

Dispelling Common Misconceptions and Stereotypes about **Islam**

Muslims are not only located **in the Middle East**.

Followers of Islam are found world-wide. The majority of Muslims live in Asia, predominately in South and Southeast Asia. Indonesia is the country in the world with the largest Muslim population.

Islam is a **peaceful faith**.

The vast majority of Muslims are peace-loving people. Most Muslims are pious and nonviolent people who seek to honor God in their lives. Islam calls for compassion and peace. Concerns over Islamic extremism are widely shared in Western publics and Muslim publics alike², and many Muslims are victims of Islamic extremism themselves.

Islam is not **fundamentally different** from Christianity and Judaism.

All three of these religions are monotheistic with many common doctrines, texts and beliefs. Muslims respect the same prophets as Jews and Christians including Abraham, Moses and Jesus. Islam recognizes both the Torah and the New Testament as revelations from God, though the belief is that they are flawed due to human transmission.

Not all Muslim women **wear a veil**.

Most countries in the Middle East do not require their women to cover their hair or their face; many Muslim women choose to do so on their own¹. They choose this for their own personal and religious beliefs. Veiling practices also vary by region, social class, custom, and rejection of custom.

Islam provides a **framework** for daily life.

Muslims have both required (prayer, pilgrimage) and prohibited (drinking alcohol, eating pork) acts. Similar to other religious traditions, Islam is not particularly restrictive, but has a set of rules by which members of the religious community should live.

Muslims **worship God**, not Muhammad.

Muslims believe that the Prophet Muhammad was the last Messenger of God to be sent to humanity. To Muslims, Muhammad represents the ideal and perfect person, worthy of love and respect. Muslims believe that there is only one true God, and worship God alone.

Jihad means **“struggle.”**

The word jihad refers to an internal or external struggle that accompanies religious devotion. Jihad is often used to describe striving to be a better Muslim. Muslims also have social campaigns to end poverty and hunger which they call jihad. Though this word is often translated as “holy war,” sanctioned military jihad is extremely rare.

1: “How people in Muslim countries prefer women to dress in public.” Pew Research Center, Washington, D.C. (January 8, 2014).

<http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2014/01/08/what-is-appropriate-attire-for-women-in-muslim-countries/>, accessed on March 12, 2015.

2. “Muslim Publics Share Concerns about Extremist Groups.” Pew Research Center, Washington, D.C. September 10, 2013.

<http://www.pewglobal.org/2013/09/10/muslim-publics-share-concerns-about-extremist-groups/>, accessed March 12, 2015.

Dispelling Common Misconceptions and Stereotypes about the **Middle East**

The words “Arab” and “Muslim” are **not synonymous**.

Many Arabs follow different faiths and live all over the world. Arabs are people who speak Arabic as their native language and identify themselves as Arabs. Muslims are those who practice the religion of Islam. There are Christians and Jews living in Arab countries.

Not everyone in the Middle East speaks **Arabic**.

There are many languages and dialects spoken in the many countries that comprise the Middle East including Persian, Turkish, Kurdish and Hebrew. Many Middle Easterners speak conversational English as well.

The Middle East is largely an **urbanized place**.

60% of the region’s population lives in major cities such as Cairo and Istanbul¹. SUVs, highways and high-rise buildings are all found in the Middle East, just like in the United States.

Many people in the Middle East **are friendly towards America**.

It is true that some people are critical of the United States’ foreign policy, but many others look to the United States as model for political freedom and economic development. Others enjoy American culture and fashion², and adopt it as their own.

Many women in the Middle East are **valued and respected**.

Many women in the Middle East are well-educated, participating in important roles in society and family life³, and voting in elections. For example, women in Turkey got the right to vote in 1934, ten years before women in France. Women’s rights and equality continues to be a global issue, not just in the Middle East.

Not everyone in the Middle East is **Muslim**.

In addition to the large Jewish population in Israel, there are also significant Christian and small Jewish communities throughout the region.

The Middle East is a **diverse region** with many different **cultural influences**.

There is no *one* culture of the Middle East. The region is influenced by Persian, Arabic, Jewish, Turkish, and many more cultures and traditions.

There is more than **desert** and **oil** in the Middle East.

The geography of the Middle East is diverse and includes everything from river deltas and forests to mountain ranges. Lebanon is a in the Middle East that does not have any desert.

1: “World Development Indicators.” World Bank. 2013. <http://data.worldbank.org/topic/urban-development>, accessed on March 12, 2015.

2: “The World’s Muslims: Religion, Politics and Society.” Pew Research Center, Washington, D.C. April 30, 2015.

<http://www.pewforum.org/2013/04/30/the-worlds-muslims-religion-politics-society-overview/#how-do-american-muslims-compare>, accessed on March 12, 2015.

3. Christopher, Colin. “Some women wear cloth on their heads. Why the obsession?” Inside Islam: Dialogues and Debates, UW-Madison, WI. March 30, 2012. <http://insideislam.wisc.edu/2012/03/some-women-wear-cloth-on-their-heads-why-the-obsession/>, accessed on March 12, 2015.