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Majority Muslims: Non-Arab Islam in Africa, Asia, Europe, and South America

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“It is true that the Middle Eastern population is about 90 percent Muslim, but all the Muslims of the Middle East still add up to a minority of the world’s Muslim population. Even when defining the Middle East broadly to embrace the entire Arab world from Morocco to the Arabian Peninsula plus Iran, Israel, and Turkey the Muslims thus included are only slightly more than one-third of the world’s Muslim population.

“The largest Muslim state, Indonesia, is not in the Middle East. Indeed, the first four Muslim states in terms of population are all outside the Middle East—Indonesia, Pakistan, Bangladesh, and (surprising to many) India with over 100 million Muslims.

“There are approximately half again more Muslims in the states of the former Soviet Union than in all of the Fertile Crescent states (Iraq, Israel, Jordan, Lebanon, and Syria), and the Muslims of Nigeria outnumber the Muslims of the entire Arabian Peninsula by roughly two to one.

“The total world Muslim population is estimated to be slightly more than one billion.”

—L. Carl Brown, *Religion and State*, pg. 9

With growing globalization and non-European immigration into the United States, with dozens of terrorist attacks in the past 10 years attributed to Muslim fanatics and fundamentalists, and especially with last year’s attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon, Americans are increasingly aware of, curious about, and interested in Islam as both a religion and a culture. Because of the high visibility of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and the United States’ antagonism toward Iraq, the Muslim countries Americans identify most are the Arab countries in the Middle East and Northern Africa. Arab and Muslim are not synonymous, however, despite the government’s, the media’s, and the people’s perception.

The following is a list of non-Arab Muslim countries. I will attempt to describe their historical background, socio-economic status, and governmental system as they are influenced by Islam. The countries listed below either have Muslims as a majority percentage of their population, a significant Muslim minority, or Muslim groups that play an active role in the nation’s politics. While all the countries with a significant Muslim influence are in Asia and Africa, with the exception of Albania and portions of the former Yugoslavia, Islam is being spread, both through migration and conversion, throughout Europe and the Western Hemisphere.

Because of Islam’s origination in the Middle East, it is associated with being primarily an Arab religion. All of the holy sites are in the Arabian Peninsula, and the Qu’ran is written and recited in Arabic. Muslims in the Middle East practice the “purest” form of Islam because of their proximity to the religion’s origination area. Many of the most recognized Islamic fundamentalists are Arabs from the Middle East and North Africa. Other Muslim peoples have usually been perceived as less knowledgeable about Islam and more tainted with non-Islamic ideas.

Because of these reasons, Western perceptions of Islam are that it is practiced by bearded Arabs who believe that the holy words of the Qu’ran should be fought for—literally. In fact, the opposite is true. The majority of Muslims live their lives with their religion much as Europeans and Americans live their lives as Christians: an influence upon their personal morality but not

strictly adhered to in day-to-day life. From Albania to Indonesia to Kyrgyzstan, nearly a billion Muslims live under both Islamic and secular governments.

The following is a brief description of selected non-Arab Muslim countries and geographical areas. This is not intended to be an in-depth analysis of the social and political status of each of the countries; rather, it is to give an overview of the role that Islam plays in the country's or area's politics and society, both within the country and in its interactions with other countries. Further and more in-depth resources will be provided in a bibliography.

### **Afghanistan**

Afghanistan has been in a state of war and varying rule for the past twenty years. Islam was particularly important in unifying Afghans against the Communist Soviet Union in the invasion in 1978. An Islamic government took power and attempted to begin nation building in Afghanistan, but the government never established legitimacy. The Taliban, a strict Muslim political militia, took over in 1994; this group gathered weapons and established themselves as the government. They strictly enforced Shariah, and many believe their interpretations of the Shariah are foreign deviations alien to the Islam practiced in Afghan society, which has always stressed moderation, tolerance, dignity, individual choice and egalitarianism. With the overthrow of the Taliban regime in 2001, the role of political Islam as well as social Islam is unknown, most likely to be decided by the new ruling party.

### **Former Soviet States—Azerbaijan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan**

In the former Soviet states, Islam has been largely ignored by Islamic and Muslim scholars. These countries were influenced by the Communist rule and regulations against religion, but because they were on the periphery of the Soviet empire, religious restrictions were more lax. Some local Communist officials were practicing Muslims, and rarely did the higher government attempt to stop them.

