

Twelfth Edition

A Concise History of the  
**Middle East**



Arthur Goldschmidt Jr.  
and Ibrahim Al-Marashi

# A Concise History of the Middle East

*A Concise History of the Middle East* provides a comprehensive introduction to the history of this turbulent region. Spanning from pre-Islam to the present day, it explores the evolution of Islamic institutions and culture, the influence of the West, modernization efforts in the Middle East, the struggle of various peoples for political independence, the Arab–Israel conflict, the reassertion of Islamic values and power, the issues surrounding the Palestinian Question, and the Middle East post-9/11 and post-Arab uprisings.

The twelfth edition has been fully revised to reflect the most recent events in, and concerns of, the region, including the presence of ISIS and other non-state actors, the civil wars in Syria and Yemen, and the refugee crisis. New parts and part timelines will help students grasp and contextualize the long and complicated history of the region.

With updated biographical sketches and glossary, and a new concluding chapter, this book remains the quintessential text for students of Middle East history.

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**Arthur Goldschmidt Jr.  
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# Contents

<i>List of Illustrations</i>	vii
<i>Preface</i>	viii
1 Introduction	1
<b>PART I</b>	
<b>The Rise of Islam to the Zenith of Abbasid Power</b>	<b>11</b>
2 The Middle East before Muhammad	13
3 Muhammad and the Rise of Islam	24
4 The Early Arab Conquests	42
5 The High Caliphate	56
<b>PART II</b>	
<b>The Turkic Empires From the Seljuks to Ottomans</b>	<b>69</b>
6 The Rise of the Shi'a and the Influx of the Turks	71
7 The Crusader and Mongol Invasions	80
8 Islamic Civilization	88
9 Firearms, Slaves, and Empires	105
<b>PART III</b>	
<b>European Incursions and the Nationalist Reaction</b>	<b>125</b>
10 European Interests and Imperialism	127
11 Westernizing Reform in the Nineteenth Century	137
12 The Rise of Nationalism	150

<b>PART IV</b>	
<b>World War I and Its Aftermath</b>	<b>165</b>
13 The Roots of Arab Bitterness	167
14 Modernizing Rulers in the Independent States	182
15 Egypt and the Fertile Crescent Under European Control	202
<b>PART V</b>	
<b>The Arab–Israeli Conflict</b>	<b>223</b>
16 The Contest for Palestine	225
17 Israel’s Rebirth and the Rise of Arab Nationalism	241
18 War and the Quest for Peace	268
<b>PART VI</b>	
<b>The Islamist Resurgence</b>	<b>299</b>
19 The Reassertion of Islamist Power	301
20 The 1991 Gulf War and the Peace Process	327
21 The Post-9/11 Decade in the Middle East	344
<b>PART VII</b>	
<b>The Arab Spring and Its Aftermath</b>	<b>371</b>
22 In the Season of Arab Discontent	373
23 The Regional Cold War in the Twenty-First Century	398
<i>Appendix I</i>	410
<i>Appendix II</i>	411
<i>Glossary</i>	412
<i>Bibliographic Essay</i>	443
<i>Bibliographic Web Essay</i>	485
<i>Index</i>	491

# Illustrations

## Maps

1.1	Physical features of the Middle East	6
2.1	Byzantine and Sassanid Empires, circa 600	19
5.1	The Abbasid caliphate, circa 800	62
6.1	The Fatimids and the Seljuks, circa 1090	78
9.1	The Mamluks and the Il-Khanids, circa 1300	107
9.2	The Ottoman Empire in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries	115
13.1	The Sykes-Picot Agreement, 1916	177
13.2	The Middle Eastern Mandates, 1924	180
16.1	The UN Partition Plan for Palestine, 1947	239
18.1	Israel and the occupied territories, 1967–1973	271
18.2	The territorial situation at the end of the October 1973 War	288
19.1	The Persian Gulf Area	312
21.1a	Iraq	361
21.1b	Approximate distribution of Iraq's ethnic and sectarian groups	362
21.2	Settlements in the West Bank and Gaza Strip areas, 1967–2010	367
22.1	Political map of the Middle East on the eve of the Arab Spring 2011	375
23.1	Political map of the Middle East, with oil and gas deposits, 2018	404
23.2	Areas with Kurdish majorities	407

## Figure

4.1	The Hashimite clan, showing Shi'ite <i>imams</i>	54
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# Preface

The Middle East matters to the rest of the world for its resources, its current struggles between rulers and peoples, and the rise of various forms of resurgent Islam. Its history helps to explain many of the political and military events that dominate today's news.

This textbook, sometimes called “classic,” is coauthored by Arthur Goldschmidt, Professor Emeritus of Middle East History at the Pennsylvania State University, and Ibrahim Al-Marashi, Associate Professor of History at California State University, San Marcos. We facetiously termed an earlier edition *A Decreasingly Concise History of the Middle East*, but the book must grow as new events and trends emerge. We will add some relevant photos to the website, as well as some sample test questions for course instructors.

These cuts made room to include coverage of recent significant changes in the region, also taking into account environmental changes and challenges, and a final chapter that covers and interprets what has been happening since 2015, when the eleventh edition was released. We also made relevant additions to the glossary. Timelines now appear at selected junctures of the book, and the traditional chronology has gone to the website.

Teachers and students need a book that reflects current scholarship, does not hide its ideas behind a pseudoscholarly style addressed to pedants, and does not reinforce political or ethnic biases. Students—and members of the wider English-speaking public—deserve clear explanations of the Arab–Israeli conflict, the Middle Eastern oil, the Islamic State, and the revolutions in Iran and the Arab countries. The book has gone through many previous editions and, despite the appearance of other general histories, becomes ever more widely used in universities worldwide.

Any work of art or scholarship follows conventions. When writing a book that introduces a recondite subject to students and general readers, its authors must tell the audience what these conventions will be. The English system of weights and measures is giving way to the metric system; this book uses both. Prices expressed in non-American currencies, ancient or modern, are given in 2018 US dollar equivalents. Muslims follow a twelve-month lunar calendar dated from the year Muhammad and his associates moved from Mecca to Medina. Quite naturally, they use this calendar when they teach or learn

Islamic history. Conversion between the two systems is cumbersome. Therefore, all dates given in this text are based on the Gregorian calendar. We use an international dating system, with the date before the month, and years are either BCE (Before the Common Era, instead of BC) or CE (Common Era, not AD). When dates appear in parentheses following a ruler's name, they refer to the span of his or her reign. Personal names in languages using the Arabic script are transliterated according to the *International Journal of Middle East Studies* system, minus the diacritics, except for a few persons and places mentioned often in the press. The same applies to a few technical terms that cannot be translated accurately into English.

The work of a great teacher never perishes—hence we have retained Arthur Goldschmidt's original dedication of this book to an elementary school teacher and principal whose knowledge, ideas, and enthusiasm live on in thousands of her former pupils and in the Georgetown Day School in Washington, DC.

