

# Common Misconceptions and Stereotypes about the Middle East

## SOME MISCONCEPTIONS ABOUT THE MIDDLE EAST

- The Middle East is a clearly defined place.
- People in the Middle East live as nomads.
- There is nothing but desert and oil in the Middle East.
- The Middle East and the Islamic World are the same.
- Everyone in the Middle East speaks Arabic.
- Everyone in the Middle East is Muslim.
- All Arabs are Muslim.
- Violence in the Middle East is inevitable.
- Everyone in the Middle East hates the United States and Europe.
- People in the Middle East are uneducated and unworldly.
- Islam is an inherently violent faith.
- The practices in Islam are harsh and austere.
- All Muslims must fast during Ramadan.
- Jihad means “Holy War”.
- Muslims, Christians, and Jews have always been in conflict.
- All Muslim women are oppressed and uneducated.
- Democracy and Islam are antithetical to each other.
- All men in turbans are Muslim.

## GEOGRAPHY OF THE MIDDLE EAST

- *The Middle East does not have clear-cut boundaries.* There are cross-cultural connections that stretch from North Africa through Western Asia into Central Asia. The most basic map of the Middle East includes Bahrain, Cyprus, Egypt, Iran, Iraq, Israel, Jordan, Kuwait, Lebanon, Oman, the Palestinian Territories, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Syria, Turkey, the United Arab Emirates, and Yemen.
- *Very few people in the Middle East live as nomads.* The Middle East is quite urbanized and has some of the oldest cities in the world. 60% of the region’s population lives in major cities such as Damascus, Istanbul and Cairo. Ancient Middle Eastern kingdoms such as Sumer, Babylon and Egypt were all cradles for western civilization.
- *There is more than desert and oil in the Middle East.* The geography of the Middle East is diverse and includes everything from fertile river deltas and forests, to mountain ranges and arid plateaus. Some countries in the Middle East are oil rich, while others have little or no oil reserves.
- *The Middle East and the Islamic World are not the same.* While Islam first developed in the Arabian Peninsula and Arabic is its liturgical language, the majority of the world’s Muslims are not Arab and live outside the Middle East. Indeed, today the country with the largest Muslim population is Indonesia.

## PEOPLE IN THE MIDDLE EAST

- *Not everyone in the Middle East speaks Arabic.* In addition to Arabic, there are many different languages and dialects spoken in the area. These include Persian, Turkish, Kurdish, and Hebrew.
- *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.
- *Many Arabs are not Muslim.* There are several different Arab Christian groups in the Middle East. One of the largest, with over ten million adherents, is the Coptic Christians of Egypt.
- *Violence in the Middle East is not inevitable.* The vast majority of people in the region want peace and stability. While there has been a continuing series of conflicts since the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, this is not due to any inherent cultural aggression.



## PEOPLE IN THE MIDDLE EAST (Continued)

- *Everyone in the Middle East does not hate the United States and Europe.* While some people are critical of American and European foreign policy in the region, for many these countries are also role models of economic development and political freedom.
- *People in the Middle East place a high value on education and worldliness.* Parents in the Middle East want their children to have a good education in the arts and sciences. Worldly experience through travel and exposure to other cultures is also highly regarded. Although literacy rates vary from country to country, over 80% of the people in Arab countries are literate.

## ISLAM IN THE MIDDLE EAST

- *Islam is not an inherently violent faith.* The vast majority of Muslims are peace-loving people. While a few have advocated violence as a political tool, Muslims did not invent terrorism.
- *The practices of Islam are not particularly harsh and austere.* Muslims have both prescribed (prayer, fasting, and pilgrimage) and prohibited (drinking alcohol, eating pork) acts. The expectations put on Muslims are comparable to the demands made of members of many of the world's faiths.
- *All Muslims must try to fast during Ramadan.* Beginning roughly at puberty, Muslims abstain from taking food or water from sunrise to sunset during the month of Ramadan. While fasting is strongly encouraged, allowances are made when it might damage one's health. For example, travelers, pregnant women, the elderly and the sick are all encouraged not to fast during Ramadan.
- *Jihad means "struggle."* While it can refer to military action, Jihad usually refers to internal struggles that accompany religious devotion. Beyond this, Jihad can be used to define any general struggle to better oneself. While all Muslim men might struggle with their faith, only an extremely small percentage become militant Jihadists.
- *Muslims, Christians, and Jews have not always been in conflict.* Muslims have co-existed with other faiths for centuries. Indeed, all three faiths have shared roots. Judeo-Christian prophets, such as Abraham, Noah, and Joseph, all have prominent places in Islam.
- *All Muslim women are not oppressed and uneducated.* Most lead happy, fulfilling lives. Many are well educated, productive members of society. There are as many, if not more, women than men in most Middle Eastern universities. Muslim women face the same challenges in their personal and professional lives as women all over the world.
- *Democracy and Islam are not antithetical.* There is nothing inherent in Islam that leads to totalitarianism. Many Muslims work hard to establish democracies throughout the Middle East.
- *All men in turbans are not Muslim.* Muslims wear a wide variety of clothing. Many people in the United States confuse the different practitioners of the world's religions. For example, because of a religious obligation not to cut their hair and to wear a turban, one common mistake is assuming that Sikh men are Muslim. This is not true; Sikhism originated in India and it is unrelated to Islam.



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