Political Islam in this area arose in opposition to the atheist Communist government. In Uzbekistan, an Islamist leader, only called Rakhmatullah, publicly denounced his own religious teacher for having sold out to the Communist regime, then encouraged Muslim missionaries to travel to towns and villages throughout Central Asia. Although the movement slowed after Rakhmatullah's death in 1981, what began as an apolitical Islamic "educational" movement in the late 1970s gradually became transformed into a political movement. Political Islam has also grown since the collapse of the Soviet Union, such as in Tajikistan's Islamic Renaissance Party, which has branches in other Central Asian republics and in Russia and became so popular after the collapse of the Soviet Union that many were concerned that Tajikistan would become the region's first Islamic republic. In other areas, the growth in Islamic activism has been fueled by social and economic problems, especially in the cities.

These countries were admitted to the Organization of Islamic Conferences in 1992, with the exception of Uzbekistan, admitted in 1996. These countries all have a republic form of government and a legal system based upon civil law. While minor Islamic political parties do exist in this region, the governments are generally independent of religious organizations. In most areas of these countries, Islam is moderate—wine drinking is permitted and women are not veiled or segregated.

### **South Asia—Pakistan, Bangladesh, India, Maldives, Sri Lanka**

South Asia is home to the largest number of Muslims in the world, from Pakistan, stretching east across India to Bangladesh and reaching through southern India to northern Sri Lanka and the Maldives. Only the Maldives has a legal system based upon Islamic law, and

adherence to Islam is required for citizenship, and because of its position in the Indian Ocean, separate from the Middle East and the rest of Asia, some pre-Islamic beliefs do survive.

Pakistan is not an entirely secular state either. Various laws are based upon Islamic laws, especially the law against defiling the name of Mohammed, a crime punishable by death. In Bangladesh, Islam plays a significant role in the life and culture of the people, but religion does not dominate national politics because Islam is not the central component of national identity. This stems from the separation of East Pakistan (Bangladesh) from West Pakistan (Pakistan) in 1971. For Bangladesh, choosing Bengali nationality meant rejecting Muslim brotherhood, especially after West Pakistani troops killed East Pakistanis in the name of Islamic unity. While Pakistan and Bangladesh are the dominant Muslim countries in the South Asian region, their difference in religious and national identity gives them a different political and social structure.

India and Sri Lanka are the two non-majority Muslim countries in South Asia, although both do have significant Muslim populations, both numerically and politically. In India, Muslims have had several significant clashes with the Hindu majority. In both countries, Muslims are often a force in the political opposition. Culturally, Indian and Sri Lankan Muslims generally share an identity with Pakistani Muslims.

#### **Southeast Asia—Indonesia, Malaysia, Brunei**

Indonesia has the world's largest Muslim population, over 200 million people. Malaysia and Brunei both with Muslim majorities, and the Philippines, Thailand, and Burma, with small minorities contribute another 15 million Muslims to the area. It is in this area that Muslims feel the most resentment toward Arab Muslims' feelings of superiority over other Muslims. Especially in Indonesia and to a large extent in Malaysia, Muslims seek their own Islamic identity separate from the Middle East. Despite this cultural antagonism, these Southeast Asian countries do have political and economic ties with the Middle East through alliances in the United Nations and Islamic associations.

About 90 percent of Indonesians are Muslims, though most of them practice a more relaxed, less politically motivated form of their religion than can be found in some other countries with large Muslim populations. When Indonesia gained independence, the new leaders chose to eliminate a proposal for a system based on Shariah from their Constitution; many Muslim leaders insisted on keeping Islam out of politics. But currently in face of an anti-Muslim backlash in the West, the Justice Party has been formed by strict Muslims who seek to infuse Islam into the government to aid development and counteract criticism.

Malaysia and the Sultanate of Brunei have had a closer relationship with the Arab countries than Indonesia has. Both countries have a more religious tone in their domestic politics, which has led to a closer identification with all Muslims. Some scholars also believe that as small countries, they obtain a sense of being a player in a wider field by involving themselves in Middle Eastern affairs. Malaysia has been a member of the United Nations Security Council several times, leading to a favorable reception among the international community.

#### **China**

The Cultural Revolution in China was a great trauma for the Muslims, as for all Chinese. From the early 1960s until after Mao Tse-tung's death in 1976, the practice of Islam was persecuted. Except for mosques in Peking and Canton, which were maintained for foreigners, every mosque in China was closed. After Mao's death, mosques were reopened and Islamic associations became legal. Under China's current leadership, in fact, Islam appears to be

undergoing a modest revival. Religious leaders report more worshipers now than before the Cultural Revolution, and a reawakening of interest in religion among the young. There are now over 30,000 mosques in all of China, with 23,000 in the province of Xinjiang, a predominantly Muslim province in northwest China. There has been an increased upsurge in Islamic expression in China, and many nationwide Islamic associations have been organized to coordinate inter-ethnic activities among Muslims.