We have retained in this edition many of the contributions made by Lawrence Davidson as coauthor of the eighth, ninth, and tenth editions, and thank him for his generous consent to do so. Aomar Boum added important environmental concerns to the eleventh edition that we have tried to incorporate in the twelfth, and we thank him, too. We would also like to thank the reviewers who sent invaluable feedback and suggestions to Westview Press.

Finally, we'd like to acknowledge the work our colleagues at Westview—our editor Ada Fung, and at Routledge, Joe Whiting, Anna Dolan, Becky McPhee, Emma Tyce and Julie Willis—have done to support the book.

We've enjoyed working together and getting to know each other by e-mail, phone, and Skype. We remain accountable for all errors of fact or interpretation. We welcome readers' comments and advice.

Arthur Goldschmidt Jr.  
Ibrahim Al-Marashi

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# 1 Introduction

In this book we introduce the Middle East to English-speaking students and other readers who have not lived in the area or studied its history before. Historical events occur in complex contexts, which everyone must understand in order to act wisely in the future.

*Middle East* is a rather imprecise term, describing a geographical area that extends from Egypt to Afghanistan or the cultural region in which Islam arose and developed. We plan to make the term clearer in this chapter. First, let us tell you why we think history is the discipline best suited for your introduction to the area. After all, you might look at the Middle East through its systems for allocating power and values using the discipline of political science. An economist would focus on the ways its inhabitants organize themselves to satisfy their material needs. Sociologists and cultural anthropologists would analyze the institutions and group behavior of the various peoples who constitute the Middle East. You could also view its various cultures through their languages, religions, literature, geography, architecture, art, music, dance, and food.

## **Then and Now, There and Here**

History belongs to all of us. Whenever you talk about something that happened to you, your friends, your community, or your country, you are relating history through events that occurred in the past. History can cover politics, economics, lifestyles, beliefs, works of literature or art, cities or rural areas, incidents you remember, stories older people told you, or subjects you can only read about. Broadly speaking, everything that has ever happened up to the moment you read these lines is history, or the study of the past.

You may ask: why should anyone want to study the Middle East, let alone the history of Islamic civilization? We argue that studying any subject, from philosophy to physics, is potentially an adventure of the mind. Islamic history is a subject worth learning for its own sake. Confronted by distances of time and space, and by differences of thought patterns and lifestyles, we learn more about ourselves—about our era, area, beliefs, and customs. Islam is somewhat like Christianity and Judaism, but not entirely so.

## 2 Introduction

The peoples of the Middle East (like those of the West) are partial heirs to the Greeks and the Romans. To a greater degree, however, they are direct successors of the still earlier civilizations of Egypt, Mesopotamia, Persia, and other lands of the ancient Middle East. As a result, they have evolved in ways quite different than we have. They are rather like our cousins, neither siblings nor strangers to us.

Now let us raise another issue. What are the most meaningful units of historical study? The West has a strong tradition of studying national history—that of the United States, Britain, France, Russia, or, for that matter, China or Japan. In other parts of the world, including the Middle East, political boundaries have changed so often that nation-states have not existed until recently, let alone served as meaningful units of historical study. In the Islamic and Middle Eastern tradition, historical studies tend to center on dynasties (ruling families), whose time spans and territories vary widely. The Ottoman Empire, for example, was a large state made up of Turks, Arabs, Greeks, and many other ethnic groups. Its rulers, called *sultans*, all belonged to a family descended from a Turkish warrior named Osman. It was not a nation but a dynastic state—one that lasted a long time and affected many other peoples. At some times we will use the old dynastic divisions of time and space; for the modern period, we sometimes use a country-by-country approach, making major wars and crises the points of division. At other times we will examine the history topically, in terms of “Islamic civilization” or “westernizing reform.”

From what we now know about Middle East history, we believe that our most meaningful unit of study is not the dynasty or the nation-state but the civilization. Although the term *civilization* is easier to describe than to define, this book, especially in its earlier chapters, focuses on an interlocking complex of rulers and subjects, governments and laws, arts and letters, cultures and customs, cities and villages—in short, on a civilization that has prevailed in most of western Asia and northern Africa since the seventh century, all tied together by the religion of Islam. You will see how Islamic beliefs and practices produced institutions for all aspects of Middle Eastern life. Then you will learn how Muslim patterns of belief and action were disrupted by the impact of the West. You will look at some of the ways in which the peoples of the Middle East have coped with Western domination, accepting some but rejecting much European and US culture. You will also see how they have won back their political independence and tried to regain their autonomy as a civilization. We believe this to be the best way to start studying the Middle East.

In another sense, our culture owes much to the civilizations of the Middle East. Our religious beliefs and observances are derived from those of the Hebrews, Mesopotamians, Egyptians, Persians, and Greeks who lived in the Middle East before Islam. Moreover, many Westerners do not know what they have learned from Islamic culture. A glance at the background of some English words backs up our point.

Let us start with what is closest to ourselves—our clothes. The names of several items we are apt to wear have Middle Eastern backgrounds: cotton (from the Arabic *qutn*), pajamas and sandals (both words taken from Persian), and obviously caftans and turbans. Muslin cloth once came from Mosul (a city in Iraq) and damask from Damascus. The striped cat we call tabby got its name from a type of cloth called *'attabi* once woven in a section of Baghdad by that name. Some Arabs claim that the game of tennis took its name from a medieval Egyptian town, Tinnis, where cotton cloth (used then to cover the balls) was woven. Are we stretching the point? Well, the name for the implement with which you play the game, your racquet, goes back to an Arabic word meaning “palm of the hand.” Backgammon, chess, polo, and playing cards came to the West from the Middle East. The rook in chess comes from the Persian *rukḥ* (castle) and *checkmate* from *shah mat* (the king is dead). As for household furnishings, we have taken *divan*, *sofa*, *mattress*, and of course *afghan* and *ottoman* from the Middle East.

You may already know the Middle Eastern origin of such foods as shish kebab, yogurt, tabbouleh, hummus, and pita. Some of our other gastronomic terms became naturalized even longer ago: *apricot*, *artichoke*, *ginger*, *lemon*, *lime*, *orange*, *saffron*, *sugar*, and *tangerine*. *Hashish* is an Arabic word denoting, in addition to cannabis, weeds and grass, depending on the context. Both *sherbet* and *syrup* come from the Arabic word for “drink.” Muslims may not use intoxicating liquor, but the very word *alcohol* comes from Arabic. So do words for other familiar beverages: *coffee*, *soda* (derived from the word for “head-ache,” which the Arabs treated with a plant containing soda), and *julep* (from the Persian word for “rosewater”).

