

Understanding
ISLAM
and Muslim Traditions

*An Introduction to the Religious Practices, Celebrations,
Festivals, Observances, Beliefs, Folklore, Customs, and Calendar System
of the World's Muslim Communities, Including an Overview
of Islamic History and Geography*

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Omnigraphics

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Section One: A Brief Introduction to Islam

Overview

Understanding Islam and Muslim Traditions introduces readers to Islam through an examination of its religious observances, customs, holidays, calendar system, and folk beliefs. About two-thirds of the book is dedicated to these subjects. Thus, rather than approach Islam simply as a set of abstract religious beliefs, this book takes as its primary task the description of what Muslims do and the meaning they attribute to these practices. Nevertheless, in order to make some sense of these customs and observances, the reader needs to have a basic understanding of Islamic religious beliefs. It may also be helpful to know something of the history of Islam, as well as the ethnic identity and geographic distribution of today's Muslim peoples. Therefore, these subjects are all covered in the first section of the book.

Section one is broken down into three parts. The first of these parts—The Teachings of Islam (Chapters 1-2)—offers those readers with little knowledge of Islam an introduction to the religion's basic beliefs and practices. The second part—The History of Islam (Chapters 3-6)—gives a brief history of Islam, concentrating on the founding of the religion and the major achievements of Islamic civilization. The third part looks at Muslims today (Chapters 7-9). It begins by examining commonly held stereotypes about Muslims and balancing them against profiles of accomplished and admirable Muslim men and women from around the world. It then includes a review of the geography of Islam, which explains the distribution of the world's Muslim population and concludes with a list of Islam's major holy sites.

*Opposite page:
Light filters
through the stained
glass windows to
reveal the elegant
Moroccan-style
interior of Masjid
Raya, the largest
mosque in
Sumantra,
Indonesia.
More than 220
million Muslims
live in Indonesia.*





The Teachings of Islam

Chapter 1 Essential Beliefs and Practices

Islam

“Islam” is an Arabic word meaning surrender, submission, or obedience. Thus the very name of this religion sums up its central message: that human beings must surrender themselves to God. Followers of Islam are called Muslims, meaning “those who submit.” The holy book of Islam, called the *Quran*, tells Muslims how to obey the will of God. Arabic speakers know that the word Islam contains another important message about the religion. They point out that it comes from the Arabic word *salam*, which means peace. Muslims believe that humanity can achieve peace—both inner peace and social harmony—by following the teachings of Islam. In addition, those who adopt the religion must do so in peace, without being subjected to pressure or force of any kind.

Since it was founded in the seventh century, many people consider Islam to be the youngest of the world’s major religions. Muslims don’t think Islam is a new religion, however. Rather they view it as a return to what they believe to be an ancient religion: belief in and submission to the one, all-powerful God spoken of in the earliest Hebrew scriptures (for example, the Bible’s Book of Genesis). What’s more, whereas Christians and Jews tend to view Islam as a separate religion that has no bearing on their own faith, Muslims see their religion as closely related to Judaism and Christianity. In fact, they tend to view Islam as the fulfill-

*Opposite page:
A Saudi student
of computer science
and his wife, a
biology student,
read from the
Quran in their
Texas apartment,
during one of their
five prayer periods
of the day, which
all devout Muslims
observe.*

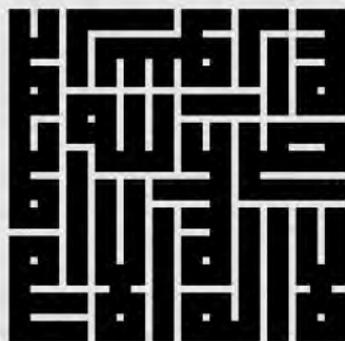
ment of those earlier religions, which got off track due to human error and the human tendency to invent false gods and to place faith in things other than God. Muslims deem that God sent Islam to humanity through the prophet Muhammad in order to correct these errors. They believe that Muhammad's prophecies will be God's last revelation to the people of the earth.

