

# Factsheet on **Islam**, Radicalization and Polarization



Part of a Series of Factsheets on Religion Radicalization Nexus  
within the context of EDUC8 Project.

Produced by Centre of Expertise for Intellectual Reformation  
Research and Advice (CIRRA)



Funded by the European Union

## Introduction

After Christianity, Islam is the largest world religion. Its origins lie in Mecca, in the west of the Arabian Peninsula. Islam has about 1.6 billion followers, representing about 24.1% of the world's population.

The majority of the Muslim population is concentrated in Africa and Asia, but there are also Muslims in Europe, especially in Eastern European countries, such as Kosovo, Albania and Bosnia and Herzegovina. Because of the large migration flows in the 1950s and 1960, Islam has settled in Western Europe, mainly through Moroccans and Turks.

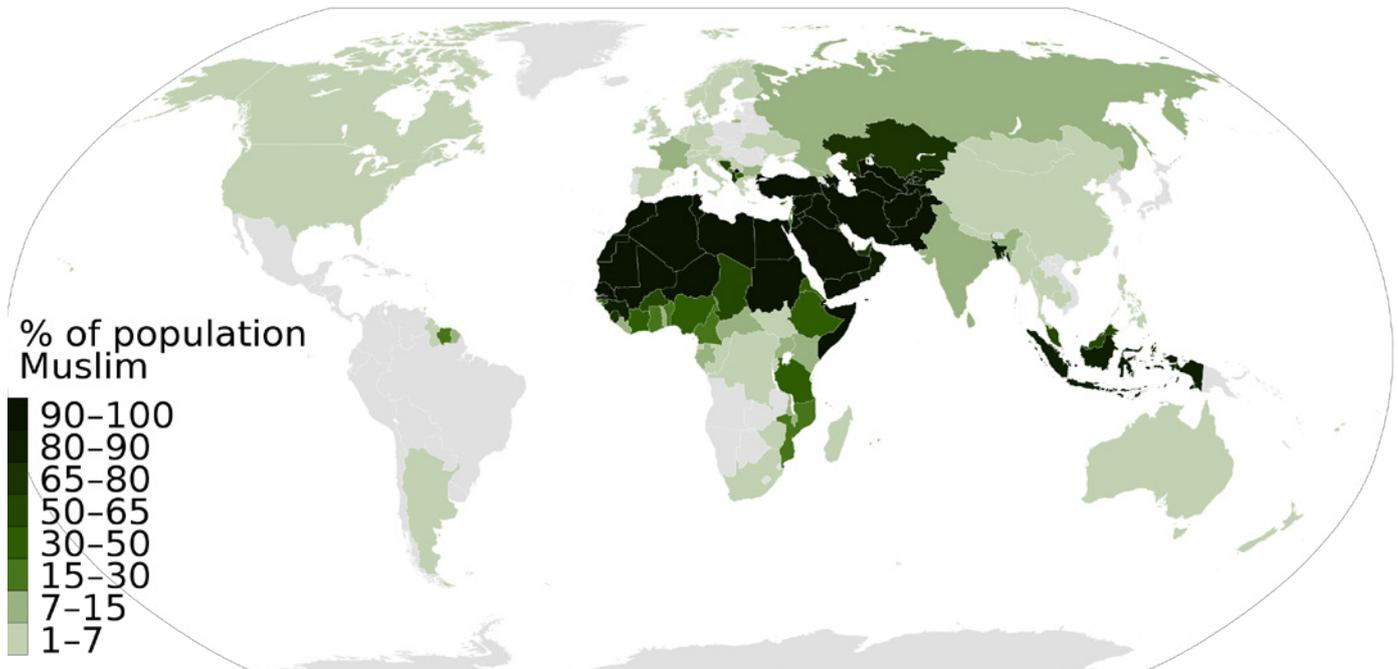


Figure 1 Map shows the % Muslim population in each nation, worldwide

Source: M.Tracy Hunter via Wikimedia Commons: [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Islam\\_percent\\_population\\_in\\_each\\_nation\\_World\\_Map\\_Muslim\\_data\\_by\\_Pew\\_Research.svg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Islam_percent_population_in_each_nation_World_Map_Muslim_data_by_Pew_Research.svg)

Etymologically, the term Islam means subjection or surrender to God by following his rules. Like Christianity and Judaism, Islam can be traced back to the arch father Abraham who was a supporter of pure faith in one God. Islam is therefore regarded as a monotheistic religion. The primary source of Islamic religion is the Qur'an. This holy book has been passed through the archangel Djibiel (Gabriel) to the Prophet Muhammad through oral way. In addition, the hadith, which indicates the way the Prophet Muhammad has been perceived as the second most important source for the Islamic doctrine.