Indeed, many words used in the sciences, such as *alembic*, *azimuth*, and *nadir*, are Arabic. In mathematics algebra can be traced to *al-jabr* (bonesetting) and *algorithm* to a ninth-century mathematician surnamed al-Khwarizmi. The word *guitar* goes back, via Spain, to the Arabs' *qitar*. Other Middle Eastern instruments include the lute, tambourine, and zither. *Mask* and *mascara* both derive from an Arabic word meaning “fool.” Let some miscellaneous words round out the digression: *alcove* (from *al-qubba*, a “domed area”), *admiral*, *arsenal*, *magazine* (in the sense of a storehouse), *talc*, *tariff* (from *al-ta'rifah*, a “list of prices”), and *almanac* (from *al-manakh*, meaning “weather”). Middle East history gives us some background to what we have, what we do, and what we are.

Getting back to more practical matters, we must look to the recent history of the Middle East to explain what is happening there now. This area gets more than its share of the news: Arab–Israeli wars (or possibly peace), assassinations, oil, revolutions, terrorism, the Gulf War, America's occupation of Iraq, the Arab Spring, and ISIS. Current events in the Middle East affect us as individuals, as members of religious or ethnic groups, and as citizens of our countries. Can history give us clues as to how we should respond? We think so. This book will risk relating past events to current ones. As historians, we care about what happened, how it happened, and why it happened. But all of

#### 4 Introduction

us who live in this world want to know what these events mean for ourselves, here and now.

As this caravan (originally a Persian word) of Middle East history starts off, we wish you *rihla sa'ida, nasi'a tova, safar be-khayr*—and may you have a fruitful intellectual journey.

#### ***The Physical Setting***

Before we can write anything about its history, we must settle on a definition of the Middle East. Even though historians and journalists throw the term around, not everyone agrees on what it means. It makes little sense geographically. No point on the globe is more “middle” than any other. What is “east” for France and Italy is “west” for India and China. Logically, we could say “southwest Asia,” but that would leave out Egypt and European Turkey. Our conventional view of the “Old World” having three continents—Europe, Asia, and Africa—breaks down once we consider their physical and cultural geography. Do Asia and Africa divide at the Suez Canal, at the border between Egypt and Israel, or somewhere east of Sinai? What differences are there between peoples living east and west of the Ural Mountains or the Bosphorus? For us humans, continents are not logical either.

So let us write about a “Middle East” that the press has made familiar to us. Its geographical limits may be disputed, but this book will treat the Middle East as running from the Nile Valley to the Muslim lands of Central Asia (roughly, the valley of the Amu Darya, or Oxus, River), from southeast Europe to the Arabian Sea (see Map 1.1). We may stretch or shrink the area when discussing a given historical period in which political realities may have altered the conventional outline. After all, the lands south and east of the Mediterranean were the East to our cultural forebears until they went on to India and China, whereupon the Muslim lands became the Near East. World War II made it the Middle East, and so it has remained, despite UN efforts to rename it “West Asia.” For navigation and aviation, peacetime commerce and wartime strategy, and journalism and politics, the area is in the middle, flanked by centers of population and power.

#### ***Some Descriptive Geography***

History waits upon geography. Before you can have a play, there must be a stage. Perhaps we should spend a lot of time on topography and climate, flora and fauna, and other aspects of descriptive geography. Some textbooks do, but they may remind you of the bad old way of teaching geography by making schoolchildren memorize the names of mountains, rivers, capitals, and principal products of countries. Let us stress some essential points you need to master before starting your study of Middle East history.

### ***Climate***

The Middle East tends to be hot and dry. Most parts get some rainfall but usually in amounts too small or too irregular to support settled agriculture. Yet the world's oldest farming villages have been unearthed in the highlands of Anatolia (Asiatic Turkey), Persia, and Palestine. Others have been found in the western Sahara. What happened? It seems that as the polar ice caps (from the last Ice Age) retreated some 10,000 years ago, rainfall diminished in North Africa and southwest Asia. Hunting and food-gathering peoples, living in lands that could once have been like the Garden of Eden, had to learn how to control their sources of sustenance, as rain-watered areas became farther and farther apart. Some peoples moved into the marshy valleys of the great rivers: the Nile, the Tigris, and the Euphrates. By 4000 BCE (Before the Common Era) or so, they had learned how to tame the annual floods to water their fields. Other peoples became nomads; they learned how to move up and down mountains or among desert oases to find forage for their sheep, goats, donkeys, and eventually camels and horses.

The sedentary farmers who tamed the rivers needed governments to organize the building of dams, dikes, and canals for large-scale irrigation that would regulate the distribution of the floodwaters. They also needed protection from wandering animal herders. The latter group, the nomads, sometimes helped the settled peoples as soldiers, merchants, and purveyors of meat and other animal products. But at times they also became a threat to the farmers and their governors when they pillaged the farms and sacked the cities. Farmers and herders often fought, like Cain and Abel, and yet they also needed each other. In arid lands characterized by long, hot summers and cold winter nights, both groups had to coexist to survive.

### ***Location***

The Middle East is the natural crossroads of the Afro-Eurasian landmass. It is also the "land of the seven seas." It lies athwart the water route from southern Ukraine to the Mediterranean via the Black Sea, the Bosphorus, the Sea of Marmara, the Dardanelles, and the Aegean Sea. In various eras an area between the Nile Delta and the Sinai Peninsula has been adapted to facilitate shipping between the Mediterranean and the Red Sea, which in turn has served as a highway to Asia and East Africa. Ever since the taming of the one-humped camel around 3000 BCE, men and women have crossed the deserts with their merchandise, flocks, and household goods. Even the high mountains of Anatolia and Persia did not bar passage to people with horses, donkeys, or two-humped camels. Invaders and traders have entered the Middle East from Central Asia, Europe, and Africa since prehistoric times. Rarely in the past 4,000 years have Middle Eastern peoples known any respite from outside pressures or influences.



Map 1.1 Physical features of the Middle East



## 8 *Introduction*

Consider what this accessibility means for the Middle East, compared with other parts of the world. Chinese civilization developed in relative isolation; invading “barbarians” were first tamed and then absorbed into China’s political system. British subjects lived for centuries in what they smugly called “splendid isolation.” The United States long saw itself as separate from the outside world. Writing as Americans to our fellow citizens, who may at times question the political attitudes and actions of Middle Eastern peoples, let us all ask ourselves these questions: When did we last fight a war on US soil? When did we last experience a foreign military occupation? Up to 2001, did we even fear hostile raids from abroad? Middle Easterners have, by contrast, known conquest, outside domination, and a continuing exchange of people and animals (but also of goods and ideas) with both the East and the West throughout their history.

### *Natural Resources*

Nature did not endow the Middle East as lavishly as North America or Europe. There are no more grassy plains. Nearly all the forests have been cut down. Partly as a result of deforestation, drinkable water is scarce almost everywhere and has become so precious that wars have been fought over it. Some coal and lignite are mined in Anatolia. A few mountainous areas harbor deposits of copper, iron, and other metals; in many instances they have been worked since ancient times. These resources are meager. More plentiful are sand and limestone, other building materials, and sunlight (a blessing if solar energy becomes the main source of power).