The Five Pillars of Islam

The core of Muslim religious life revolves around one central belief and four religious practices. Together these are called the five pillars of Islam. Muslims may differ with one another on other matters, but the vast majority unite to proclaim the importance of these principles. Muslim thinkers assert that Islam is a total way of life for individuals and communities, rather than just a private belief system. The five pillars reflect this understanding of Islam, in that they affect both communal life and the private life of individual believers. What's more, they demonstrate the great importance that Islam places on reverence for God and charity to one's neighbor.

The First Pillar

One all-important religious teaching stands at the very heart of Islam and must be adopted by all Muslims. This is the belief that there is only one God. Religious scholars call this belief monotheism and contrast it to polytheism, the belief in many gods and/or goddesses. Muslims refer to God as *Allah*, an Arabic word meaning God. Some writers note that the exact, literal translation of Allah is "the God." In this case, the word "the" serves to reinforce the idea that there is only one God. Muslims also assert that God has no associates,



SHAHADAH SQUARE

*There is no divinity but God,
Muhammad is the Messenger of God,
may God pray upon him.*

Stone carved panel from Khan al-Saboun, Aleppo, Syria,
early 16th century. Square Kufi calligraphy.

partners, or offspring, and that he does not share his power with anyone or anything. Those who adopt these wrong ways of thinking about God are committing a sin known in Arabic as *shirk* (association). Along with failure to believe in God, *shirk* is the worst sin one can commit in Islam. According to the Quran, the holy book of Islam, these are the only sins God finds it impossible to forgive. Some Muslim scholars suggest that this may be because those who commit them cut themselves off from God's absolute power, and thus separate themselves from God's power to forgive.

Muslims link their faith in one God of limitless power and majesty with the belief that Muhammad, a man who lived in Arabia during the seventh century, was chosen to serve as God's prophet. The centrality of these beliefs is reflected in the fact that the first pillar of Islam requires all Muslims to affirm them daily in prayer. Muslims testify to these beliefs by reciting the *shahada* in their daily prayers. *Shahada* means "affirmation" or "witness" in Arabic. In English this declaration of faith may be rendered thus: "I witness that there is no god but God, and Muhammad is the messenger of God." The *shahada* is so central to Islam that to recite it with belief is all that is necessary for new members to convert to the religion.