Despite the great strides in religious freedoms for Muslims, the people do face persecution, especially those in the northwest. The Han Chinese (the majority of the overall population and those in power) have immigrated to formerly Muslim areas, pushing the Muslims to become both the minority in population and in power. The Chinese military has a significant presence to threaten religious fundamentalists, separatist groups, and human rights advocates.

### **Iran**

Iran is the country often thought of as a Middle Eastern Islamic state, but Iran is really a Persian country, outside of the Middle East and the Arabian Peninsula. The Islam practiced in Iran is of Shia Islam, in contrast to most other Muslim countries, which practice Sunni Islam. The government is a theocratic republic as established by the Ayatollah Khomeini in 1979. Shariah is strictly enforced, and all citizens must obey the Islamic code. Despite the tight restrictions on conduct, Iran does hold relatively open elections. Candidates must be Muslims who demonstrate both religious expertise and moral rectitude, but eligible voters are able to choose their leaders from these candidates. As of late, movements to liberalize society are growing in Iran, but they are growing alongside more fundamentalist groups.

### **Turkey**

Turkey is the world's first secular Muslim state and the only one to attempt completely to eliminate Islam from public life. The state did have a tolerant attitude toward Islam, which encouraged the proliferation of private religious activities, including the construction of new mosques and Koran schools in the cities, the establishment of Islamic centers for research on and conferences about Islam and its role in Turkey, and the establishment of religiously oriented professional and women's journals. Islamic intellectuals are harshly critical of Turkey's secular intellectuals, whom they fault for trying to do in Turkey what Western intellectuals did in Europe: substitute worldly materialism, in its capitalist or socialist version, for religious values.

Although intellectual debates on the role of Islam attracted widespread interest, they did not provoke the kind of controversy that erupted over the issue of appropriate attire for Muslim women. During the early 1980s, female college students who were determined to demonstrate their commitment to Islam began to cover their heads and necks with large scarves and wear long, shape-concealing overcoats. The appearance of these women in the citadels of Turkish secularism shocked those men and women who tended to perceive such attire as a symbol of the Islamic traditionalism they rejected. Militant secularists persuaded the Higher Education Council to issue a regulation in 1987 forbidding female university students to cover their heads in class. Protests by thousands of religious students and some university professors forced several universities to waive enforcement of the dress code. The issue continued to be seriously divisive in the mid-1990s. Throughout the first half of the 1990s, highly educated, articulate, but religiously pious women have appeared in public dressed in Islamic attire that conceals all but their faces and hands. Other women, especially in Ankara, Istanbul, and Izmir, have demonstrated against such attire by wearing revealing fashions and Atatürk badges. The issue

is discussed and debated in almost every type of forum—artistic, commercial, cultural, economic, political, and religious. For many citizens of Turkey, women's dress has become the issue that defines whether a Muslim is secularist or religious.

#### **Horn of Africa—Ethiopia, Eritrea, Somalia, Djibouti, (Comoros)**

Ethiopia (including what is now Eritrea and Djibouti) knew virtually no Arab immigration, and Ethiopian Muslims belonged to the indigenous peoples, retaining much of their specific ethno-cultural characteristics, so that these often overshadowed "Islamic identity." Arabic was not a spoken language among any group, and there were no Arab traditions related to marriage, inheritance, and other related customs, imported into Ethiopia. Shariah law was always very partially applied and combined with the customary law of a region or of a dominant ethnic group. In addition, Islam in Ethiopia nearly always lived in the shadow of an old and powerful Christian kingdom. Christianity was the core world-view of the political elite and a defining element of the country's historical nationhood, and up to the demise of the monarchy in 1974, Muslims were excluded from this. They hence held a secondary place in the political and civic domains; there was a politically relevant "boundary" between the two communities of faith.

Somali Islam rendered the world intelligible to Somalis and made their lives more bearable in a harsh land. Amidst the interclan violence that characterized life in the early 1990s, Somalis naturally sought comfort in their faith to make sense of their national disaster. Somali brand of messianic Islamism (sometimes seen as fundamentalism) sprang up to fill the vacuum created by the collapse of the state. Within Somalia, some Islamic fundamentalists have expressed the commitment to jihad against the Ethiopian government, but at present it seems unlikely that there will be an Islamic state imposed on Somalia, though some are actively pursuing that objective.

Although Comoros is a group of islands between the continent of Africa and Madagascar, it has been included in this category for convenience. Islam and its institutions help to integrate Comoran society and provide an identification with a world beyond the islands' shores. Practically all children attend Quranic school for two or three years, starting around age five; there they learn the rudiments of the Islamic faith and some classical Arabic. The country uses a combination of French and Muslim law in a consolidated code for its legal system.