But what about oil? It is true that some areas, especially those around the Persian Gulf, have huge petroleum deposits, more than half of the world’s known reserves. Oil has magnified the Middle East’s importance. Its blessings, though, are showered on but few countries, mainly Saudi Arabia, Iran, Kuwait, Iraq, and the United Arab Emirates. Exploitation of Middle Eastern oil did not start until the twentieth century; it became large scale only after 1945. For most of history, crude petroleum was a medicine, a pitch for caulking riverboats, or the cause of mysterious fires that were objects of religious veneration, but not the source of wealth and power that it has now become. And who knows how long it will last?

### *Human Diversity*

The Middle East’s geography has contributed to the diversity of its inhabitants. On the one hand, varied landscapes—mountains and plains, river valleys and deserts—require differing lifestyles. Relatively inaccessible mountains, further isolated in winter and spring by fast-flowing streams, have shielded religious and ethnic minorities in such countries as Lebanon, Yemen, and Iran. On the other hand, frequent invasions have brought new races and folkways into the Middle East. The result is a vast mosaic of

peoples, a living museum of physical types, belief systems, languages, and cultures.

This diversity may not always show up on statistical tables, such as the one at the end of this book. Even when it does, remember that nine-tenths of the people in the Middle East are Muslims. Half the population of the area speaks Arabic; most of the other half speaks either Turkish or Persian. The mosaic of separate religious and ethnic groups has started to crumble. Widespread primary schooling, satellite television, DVDs, cell phones, and tablets help diffuse a universal culture, mostly among the young. Oil revenues, the proliferation of factories, and the growth of cities have also made the people seem more alike.

But cultural and religious differences persist and promote conflicts. Lebanon's civil wars arose partly because many Muslims felt that they did not enjoy power and prestige equal to that of the Christians, who used to be the country's majority. Syria's current elite comes disproportionately from a minority sect, the Alawites, who used the army officer corps to rise to power in a society otherwise dominated by Sunni Muslims. Christian Arabs, especially the Greek Orthodox, who make up about 5 percent of Syria's population and 8 percent of Lebanon's, were more active than the Muslims in promoting the early spread of Arab nationalism in those countries. Iraq's politics are bedeviled by differences between Sunni and Shi'a Muslim Arabs, both of whom have resisted attempts by the Kurds (about a fifth of the country's population) to form a separate state. Israel, though mainly Jewish, has 1.7 million Arabs living within its pre-1967 borders and has been ruling 2.6 million additional Arab Muslims and Christians in the West Bank, which it has controlled since the June 1967 war. The Gaza Strip, which Israel occupied from 1967 to 2005 and invaded again in 2006, 2009, and 2014, contains 1.8 million Arabs. Israel's Jews are divided between those of European origin, called *Ashkenazim*, and those who came from Asian or African countries, called *Mizrachim* or Orientals. You may now be confused by these sectarian and ethnic differences, but we will cover them in more detail later. You may also look up the terms in the glossary.

### **Some Points to Anticipate**

The interaction between human beings and their physical surroundings is a fascinating subject, more so than most students realize. As you read through the historical narrative, do not be put off by the names of deserts and mountains, rivers and seas. Think of the challenges they have posed to humanity and the stratagems by which Middle Eastern peoples have overcome them. History is not limited to shaykhs and shahs or to presidents and politicians; it is also the story of traders and teachers, artisans and farmers, herders of goats and warriors on horseback. In the chapters that follow, you will see how they used the mountains, plains, and valleys that appear on

Map 1.1 and how they filled the Middle East with cities, dynastic kingdoms, and contending nation-states.

In reading the Middle East's history from the rise of Islam to the present, you will notice how much of your attention will be focused on confrontations, especially wars. When you survey the history of any region or country, you risk getting bogged down in its struggles and ignoring its cultural achievements or the everyday lives of its people. In this book the closer we move toward current events, the more we will discuss Middle East conflicts: the United States versus the Soviet Union, oil producers versus consumers, Islamist versus secularist, Christian versus Muslim, Shi'a versus Sunni, and Palestinian versus Israeli.

Textbook writers often make lists to condense their ideas, and this list sums up what we see as the main causes of Middle Eastern conflict: (1) the incomplete transition from communities based on religion and obedience to divine law to nation-states enforcing human-made laws to increase their security and well-being in this world; (2) the resulting belief on the part of many Middle Eastern peoples that their governments are illegitimate and not to be willingly obeyed; (3) the quest for dignity and freedom by highly articulate peoples (or nations) who have endured centuries of subjection and are determined never again to lose their independence; (4) the involvement of outside governments and individuals who do not recognize the hopes and fears of Middle Eastern peoples and, in the worst case, play on them to serve their own needs (as can be seen in the Iraq War); (5) the growing concentration of highly destructive weapons in countries that are both volatile and vulnerable; (6) the rising need for food, water, and fossil fuels worldwide as the amounts available for consumption decrease; (7) overpopulation of some countries and the widening gap between a few very rich people and the many poor; (8) the failure to contain or resolve the Palestinian–Israeli conflict; (9) sectarian and ethnic tensions; and (10) Palestinian, Iraqi, Syrian, and Yemeni refugees abroad and internally displaced populations.

The Middle East is the most troubled region of a turbulent world. Its people are not at peace with one another or with themselves. They suspect that outsiders do not understand them. We hope that you will know them better after reading this text and continue to learn about their cultures—not with a childish desire to prove “We’re right and you’re wrong” but, rather, with a mature hope of promoting true dialogue between Middle Eastern and Western ways of life. There is much to be learned from the people of the Middle East: hospitality, generosity, strong family ties, and true empathy for the needs and feelings of others. However, clashes are expected to continue, and there are no easy solutions. The Middle East is an area that has always been vulnerable to invasion and exploitation, that could not escape the ambitions of local and foreign rulers, and that has been prized for its natural resources or its strategic location. It has produced more than its share of scholars and poets, artists and architects, philosophers and prophets. This region is often called “the cradle of human civilization.” Let us hope it will not become its grave.