## Origin

Muslims regard Islam as the last religion revealed by God and supplementing the previously revealed laws. Islam is therefore not a new religion but is a continuation of the religion that began with Adam and which was also preached by other prominent prophets such as Musa (Moses) and 'Isa (Jesus). The Prophet Muhammad (570-632) is considered by Muslims to be the last prophet sent by God and is therefore called 'Seal of the Prophets'. The last book revealed, the Qur'an, has been revealed gradually over a period of about 23 years. Although the revelation and the precipitation of this holy book during the life of the Prophet Muhammad was fractionated according to the circumstances at that time, it is only after Muhammad's death that the Qur'an was collected into one codex. Muhammad spent part of his life in Mecca and Medina during the 6th and 7th centuries. The context of the Koran should therefore also be understood from this perspective. The first twelve years Muhammad spent in Mecca were mainly focused on convincing the Mekkan polytheists to recognize the unity of God and offering a spiritual solution to the unjust tribal ethics through social reform. The aim of the remaining eleven years was to establish in Medina a first Islamic community that would be a translation of the ethical, religious and political values of the Qur'an. Nevertheless, the Prophet Muhammad has managed to unite the then Arab tribes in political and religious terms with varying successes in a short time. After the death of the prophet, the Islamic empire expanded further among the various kalaween (leader of the Muslims). An important fact is that not only did religion expand but culture also expanded through art, science, poetry and philosophy, and this up to the borders of China in the East to the South of France in the West.

## Rituals

The Islamic religion is based on five religious pillars, the first of which is the creed. Although this pillar does not consist of physical activities and merely speaking out certain words, it is considered to be the most important pillar. This formulation, also known as as-Shahada, includes the essence of Islam, attested that only one God has the right to be worshiped and that Muhammad is his prophet and envoy. The giving of this testimony ensures that a person joins Islam.

The second pillar of faith is the five-day ritual prayer or the Arabic word as-Salaat and is considered a direct communication with God. By means of certain actions and the cancellation of specific texts, the Muslim tries to reach a meditative state in which he temporarily stretches from worldly distractions. Ritual prayer is also considered an important key to success both in the mundane and in the hereafter.

AZ-Zakaat is the third religious pillar of Islamic religion and is translated as the obligatory fee for Armenics. By giving away part of their financial capacity to the less-favored, Muslims seek to purify their souls. This protects the wealthy from greed and greed and the poor from jealousy toward the rich through this financial contribution. The higher objective is therefore to create social justice in society.

The fourth pillar of faith includes fasting during the month of Ramadan, the ninth month of the Islamic calendar, and is well known as as-Sawm. Fasting according to the Islamic tradition includes abstaining from food, drinking and sexual community from sunrise to sunset for a month. The purpose of this is to free the soul from whatever form.

In addition to promoting social cohesion through the common prayer and the joint break-up of the meal, fasting also aims to develop empathy and solidarity for the disadvantaged.

The fifth pillar of faith or Al-Hajj is on the pilgrimage to Mecca, which every Muslim must perform once in his life if he is physically and financially capable of doing so. The purpose of this pilgrimage is to return to the source where Islam began and to subjugate itself fully and obey the will of God through various rituals. Several of these rituals can be traced back to Ibrahim (Abraham) and his family members.