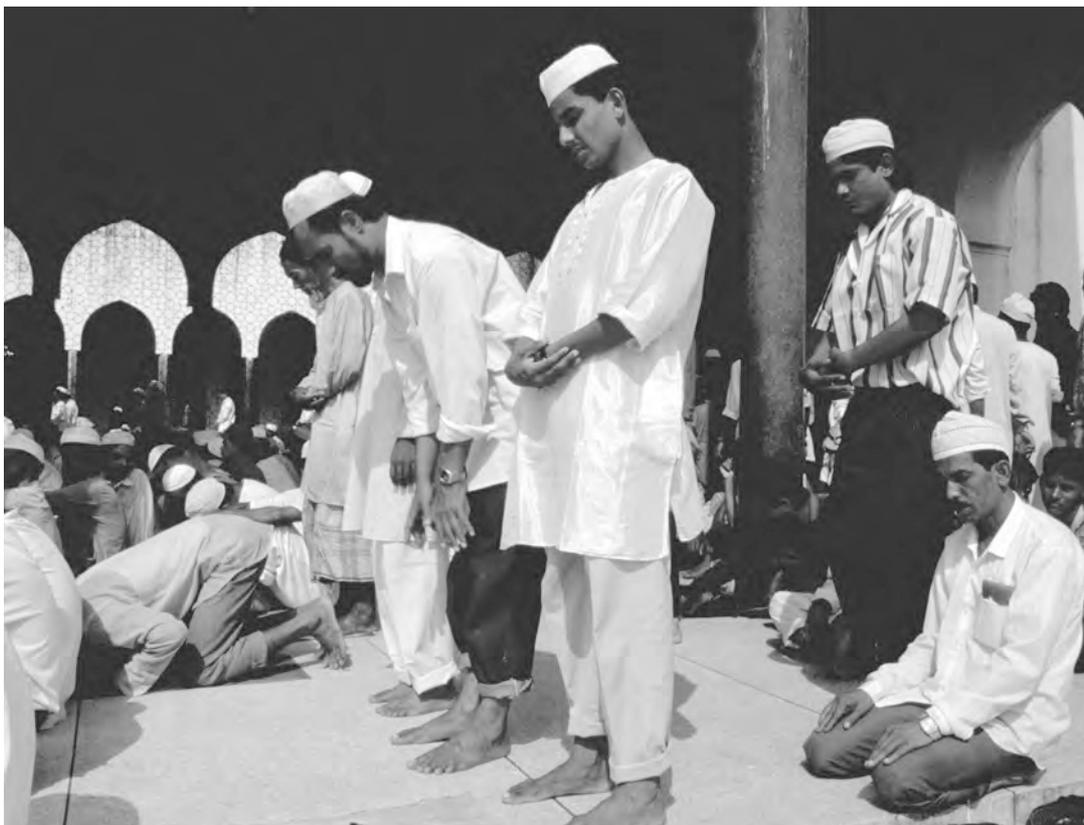


The Second Pillar

Formal prayer, or *salat*, is the second pillar of Islam. Muslims make a distinction between this kind of ritualized prayer—where believers speak required words and perform required actions—and informal prayer, called *dua*, where believers may pour out their individual feelings and concerns to God. Devout Muslims perform *salat* five times each day: at sunrise, at midday, in the middle of the afternoon, at sunset, and in the evening. These prayers are offered in Arabic, regardless of the native language of the worshiper. Muslims prepare to worship by washing their feet, hands, face, and mouth. *Salat* begins with the proclamation "God is most great." It also includes a recitation of the *Fatiha*, the very first chapter in the Quran:

In the name of God, the Merciful and Compassionate. Praise be to God, the Lord of the Universe, the Merciful and Compassionate. Ruler on the Day of Judgment. You do we worship and call upon for help. Guide us along the Straight Path, the road of those who You have favored, those with whom You are not angry, who are not lost. (Quran 1:1-7, Cleary trans.).

A young Muslim girl, holding a pair of prayer beads, performs dua.



Muslims from Dhakar, Bangladesh, performing some of the different body positions required of worshipers during salat.

The prayer session continues with other passages from the Quran as well as affirmations of faith. Each cycle of prayer closes with a repetition of the phrase “God is most great,” after which the entire cycle is repeated two, three, or four times. Although it is preferable to offer these prayers in a group, those who find themselves alone also pray. At the end of the entire session worshipers offer a peace greeting — “Peace be upon all of you and the mercy and blessings of God” — to those on either side of them.

Certain body positions, as well as certain words, are required of worshipers during salat. First, worshipers stand facing the direction of Mecca, a city in Saudi Arabia. The worshipers then raise their hands as they begin to recite the prayers. As the prayers continue they stand with arms folded across their stomach, bow, kneel and prostrate themselves (bowing until the forehead touches the ground), and return to a sitting position. This cycle of movement is repeated with each cycle of prayer.

Salat may be performed at home, in a mosque, or anywhere the worshiper happens to find him or herself at the correct time. On Friday, the Muslim holy day, many people go to the local mosque for their noonday prayers. At this time the prayers are followed by a sermon. In predominantly Muslim countries, considerably more men than women perform salat in mosques. Women have customarily prayed at home, but in recent years more have been attending mosque prayer services.

The Third Pillar

Zakat, or almsgiving, is the third pillar of Islam. Each year all adult Muslims must give two and one-half percent of all their wealth (goods as well as income) to the poor. The truly poor are exempted from this duty, because Muslim law specifies that a person must possess a minimum amount of wealth before he or she is eligible to give. In some predominantly Muslim countries the government collects zakat. In others people make these payments to charitable institutions, mosques, or needy individuals. Muslims distinguish zakat, which is viewed as a kind of tax, from charity, which is seen as a voluntary contribution. In addition to paying zakat, Islam encourages Muslims to make frequent charitable donations.