## Part I

# The Rise of Islam to the Zenith of Abbasid Power

- 570 Muhammad born; Ethiopians invade western Arabia
- 610 First revelations of the Qur'an to Muhammad
- 622 *Hijra* of Muhammad and his associates from Mecca to Medina; first Muslim *umma* is formed
- 630 Mecca's pagan leaders accept Islam
- 632 Muhammad dies; associates choose Abu-Bakr as first caliph
- 634 Umar succeeds Abu-Bakr as caliph
- 636 Arab victory over Byzantines in Battle of Yarmuk River
- 637 Arab victory over Sassanid Persia at Battle of al-Qadisiyya
- 639–642 Arabs take Egypt from Byzantine Empire
- 640 Arab garrison towns set up at Basra and Kufa
- 644 Umar murdered; associates elect Uthman as caliph
- 656 Rebels murder Uthman; Ali becomes caliph
- 657 Mu'awiya challenges Ali at Battle of Siffin
- 661 Kharijite kills Ali, whose son, Hasan, abdicates to Mu'awiya
- 661–750 Umayyad caliphate in Damascus
- 680 Husayn challenges Umayyad rule and is killed at Karbala
- 708–715 Muslim army conquers Sind, Transoxiana, and Spain
- 732 Franks under Charles Martel defeat Muslims in Battle of Tours
- 747 Abu-Muslim, backed by Shi'a *mawali*, starts Abbasid revolt in Khurasan
- 750 Abbasids defeat and murder Umayyads of Damascus
- 750–1258 Abbasid caliphate in Iraq
- 762 Baghdad founded as new 'Abbasid capital
- 786–809 Caliphate of Harun al-Rashid
- 878 Disappearance of Muhammad, twelfth Shi'a imam

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## 2 The Middle East before Muhammad

If history can be defined as humanity's recorded past, then the Middle East has had more history than any other part of the world. Although the human species probably originated in Africa, the main breakthroughs to civilization occurred in the Middle East. It is here that most staple food crops were initially cultivated, most farm animals first domesticated, and the earliest agricultural villages founded. Here, too, arose the world's oldest cities, the first governments, and the earliest religious and legal systems. Writing and the preservation of records were Middle Eastern inventions. Without them, history, as commonly understood, would be inconceivable.

### The Environment

During the last 10,000 years before the birth of Christ, the peoples of the Middle East developed various skills to cope with their challenging environment. The West tends to perceive the Middle East as a stretch of sand dunes and deserts with few scattered oases. In these mental and written images, the camel is the only animal that could survive the unbearable heat. Although this might be true for many parts of the region, the Middle East supports a complex ecosystem where population, flora, and fauna have adjusted to climate changes and droughts and have survived protracted ecological crises.

As the uplands grew dry and parched, people learned to harness the great rivers to grow more crops. Surface and underground water systems largely shaped the majority of Middle Eastern environmental landscapes. Middle Eastern inhabitants succeeded in controlling the flow of rivers such as the Nile, Euphrates, Tigris, and Jordan, through dams and canals, as well as underground water channels (called *qanats*), laying the basis for a well-developed agricultural system.

The Middle East was one of the first regions where humans shifted their survival strategies from hunting and gathering to subsistence farming and settlement. They tamed donkeys and cattle to bear their burdens and share their labors. They built ovens hot enough to fire clay pottery. They fashioned tools and weapons of bronze and, later, of forged iron. They devised alphabets suitable for sending messages and keeping records on tablets of clay or rolls of

papyrus. They developed cults and rituals, expressing the beliefs that gave meaning to their lives.

The ancient civilization of Sumer in southern Mesopotamia provided one of the earliest examples of irrigated farming that led to rising population. However, greater population density and overuse of land led to soil salinization, causing Sumer's downfall. At the center of the Sumerian and other Middle Eastern environmental approaches was the development of irrigation canals that sustained large settled communities. These systems of irrigated farming contained the potential for prosperity as well as for the demise of these civilizations.

In his 1228 *Mu'jam al-buldan* (Dictionary of Countries), the Arab geographer Yaqut al-Hamawi describes the earthen dam of Ma'rib in today's Yemen:

the water from springs gathers . . . collecting behind the dam like a sea. Whenever they wanted to they could irrigate their crops from it, by just letting out however much water they needed from sluice gates; once they had used enough, they would close the gates again as they pleased.

The Ma'rib dam is located near San'a, today's capital of Yemen. Called the oldest dam in the world, it was built by the ancient Sabaeans to capture seasonal monsoon rainfall needed for irrigation. By the time Muhammad was born, Yemen and southern Arabia, unlike most of the Arabian Peninsula, had developed agriculture supported by irrigation canals fed by the dam and its networks of canals.

*Qanats* are a series of wells connected by a subterranean tunnel that channels water to the surface. Water flows from the original high mountain well that connects to the aquifer down the gentle slope of a series of wells, ending in a spring at the level of the village or farms. The wells or shafts permit easy access and the removal of soil from the *qanat* tunnels. As a system of irrigation and water collection, *qanats* were developed in Persia during the first millennium BCE and spread throughout the Middle East. The Assyrians relied on the *qanats* as a source of drinkable water. The capital city of Persepolis was mostly irrigated by *qanats*. The technology of *qanats* spread into places beyond the Iranian Plateau, especially during the rule of the Achaemenids, who allowed diggers to profit from its revenues. New settlements emerged as additional *qanats* were dug throughout the region, including the shores of the Mediterranean, the Arabian Peninsula, Syria, and Oman. Eastward, the system was diffused through the Central Asian oases on the Silk Road to the Chinese city of Xinjiang. Once Islam emerged and spread in the Middle East, *qanats* were introduced into North African oases and Spain.

The arid nature of the Middle East had made the *qanat* a primary choice of water management even before Islam. Unlike pumping technologies, the *qanat* is a very reliable and sustainable system of using a scarce resource as it allows continuous flow of water without draining the aquifer. A hereditary class of skilled diggers maintained the *qanats*, moving from one place to another to

build new ones. Where rivers were absent, this method of water distribution facilitated settlement throughout the Middle East. Its inhabitants absorbed Medes and Persians coming from the north and successive Semitic invaders from Arabia. They submitted to Alexander's Macedonians in the fourth century BCE but soon absorbed them into their own cultures. Finally, in the last century before Christ, the lands east and south of the Mediterranean were absorbed into the Roman Empire.

## **Persia and Rome**

The two great empires existing at the dawn of the Common Era, Persia and Rome, took many pages from the books of their imperial precursors. During the period of the Achaemenid dynasty (550–330 BCE), Persia, the land we now call Iran, had ruled over various ethnic and religious groups in an area stretching from the Indus to the Nile. Some, but not all, of the kings and nobles followed the religion of Zoroaster, who lived around the eleventh century BCE. He had taught the existence of a supreme deity, Ahura Mazda (Wise Lord), creator of the material and spiritual worlds, source of both light and darkness, founder of the moral order, lawgiver, and judge of all beings. An opposing force, Ahriman, was represented by darkness and disorder. Although Zoroaster predicted that Ahura Mazda would ultimately win the cosmic struggle, all people were free to choose between Good and Evil, Light and Darkness, the Truth and the Lie. The Zoroastrians venerated light, using a network of fire temples tended by a large priestly class. Zoroastrianism appealed mainly to the highborn Persians, not to commoners or to the other peoples under their rule. The Achaemenid kings tolerated the diverse beliefs and practices of their subjects as long as they obeyed the laws, paid their taxes, and sent their sons to the Persian army. Their empire set the pattern followed by most—but not all—of the multicultural dynastic states that have arisen since ancient times. When Alexander the Great humbled the Achaemenids and absorbed their empire into his own, he hoped to fuse Hellenic (Greek) ways with the culture of the Middle East. Many of the ideas, institutions, and administrators of the Egyptians, Syrians, Mesopotamians, and Persians were co-opted into his far-flung but short-lived realm.

