, approximately 85%, identify as Sunni. Both Sunni and Shia Muslims follow the Qur’an and the reported sayings and deeds of the Prophet Muhammad, referred to as the **Hadith**. Over time, the Sunni and Shia have developed different interpretations of the Hadith. Despite historic, political and religious differences, the Sunni and the Shia share the same core beliefs of Islam.

Muslims in America

In America, Islam has had a long history dating back to the 18th century, when African slaves brought Islam to our shores. During the 19th century, Muslim immigrants arrived

from the Middle East. In the early-to-mid 20th century, leaders like Malcolm X inspired a new group of African-Americans to convert to Islam. □ Today, the American Muslim community is highly diverse.

About 25% of American Muslims are African-American. The largest ethnic group of Muslims in the U.S. is South Asian – people of Indian, Pakistani, Bangladeshi, Sri Lankan, or Afghan descent.

Other major ethnic groups represented by Muslims in the U.S. are: Arab, African, Iranian, Turkish, Southeast Asians, Caribbean, White American and Europeans.

There are Muslims living in nearly every community across the U.S., with large populations centered in California, New York, Illinois, New Jersey, Indiana, Michigan and Virginia.

American Muslims are both Sunni and Shia, with the majority identifying as Sunni.

High profile American Muslims include: Heavyweight champion Muhammad Ali; Fareed Zakaria, the editor of Newsweek International; Supermodel and entrepreneur Iman; Actor and hip hop artist Mos Def; NBA basketball player Hakeem Olajuwon of the Houston Rockets; Rep. Keith Ellison of Minnesota.

For more information on Islam and Muslims in America, please visit the One Nation website: www.onenationforall.org