The Fourth Pillar

Fasting, or *sawm*, is the fourth pillar of Islam. Muslims fast during the entire month of Ramadan by not eating or drinking during the daylight hours. In this way Muslims learn first-hand about the suffering of the poor and hungry. Husbands and wives must also refrain from marital relations, and everyone must avoid evil thoughts and bad deeds. Children, pregnant and menstruating women, the sick, and the very elderly do not have to observe the fast. Fasting reminds Muslims of their dependence on God and helps them to focus on spiritual matters. In Muslim countries people experience the Ramadan fast as a special, joyful time.

Muslims understand salat, zakat, and sawm to be closely related activities. Each advances the common goal of bringing the individual believer and the community closer to God. As one famous Muslim religious teacher put it, “Prayer carries us half-way to God; fasting brings us to the door of his praises; almsgiving procures for us admission” (Zepp 2000: 89).

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More than two million Muslims from all parts of the globe have traveled to Mecca, in modern-day Saudi Arabia, to complete the fifth pillar of Islam.

The Fifth Pillar

The fifth pillar of Islam is pilgrimage to Mecca, in modern-day Saudi Arabia. Believers who can afford it are expected to make this journey, called *Hajj*, at least once in their lifetimes. Tradition specifies that only those who can make the pilgrimage without going into debt can make a valid Hajj. Because of the expense involved, most of the world's Muslims do not complete this act of devotion. They are not considered less devout if they fail to meet this religious obligation for financial reasons.

The Hajj takes place at the same time every year according to the Muslim calendar, during the first ten days of the month that Muslims call *Dhu al-Hijjah*. According to the calendar used in the United States and most of the world, however, the dates of the Hajj change from year to year. Since the Muslim calendar

has 11 fewer days than our own (called the Gregorian calendar), the dates of the Hajj according to our calendar shift backward by 11 days each year. In recent years, more than two million Muslims from all parts of the globe have traveled to Saudi Arabia during these ten days to complete this religious duty. Making the Hajj is a powerful experience in the life of a Muslim, a chance not only to visit the religion's holiest of sites, but also to worship with a great cross-section of the worldwide Muslim community. Male pilgrims wear identical white robes, and many women wear white too, although their dress code is less strict. No perfume or jewelry is allowed, and certain behaviors are also forbidden. Islam teaches the equality of all believers before God. Many pilgrims report that the experience of making the Hajj alongside thousands of other pilgrims — rich, poor, and of all colors and ethnicities — makes that teaching a reality for them.

Jihad

The Arabic word *jihad* means “struggle” or “striving.” This concept is so important to Islam that some Muslims call jihad the sixth pillar of Islam. Although Muslims have sometimes used it to refer to warfare against non-Muslims, the term is most often used to describe the struggle within the self to overcome selfishness, greed, and other weaknesses. The Quran urges Muslims to improve themselves and their communities through jihad. For the vast majority of Muslims this means working to overcome their own personal failings, striving to live a charitable and ethical life, building a just society, and spreading the teachings of Islam.

The Quran's teachings on jihad also approve of the defense of the Islamic community against aggressors. Certain passages, too, seem to suggest that it is permissible to use warfare to spread Islamic rule (9:5, 9:29). When used in these senses the word jihad has sometimes been mistranslated as “holy war.” While religious scholars contend that the concept of jihad does not justify military aggression, certain groups in past and present times have used the concept and the passages from the Quran to justify violent attacks against people deemed to be their enemies. For example, the terrorist group al-Qaeda (an Arabic phrase meaning “the base”) has declared a jihad against the United States and other nations that its leaders believe to be the enemies of Islam. In addition, there are a number of Islamist terrorist groups operating in the Middle East who conceive of their political and military activities as jihad. Examples include the

Although Muslims have sometimes used it to refer to warfare against non-Muslims, the term “jihad” is most often used to describe the struggle within the self to overcome selfishness, greed, and other weaknesses.

Palestinian Islamic Jihad Organization and Hamas (Movement of Islamic Resistance), both of which are fighting to establish some form of Palestinian rule in what is now the state of Israel. While these groups often receive a good deal of media attention, especially after staging an act of violence, not all Muslims agree with their methods.



The Egyptian president Anwar Sadat (1918-1981), himself a Muslim, was assassinated by religious extremists from an Egyptian group called al-Jihad. They killed Sadat because they opposed his efforts to make peace with Israel.