Cultural fusion continued later, when Rome ruled the Middle East. By uniting under its rule all the peoples of the Mediterranean world, the Roman Empire stimulated trade and the interchange of peoples and folkways. Several Middle Eastern religions and mystery cults spread among the Romans, including Mithraism, a cult that had begun in Persia and attracted many Roman soldiers, and Christianity, originally a Jewish sect whose base of support was broadened by Paul and the apostles. Most of the early church fathers lived in Anatolia, Syria, Egypt, and North Africa. These areas—later Islam's heartland—saw the earliest development of most Christian doctrines and institutions. By the late third century, Christianity (still officially banned by the Roman Empire) actually prevailed in the eastern Mediterranean. Its appeal, relative to rival religions, lay

partly in its success in adopting attractive aspects of earlier faiths. For instance, the Egyptians could identify the risen Christ with Osiris, one of their ancient gods who too had died and been resurrected.

When Rome's emperor Constantine (r. 313–37) became a nominal Christian, he redirected the course of history, both Middle Eastern and Western. Rome became a Christian empire. The emperor ordered the construction of a new capital, strategically situated on the Straits linking the Black Sea to the Aegean. He called it *Nova Roma* (New Rome), but its inhabitants named it Constantinople. Its older name, Byzantium, survives in the parlance of historians who call his “new” state the Byzantine Empire. Actually, you might simply call it Rome, just as people did in the fourth century and long afterward. Even now, when Arabs, Persians, and Turks speak of *Rum*, they mean what we term the Byzantine Empire, its lands (especially Anatolia), or the believers in its religion, Greek Orthodox Christianity. *Rum* was far from the Italian city on the banks of the Tiber, but the old Roman idea of the universal and multicultural empire lived on in this Christian and Byzantine form. Later, Arabs and other Muslims would adopt this idea and adapt it to their own empires.

Roman rule benefited some Middle Eastern peoples. Their trading and manufacturing cities flourished, just as before. Greek, Syrian, and Egyptian merchants grew rich from the trade among Europe, Asia, and East Africa. Arab camel nomads, or Bedouin, carried cloth and spices (as well as the proverbial gold, frankincense, and myrrh) across the deserts. Other Middle Easterners sailed through the Red Sea, the Gulf, and the Indian Ocean to lands farther east. Surviving remains of buildings at Leptis Magna (Libya), Jerash (Jordan), and Ba'albek (Lebanon) give us a hint of the grandeur of Rome in the Middle East.

But Roman dominion had its darker side. Syria and Egypt, the granaries of the ancient world, were taxed heavily to support large occupying armies and a top-heavy bureaucracy in Rome and Constantinople. Peasants, fleeing to the cities to escape taxes, could find no work there. Instead, they joined rootless mobs who often rioted over social or religious issues. In principle, an urbane tolerance of other people's beliefs and customs was the hallmark of a Roman aristocrat. But we know that long before Rome adopted Christianity, its soldiers tried to suppress a Jewish rebellion by destroying the Second Temple in Jerusalem. Many of Jesus's early followers were tortured or killed for refusing to worship the Roman emperor.

Christian Rome proved even less tolerant. The spread and triumph of Christianity brought it into the mainstream of Hellenistic (Greek-influenced) philosophy. Major doctrinal crises ensued, as Christians disputed the precise nature of Christ. The debated points are hard to grasp nowadays and may puzzle even Christians, as well as everyone else. Let us examine the issues. The essence of Christianity—what distinguishes it from Judaism and Islam, the other monotheistic (one god) religions—is its teaching that God, acting out of love for an often sinful humanity, sent his son, Jesus, to live on earth among men and women and to redeem them from their sins by suffering and dying on the cross. If you hope, after your death, to be reunited with God in the

next world, you must accept Jesus as Christ (Greek for “anointed one” or “messiah”) as your personal savior. Christ’s central role as mediator between God and humanity led the early Christians into many disputes over his nature.

### **Dissident Christian Sects**

One Christian group, the Arians, which arose in the early fourth century, taught that Christ, though divinely inspired and sired, was still a man not equivalent to God. The Arians’ foes argued that if Christ were merely a man, his crucifixion, death, and resurrection could not redeem humankind. They won the church’s acceptance of Christ’s divinity at a council held in Nicaea in 325 CE (the Common Era). Arianism became a heresy (a belief contrary to church doctrine), and its followers were persecuted as if they had betrayed the Roman Empire. Most Christians, though, accepted the divine Trinity: God as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Was Christ really God? If so, do Christians accept the Gospel stories of his mother’s pregnancy and of his birth, baptism, mission, and suffering—all essentially human attributes?

In Antioch arose a school of theologians called the Nestorians. They saw Christ as two persons, divine and human, closely and inseparably joined. A church council at Ephesus condemned this view in 430, after which the emperor and the Orthodox church tried to suppress Nestorianism throughout the Byzantine Empire. Many Nestorians found refuge in Persia and sent missionaries to Central Asia, India, China, and even southern France. Some of their opponents, called Monophysites, went to the opposite extreme, claiming that Christ contained within his person a single, wholly divine nature. Centered in Alexandria, this Monophysite idea won followers throughout Egypt, Syria, and Armenia (an independent kingdom in eastern Anatolia). The Egyptian Monophysites called themselves Copts, the Syrians Jacobites; their churches (plus the Armenian one) still survive today. The majority of Orthodox bishops, meeting at Chalcedon in 451, declared that the Monophysites were heretics, like the Arians and the Nestorians. The Orthodox church devised a compromise formula: Christ the savior was both perfect God and perfect man. His two natures, though separate, were combined within the single person of Jesus Christ. Whenever the Byzantine emperor upheld the Chalcedon formula, the Orthodox bishops would use their power to oppress Egyptians and Syrians who would not recant their Monophysite (or Nestorian) heresy. This policy turned dissenters against Constantinople and would later facilitate the Arab conquests and the process by which Islam displaced Christianity as the majority religion in the Middle East.

### **Rome’s Persian Rival**

The Roman Empire never monopolized the Middle East. There was always a rival state in Persia that covered not just today’s Iran but also what we now call

Iraq (Mesopotamia), in addition to lands farther east, such as present-day Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Central Asia. Mountain ranges, such as the Zagros in lands north of the Gulf, the Elburz just south of the Caspian, and the Khurasan highlands, got enough rain and snow to support hundreds of hillside agricultural villages. The Persians surpassed the Romans in bronze casting and iron working. Both East and West adopted Persian architectural motifs, such as domes mounted on squinches (reinforced corners), shaded courtyards, and huge bas-relief murals.