#### **Central Africa—Chad, Niger, Nigeria**

Islam in these Central African countries is not highly organized, and it has to a large extent been separated from many of the movements of the Middle East. For example, Islam in Chad is not particularly militant. Even if young Muslims in urban areas are aware of happenings in other parts of the Islamic world, they have not responded to fundamentalist appeals. Chad has not been a large player in Islamic politics, but it has been used as a tool by both Libya and Sudan for access to greater Africa.

Both Niger and Nigeria see growing numbers of Muslim activists who are beginning to push for Shariah law. Nigeria is not a secular country. Rather, it is a multi-religious country. The country has long maintained coherence by forging compromises between Muslim and Christian groups. All twelve of the northern states of Nigeria have imposed Shariah law. For a while, non-Muslims had to remain in an enclave, living quasi-segregated lives in their churches, their social clubs, and even their work; in contrast, becoming a convert to Islam was the doorway to full participation in the society.

### **West Africa—Burkina Faso, Gambia, Guinea, Mali, Mauritania, Senegal, Sierra Leone**

There is a dearth of information on Islam in the countries of West Africa, especially the smaller countries. In Burkina Faso, the Gambia, Guinea, Mali, Senegal, and Sierra Leone Islam is on the rise, especially movements to further infuse it into the governments. For the most part, however, the Islam practiced in these countries is moderate and tolerant. In Mauritania, a stricter form of Islam is part of the governmental structure, including in the legal system, where Shariah was established.

### **Sudan**

Sudan is currently under the rule of the National Islamic Front, a fundamental political organization that uses Islamic law as the basis for its legal and governmental system. The predominantly Muslim North has historically perceived Sudan as a single country composed of one people divided by colonial powers. Northern policies have subsequently sought to “re-unite” the country through a process of Arabization and Islamization. Such policies, however, have generated antagonism among the southern population whose indigenous cultural values combined with Christianity to create a common identity, one defined largely in opposition to Northern attitudes and policies. Because government policy since independence has by and large disregarded Sudan’s multi-religious character and the South’s contrasting identity, conflict and civil war has remained endemic.

### **Albania**

Religion was outlawed in Albania in 1967 during Communist rule, but before that, about 75 percent of the population was Muslim, the only country in Europe to have a Muslim majority. In 1967, Albania was declared the world’s first atheistic state; hundreds of mosques were destroyed and pig farms sprang up all over the country. After the fall of Communism, religion was no longer outlawed, but Communism still influences the culture of Albania. The country has a highly secular government, and religion is not a big influence on the psychology of Albanians because of a lack of a strong tradition.

### **Guyana and Suriname**

In contrast to the situation found on the Indian subcontinent, Muslims and Hindus experience little friction in Guyana and Suriname. These two religious communities have a tacit agreement not to proselytize each other’s members. In smaller villages, Christians and Muslims come together to participate in each other’s ceremonies. Most of the Muslims in these two countries have become part of a multi-ethnic community in northeastern South America and have grown away from a South Asian identity and a larger Muslim brotherhood. Despite this, both Guyana and Suriname are members of the Organization of Islamic Conferences, and some Muslims in these countries are pushing for greater Muslim education.

Country	Muslim Percent of Population	Number of Muslim People
<b>Asia</b>		
Afghanistan	99%	26.5 million
Azerbaijan	70%	7.3 million
Bangladesh	83%	108.9 million
Brunei	67%	230 thousand
China	3%	38.2 million
India	12%	123.6 million
Indonesia	88%	201 million
Iran	99%	65.4 million
Kyrgyzstan	75%	3.6 million
Malaysia	55%	12.2 million
Maldives	100%	310 thousand
Pakistan	97%	140.3 million
Sri Lanka	7%	1.4 million
Tajikistan	85%	5.6 million
Turkey	99%	66.4 million
Turkmenistan	89%	4.1 million
Uzbekistan	88%	22.2 million
<b>Africa</b>		
Burkina Faso	50%	6.2 million
Chad	50%	4.4 million
Comoros	98%	590 thousand
Djibouti	94%	430 thousand
Eritrea	60%	2.6 million
Gambia	90%	1.3 million
Guinea	85%	6.5 million
Mali	90%	9.9 million
Mauritania	100%	2.7 million
Niger	80%	8.5 million
Nigeria	50%	63.3 million
Senegal	92%	9.5 million
Sierra Leone	60%	3.2 million
Somalia	99%	7.4 million
Sudan	70%	25.3 million
<b>Europe</b>		
Albania	70%	2.5 million
<b>South America</b>		
Guyana	9%	63 thousand
Suriname	20%	87 thousand



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