In the Muslim world the number of organizations that define their mission in terms of jihad has increased throughout the twentieth century, especially after 1970. Nevertheless, as one expert in the field has written, this increase “does not say as much about Islam, as is often assumed in the West, as it says about desperate attempts to exploit Islam politically” (AbuKhalil 1995: 373). Muslims as well as non-Muslims have fallen victim to violent jihad movements. Often these militant jihadists will label Muslims who do not agree with them as “unbelievers,” a label which in their minds legitimizes the use of violence against them. For example, the Egyptian president Anwar Sadat (1918-1981), himself a Muslim, was assassinated by religious extremists from an Egyptian group called al-Jihad. They killed Sadat because they opposed his efforts to make peace with Israel. In another Muslim country, Afghanistan, a group of religiously trained soldiers called the Taliban took over the country in 1996. Taliban is an Arabic word meaning “seekers,” and usually refers to students of religion. Although Islam was already the prevailing religion (about 99 percent of the population is Muslim), the Taliban claimed that the takeover was necessary in order to restore order and to establish its own version of strict Islamic law. Once in power, the Taliban government imposed harsh punishments, including beatings, amputations, and death, on those who disobeyed their laws.

Other Important Beliefs

In addition to the beliefs and values addressed in the five pillars, there are other concepts that are important to Islam. These include the absolute unity of God (which is implicit in the first pillar, the shahada), the existence of angels, and the understanding that one’s personal destiny, whether for better or for worse, is determined by God. Muslims also accept both the Jewish and Christian scriptures as divinely inspired (although they think that Jews and Christians have distorted to some degree these messages and their meaning). Therefore, Muslims accept Jesus and the Hebrew prophets as authentic prophets of God. They do not accept the divinity of Jesus, however. Muslims also believe in a Day of Judgment and life after death. They believe that the dead will appear before God to be judged according to how they lived their lives. Evildoers and the irreverent will go to a place of torment. The righteous and devout will live forever in paradise.



Chapter 35

Laylat al-Qadr

***(Also called Night of Power, Night of Destiny,
Night of Determination, Precious Night)***

Laylat al-Qadr is an Arabic phrase meaning “Night of Power” or “Night of Destiny.” Muslims have also translated the phrase as “Night of Determination,” or “Precious Night.” It refers to a yearly holiday that commemorates the transmission of the Quran from God to the Prophet Muhammad. Some Muslims believe that the Prophet received it into his heart, in its entirety, in a single night. Others believe the angel Gabriel (Jibril) brought it down from heaven on that night, but transmitted it to Muhammad little by little. In any case, Sunni Muslims agree that the Quran came down from heaven to earth on a single evening that occurred during the last ten days of Ramadan in the year 610. On that night Muhammad heard the angel Gabriel speak to him for the first time. Therefore the date marks the beginning of the Prophet’s God-given mission to transmit Islam to humanity. Most Muslims celebrate Laylat al-Qadr on the 27th of Ramadan, though no one can say for sure on which date the event occurred.

Ten Days of Prayer

Because the Night of Power is believed to have happened during the last ten days of Ramadan, this segment of the holy month is thought to be especially full of divine grace. Heaven lavishes rewards on those who perform special



Devout Muslims sometimes spend the last ten days of Ramadan in a spiritual retreat called i'tikaf.

devotions during these days. Devout Muslims sometimes spend these ten days in a kind of spiritual retreat called i'tikaf. Muslim historians note that not only the Prophet Muhammad but also his wives regularly undertook the spiritual discipline of i'tikaf during Ramadan. The practice involves spending the last ten days of the month in a mosque, emerging only to eat (if this is not permitted inside the mosque), perform *wudu*, take care of one's bodily needs, and to

bathe. This seclusion permits the worshiper to dedicate himself or herself utterly to spiritual concerns. People who undertake this devotion spend their time in prayer and meditation. They also read and recite the Quran, and think deeply about their lives and their faith. In some countries women who wish to observe i'tikaf may be encouraged to do so at home rather than in the mosque.