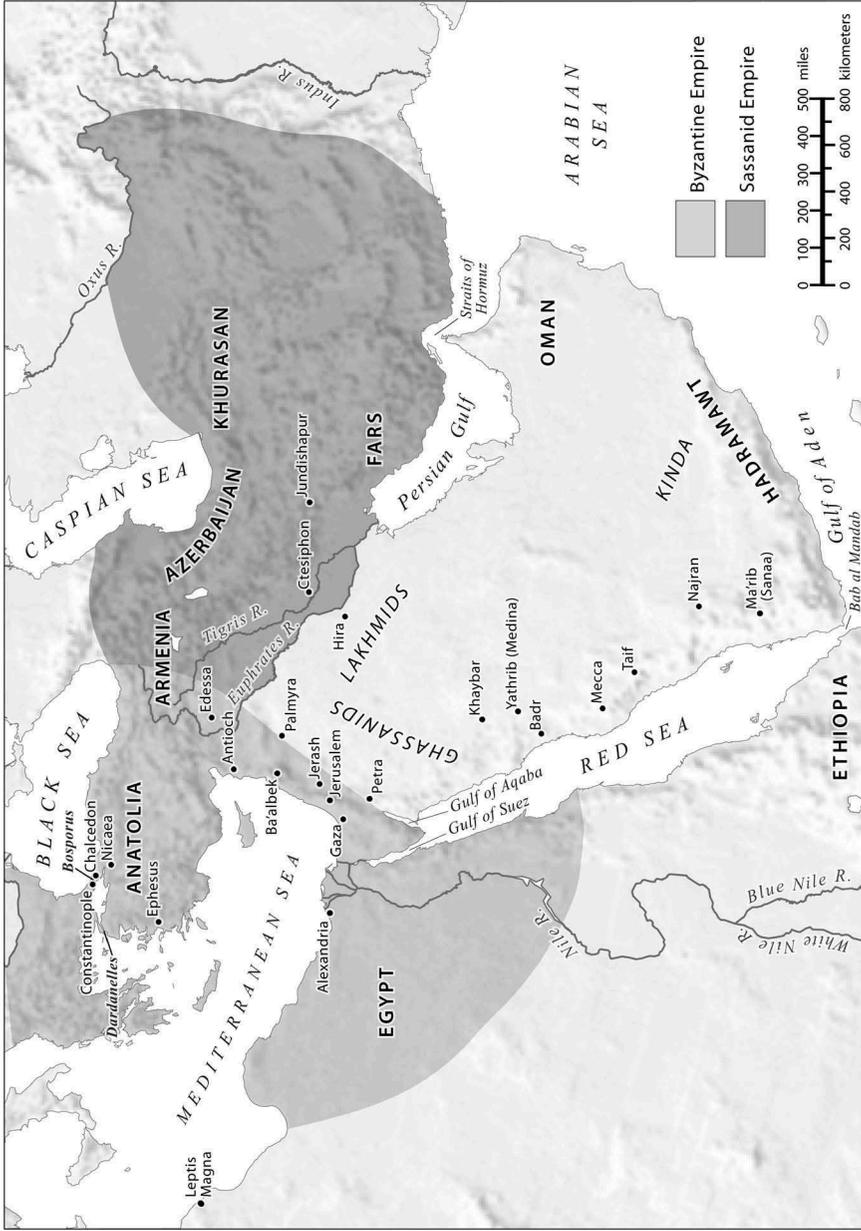
From 250 BCE to 224 CE, Persia was ruled by the Parthians, a poorly understood dynasty. Their written histories have come from the Romans, who could never subdue them, and the Sassanids, the Persian dynasty that supplanted them. We can hardly expect these sources to be sympathetic. But archaeological excavations have proved that the Parthians, who were proficient hunters on horseback, engaged architects and artisans. They preserved Persian culture and the Zoroastrian religion, yet they welcomed Buddhists and Jews into their country.

Their successors, the Sassanid dynasty, usually get credit for Persia's revival. Between the third and seventh centuries, they amassed a vast empire (shown on Map 2.1), made Zoroastrianism the state religion, and created a strong and centralized administration. The early Sassanids sent out scholars to many other countries to collect books, which were translated into the Pahlavi (Middle Persian) language, to trade, and to collect scientific and technical lore. Many foreign scholars were attracted to Persia, a tolerant kingdom in which Nestorian Christians, Jews, and Buddhists could worship and proselytize freely. Driven from a bigoted Byzantine Empire in the fifth century, Nestorian savants found refuge at the legendary Persian academy of Jundishapur, a center for the preservation of Hellenistic culture—indeed, the humanistic heritage of the whole ancient world. Scholars and students came from all parts of Europe and Asia to teach and study there, unhindered by racial prejudice, religious dogma, or political restrictions.

Persia's influence spread far. Although Zoroastrianism's appeal was limited mainly to Persians, it spawned a popular dualistic faith called Manichaeism, which spread throughout Europe and Asia during the Sassanid era. Meanwhile, Persian art influenced architecture, sculpture, painting, and even jewelry and textile design, from western Europe to China. Ctesiphon, the Sassanid capital just south of what is now Baghdad, featured vaulted buildings higher and wider than any to be found in the Roman Empire. Small wonder that this highly cultured kingdom defied the Romans and their Byzantine successors. Aided by their Bedouin allies in Arabia, Persian soldiers took Syria, Palestine, and Egypt early in the seventh century. This climax, however, would be brief.

## **The Arabs**

It was not the Persians who ended the Hellenistic age in the Middle East but their Arab allies. How did the Arabs begin? The domestication of the camel, a



Map 2.1 Byzantine and Sassanid Empires, circa 600

slow process that began around 3000 BCE, enabled bands of people to cross the vast deserts of Arabia, eastern Persia, and eventually North Africa. The Arabian dromedary, or one-humped camel, is famous for its ability to go for days across great distances without needing water, owing to its drinking capacity of 53 gallons (200 liters) in three minutes, its retention of liquids once consumed, and its memory for desert water holes. Relative to other animals, the camel loses little water through perspiration, skin evaporation, and urination. Padded feet, short hair, and a high ratio of skin surface to body mass all help it withstand the heat. Camels can subsist on thorny plants and dry grasses that other animals cannot digest. They store fat—not water—in their humps as a reserve against scarcity.

The people who tamed the camel, probably first for food and only later for transportation, were Arabs. No one is sure where the Arabs came from. Popular legends identify them as descendants of Ishmael, Abraham's son by his Egyptian maid, Hagar. Scholars think the Arabs are kin to the ancestors of other peoples who speak Semitic languages, such as the Hebrews, the Assyrians, and the Arameans, all of whom settled in the Fertile Crescent (Syria and Mesopotamia). In ancient times, as the population outstripped the means of subsistence in such well-endowed areas as the Fertile Crescent, some groups took to herding sheep and goats in lands where no crops could grow. A few ventured farther away and migrated from one desert oasis to another (or up and down mountains) to find seasonal water and vegetation for their flocks. Those who had mastered the camel could move even farther from the lands of peasants, shepherds, and tax collectors.