Figure 2. Praying Man  
Source: © fotokitas / AdobeStock



Figure 3. Mecca during Pilgrimage (Source: © Konevi / Pexels)

## Contemporary misconceptions

### Men are above Women

One of the main aims of the Qur'an was to restore the social and economic imbalance on the 7th-century Arabian Peninsula. The Holy Book sought to organize an egalitarian society to serve as a role model for all mankind. In social terms, this meant that the position of the weaker members of society - such as orphans, poor and women - was considerably strengthened. It can be seen from various verses that the Qur'an man and woman, both morally and spiritually, are placed on an equal footing. The reforms that the Qur'an wanted to carry out from the outset also related to the world of social inequality in terms of gender, social status and race. The Qur'an indicates that the only criterion on which a believer can be judged can only relate to his level of piety or taqwa. Men and women are therefore considered as equals and associates in pursuing this piety or righteousness.

## Islam is a violent religion

Certain passages that appear in the Qur'an should be situated in the social context in which they were created. These verses refer to situations that do not coincide with the contemporary context. The broader framework of these passages is the seventh-century Arabia. These specific verses give more details about the political action of the Prophet Muhammad in his time and can only serve as a lesson for another age if it can be estimated how the then society functioned.

To understand what seems to be violent in the Koran, the historical circumstances in which the Koranic discourse originated and resounded must be reconstructed. The seventh century Arabian Peninsula consisted of tribal society. The basis'n such tribal society was the covenant of people with a deity. Alliances were based on solidarity and loyalty to the given word and mutual agreements form the basis for social rest.

Violence referred to in the Qur'an was therefore directed at tribal violence which was common In society. Moreover, there were strict rules for Muslims regarding the battles such as the ban on killing children or the chopping down of trees. The violence in the Koran therefore never runs counter to the social rules of the social context in which it was created.

## Polarization and Radicalization

Islam and violence are often associated to each other. Several incidents 'in name of the Islam' created an incorrect perception of what is prescribed in Islam. Examples hereof are the attack on the World Trade Center on September 11 2011, but also the growth of extremist organizations such as ISIS in 2014, the terror attacks in several European cities,...

As a result, Islam has often been discussed in the media in a negative way.

Although these attacks were initiatives of Islamic groups, their actions are in contrast to the principles of Islam. These extremist groups justify their actions by calling it 'jihad' thereby misusing the term to justify violence.

Although radicalism and extremism have often been associated with Islam over the last two decades, violence is not at all inherent in Islam. Islam forbids the use of violence against anyone, without difference between believers and non-believers. It is true that the Qur'an contains certain verses about violence, but one must read these verses in their intended context. It is not the intention that we interpret and apply Koran verses literally in our current society. This would be inconsistent with the intent of the text.

Radicalism and extremism have taken different forms over the years. In the last century, for example, we were faced with a number of right-wing extremist organizations and groups. Communist extremism also had a negative impact on Western society. In recent years, we have also been contending with advancing Islamic radicalism. What becomes clear here is that violence is not necessarily inherent in a particular belief, philosophy or ideology, but that many different factors lead to extreme thinking. This stems from different beliefs, philosophies and ideologies and Islam has no patent on that. This is also confirmed by the Israeli writer and intellectual Amos Oz:

Fanaticism is not only the heritage of Al Qaeda or IS, Jabhat Al-Nusra, Hamas and Hezbollah, of neo-Nazis, anti-Semites, white supremacist thinkers, Islamophobes, the Ku Klux Klan, the hilltop hooligans and other blood shedders in the name of their beliefs. All those fanatics and what looks like them - we all know them. They look at us day after day from the television screen, passionately waving in front of camera lenses preaching all kinds of slogans into the microphone...<sup>1</sup>

Violence is not inherent to faith, but man people and groups use faith for their own interests. Everything that ends up in the hands of people can go wrong. The most sublime object in the hands of people can end in evil. In Latin it is expressed as follows "Corruptio optimi pessima" or "The very best becomes the worst when it turns into its opposite".

<sup>1</sup> O. AMOS, Beste Fanatici, Drie essays, Amsterdam, De Bezige Bij, 2017, p.23.

Cover: The Sheikh Zayed Grand Mosque Center, Abu Dhabi, UAE.  
Photo by © Makalu / Pixabay

This factsheet was funded by the European Union's Internal Security Fund - Police.  
The content of this fact sheet represents the views of the authors only and is their sole responsibility.  
The European Commission does not accept any responsibility for use that may be made  
of the information it contains.

Copyright © EDUC8 2021. All rights reserved.