Those who wish to make i'tikaf during Ramadan begin on the evening of the 20th or 21st of Ramadan and continue until the sighting of the new moon that announces the end of Ramadan. Muslims may also practice i'tikaf for short periods of time during the rest of year. This practice is often undertaken in fulfillment of a vow.

Laylat al-Qadr in the Quran and in Muslim Folklore

Laylat al-Qadr is so full of grace that the Quran itself proclaims the night “better than a thousand months.” It further explains that angels descend to earth to do the will of God. Some Muslims believe that God sets the events that will occur in the coming year on Laylat al-Qadr. These beliefs have their basis in chapter 97 of the Quran, which is devoted to the Night of Power:

Truly We revealed it
on the Night of Determination.
How will you know what the Night
of Determination is?
Better is the Night of Determination
than a thousand months.
On (this night) the angels and grace descend
by the dispensation of their Lord,
for settling all affairs.
It is peace
Till the dawning of the day (Quran 97, Ali trans.).

An allusion is also made of the Night of Power in chapter 44, which affirms that the purpose of sending the Quran was to warn humanity of the standards by which God will judge them:

The perspicuous Book is witness
(that) We sent it down on a night of blessing—
so that We could warn—
on which all affairs are sorted out and decided
as commands from us (Quran 44:2-5, Ali trans.).

According to Muslim lore, the veil separating heaven and earth thins on Laylat al-Qadr and great blessings disperse over the earth. Traditional beliefs assert that on this night all prayers are heard with sympathy. Islamic folklore teaches that the night skies are brighter and lighter on Laylat al-Qadr and the dawn breaks more brilliantly than on any other day of the month. Those who doubt that the 27th of Ramadan is the actual date of Laylat al-Qadr may scan the skies during the last ten days of Ramadan, seeking the telltale light that marks the real event.

A Night of Prayer

Devout Muslims often spend the night of the 27th of Ramadan in prayer at home or at the mosque. A hadith of the Prophet recommends this devotion:

Whoever establishes the prayers on the night of Qadr out of sincere faith and hoping to attain Allah's rewards (not showing off) then all his past sins will be forgiven (Al Hariri-Wendel: 230).

In addition to favors and the forgiveness of sins, Muslims seek guidance, insight, and glimpses of the pure light of God on this night.

The following prayer was written especially for Laylat al-Qadr. On this holy night Muslims may recite composed prayers, such as the one given below, or simply place their own needs before God in their own words:

In the name of Allah, the Beneficent the Merciful
O Allah bless Muhammad and the family of Muhammad.
O Allah, let it be that when You decree and ordain
from the matters which are certain,
That when You distinguish in the matters which are wise on the
night of Qadr,
In the decree which cannot be reversed nor changed,
That You write me amongst those who will go
For pilgrimage (Hajj) to Your holy house,
Whose Hajj is approved,
Whose efforts are appreciated,
Whose sins are forgiven,
Whose evil deeds have been pardoned.
And from what You decree and ordain,
Let my life be lengthened,
And increase my sustenance,
And . . . [here the worshiper adds his or her own petition]
(Kassamali: 79).

Iran and Shia Muslims

In Iran—where most people follow Shia rather than Sunni Islam—Muslims observe Laylat al-Qadr for three days, from the 19th to the 21st of Ramadan. They also commemorate the martyrdom of Ali (the Prophet’s son-in-law) on these days, making this a very holy and spiritual time of year for Persian Muslims. According to Shia teachings, Ali was attacked on the 19th and died of his wounds on the 21st of Ramadan.

Persians sometimes refer to the Night of Power as the Precious Night. Prayers offered on these nights are said to be worth a thousand performed on other days, so many Iranians stay up late into the night in prayer. Some follow the custom of saying one hundred *rakat* of formal prayers on each of the three nights, in addition to many informal prayers of the kind given above.

Glossary

The glossary includes most of the foreign words that have been mentioned in the text. (Most place names and proper names do not appear here.) It also includes certain English words that refer to Islamic concepts (e.g., “minaret” and “mosque”). Foreign words appear in italics.

A Note on Spellings

The Arabic alphabet differs significantly from the Roman alphabet. Over the years, scholars have employed a number of different Arabic transliteration systems in order to transcribe Arabic words and phrases into English. Each system results in slightly different English language spellings. The situation is made more complicated by the fact that the pronunciation of Arabic words differs throughout the Arab world. As a result, English spellings vary also, as they attempt to capture these differences. These circumstances have created an English language literature on the Middle East that encompasses a wide variety of spellings for the same Arabic words and phrases. What’s more, some spellings of Arabic words, now deemed incorrect by today’s scholars and native speakers, have become established in the English language. The name of the city where Muhammad was born provides an example. Some Muslims and contemporary scholars would prefer to spell it “Makkah,” but the old spelling, “Mecca,” has already rooted itself in the English language.

Yet there are other examples in which old English conventions are changing in favor of more precise spellings. For example, the old, inaccurate term “Moham-madan” was changed in the middle of the 20th century to “Moslem,” which has now been replaced by the most correct form of the word, “Muslim.” Another example is the word Quran, which has come to be accepted as the more precise way to refer to the holy scripture that is sometimes spelled “Koran.” Just as the Chinese city that was once called Peking in English is now Beijing, the English language has been slowly changing to reflect more accurate spellings of Arabic terms.

The spellings chosen for this book are among the simplest in common usage. Diacritical marks have been omitted. Readers who know Arabic may find that



In Muslim countries, the call to prayer issues from the minaret of local mosques five times each day.

these spellings oversimplify the Arabic words they are intended to represent. Nevertheless, these simple spellings were chosen to help the vast majority of readers — whom we assumed would not know Arabic — understand a text that of necessity includes many foreign words.

A

abaya — A loose, long-sleeve, full-length robe worn by some Muslim women when they go out in public. See also *burqa* and *chador*.

Abbasid — Name of the most illustrious caliphate in the history of Islam. The *Abbasid* caliphs reigned from their capital in Baghdad, Iraq, between the years 749 and 1258.

abd — Arabic for “servant.” A common component of many Muslim names, such as Abdullah, meaning “servant of God.”

abu — From the Arabic word *Ab*, meaning “father.” Followed by a name, *abu* means “father of.”

adhan — Call to prayer. In Muslim countries, the call to prayer issues from the minaret of local mosques five times each day.

A. H. See *anno Hegira*.

al-hamdu Lillah — Means “Thanks be to God” or “Praise be to God.” Referred to as the *hamdallah*. The full phrase, *al-hamdu Lillahi Rabb il-Alameen*, means “Praise be to Allah, the Lord of the Worlds.” After the *basmallah*, it is the first sentence in the first chapter of the *Quran*.

Allah — God. Literally, “the God” in Arabic.

Allahu akbar — Arabic for “God is greater. . . .” The implication is that no matter what one places at the end of the sentence, God is greater than that thing. Also translated as “God is Great,” and “God is greater than all.” Referred to as the *takbir*.

Allah umma salli ala an-Nabi — An Arabic phrase meaning “God’s blessing and grace upon the Prophet.”

al-Quds — “The Holy” in Arabic. Refers to the city of Jerusalem.

ameen — Arabic for “truly” or “so be it.” The equivalent of the English “amen.” Said at the end of prayers.

ameen ceremony — Party held to celebrate a child’s first complete reading of the *Quran* in Arabic.

anno Hegira — Means “Hegira Year.” Abbreviated A.H. The Muslim calendar begins in 1 A.H., the first year after the Hegira, that is, the migration of Mecca’s original Muslim community to Medina.



Allah written in Thuluth, a soft cursive style of Arabic calligraphy.

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Muslims gather outside the Cedar Rapids Islamic Center in Iowa after Sunday prayers (above). The children are being taught Arabic during a Sunday morning class at the Islamic Center (opposite page).

Index

The index for *Understanding Islam and Muslim Traditions* includes personal names, place names, and subject terms that appear in the book. Photo captions have also been included in the index, with these page references marked in italic type. To facilitate use of the glossary, the index also features references for its definitions of terms. For these entries, the page reference for each glossary term is marked after the heading “defined.”

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