### ***Conditions in Arabia***

The Arabian Peninsula was just such a place: desolate, bereft of rivers and lakes, cut off by land and sea from all but the bravest invader. The sole exception is its mountainous southern region, Yemen, which we will discuss later. The prevailing west winds from the Mediterranean, which carry winter rain to Syria and Anatolia, rarely bring moisture as far south as Arabia. Now and then a freak storm can send floods coursing down the dry valleys, but most of the water runs off because the ground is too hard to absorb it. Fortunately, underground water does reach the surface in springs, water holes, and oases, where date palms flourish. The Arabs learned to move around constantly, following the seasonal availability of groundwater and forage for their animals. Milk and dates—occasionally meat and bread—made up their staple diet.

It would have been hard for an individual or even a small band of people to survive in such a harsh environment. Great military empires or mercantile city-states would not have arisen there. The Arabs were organized into clans and tribes, extended families that migrated together and held their property in common. Significantly, the tribes protected their members against other nomads and the settled peoples. The Arabs were belligerent and zealous in defending their honor, on which their freedom depended.

Tests of strength, such as raids and skirmishes, were common. Each tribe was governed by a council of adult men who represented the various clans or smaller family groupings. The council chose a *shaykh* (elder), usually the member of the tribe most respected for his bravery and generosity, except in a few tribes where the leadership was hereditary. The council decided on questions of waging war or making peace, inasmuch as the tribe increased its meager income by raiding other tribes and “protecting” the caravans that carried goods between Syria and the Indian Ocean. Some members of tribes served as auxiliaries in the Persian or Roman armies; one third-century Roman emperor was named Philip the Arab. Others built trading cities on the fringes of the settled areas, such as Palmyra in Syria, Petra in Jordan, and Najran in Yemen. Still others took up farming land, as in the region around Yathrib (now called Medina). But camel breeding and raiding were the Arabs’ most respected activities.

### ***Arabian Culture***

The Bedouin Arabs, having adapted to desert life, may have lacked the refinement of the Romans or the Persians, but they were not barbarians. They were warlike; hunger or habit led them to prey on one another or on outsiders. Their constant movement gave them no chance to develop architecture, sculpture, or painting. But they did possess a highly portable form of artistic expression—poetry. Pre-Islamic poetry embodied the Arab code of virtue, the *muruwwa*: bravery in battle, patience in misfortune, persistence in revenge (the only justice possible where there was no government), protection of the weak, defiance toward the strong, hospitality to the visitor (even a total stranger), generosity to the poor, loyalty to the tribe, and fidelity in keeping promises. These were the moral principles people needed to survive in the desert, and the verses helped to fix the *muruwwa* in their minds. Recited from memory by the tribal Arabs and their descendants, these poems expressed the joys and tribulations of nomadic life, extolled the bravery of their own tribes, and lampooned the faults of their rivals. Some Arabs loved poetry so much that they used to stop wars and raids yearly for a month in which poets might recite their new verses and match wits with one another. Pre-Islamic poetry helped to shape the Arabic language, the literature and culture of the Arabs, and hence the thoughts and actions of Arabic-speaking peoples even now.

### ***Southern Arabia***

During the time when Rome and Persia seemed to dominate the Middle East, there was actually a third power, far off and almost ignored. Southern Arabia, with its monsoonal rain and lush vegetation, seemed a world apart, but it fostered the growth of several city-states. Saba (whence came that mythic queen of Sheba to visit Solomon) is the best known. Even before the time of Christ, its people, the Sabaeans, had developed a thriving trade between their

base in Yemen and the far shores of the Indian Ocean. They were the first to make India and its products known to the Roman world and to colonize East Africa. The Sabaeans built *qanats*, dammed mountain streams, and terraced the Yemeni hillsides to support an elaborate agriculture. Their main export crop was frankincense, used by the pagan Romans to mask the offensive odor when they cremated their dead. The spread of Christianity, which replaced cremation with burial, hurt the frankincense trade. When Ethiopia turned Christian and became allied with the Byzantines, the Yemeni Arabs, whose kings had adopted Judaism by then, got caught in the middle. Several dam breaks, an Ethiopian invasion, and a commercial depression combined in the sixth century to weaken southern Arabia.

Arabia's political situation was complex. Three outside powers contended for control: the Byzantine Empire, champion of Orthodox Christianity; Sassanid Persia, ruled by Zoroastrians but harboring Nestorian Christians, Jews, Buddhists, Manichaeans, and other sects; and Ethiopia, which espoused the same Monophysite Christianity as the Byzantines' rebellious Egyptian subjects, the Copts. Each empire had a client Arab tribe that it paid generously and furnished with the trappings of monarchy in return for military service. The peninsula was often ravaged by wars among these three tribes: the pro-Byzantine Ghassanids of the northwest; the pro-Sassanid Lakhmids, with their capital at Hira, near the Euphrates; and the Christian tribe of Kinda, living in central Arabia and friendly to Ethiopia. Other Arab tribes, some still animist (ascribing spiritual power to natural objects), others partly Zoroastrian, Jewish, or Christian, took part in their quarrels. Southern Arabia was occupied by the Ethiopians from 525 until 570, when the Sassanids restored the Jewish kings to power.

### **Mecca**

Most of central and northern Arabia kept a precarious independence. In times of peace the area was crossed by the camel caravans plying the overland trade route linking Syria and Yemen. Despite the falling demand for frankincense, overland trade gained in importance as the Red Sea's shoals and pirates made sailing comparatively risky. The Byzantine–Sassanid wars also tended to divert trade toward western Arabia. One Arabian town, formerly tied to Saba as a religious shrine, emerged in the sixth century as a major caravan station. This was Mecca, set inland from the Red Sea among the mountains of the Hijaz. Hot and dry, Mecca did not support farming. It gained some of its wealth and power from trade. But its primacy among Arab towns stemmed from three additional assets: a yearly poets' fair at nearby Ukaz; Mount Arafat, already a pilgrimage site; and its Ka'ba, a cube-shaped structure of unknown antiquity that housed idols (reportedly 360) standing for the deities venerated by the tribal Arabs. Also nearby were lesser shrines honoring individual goddesses, notably al-Lat, al-Uzza, and al-Manat, who were worshiped by the pagan Meccans themselves.

Mecca's rulers belonged to a sedentarized Arab tribe called the Quraysh. Every Muslim caliph for more than six centuries could trace his ancestry back to this family of traders, shrine keepers, and politicians. Under their leadership, the centers of Middle Eastern power would shift from the Mediterranean Sea and the Persian plateau to the Arabian Desert and the Fertile Crescent. Some historians write that this change marked the transition from the ancient to the medieval era. The prime cause of this transition will soon become clear: Muhammad, the last and the greatest of Islam's prophets, was a Meccan of the Quraysh.

## **Conclusion**

Historians of southwest Asia divide themselves according to their specialization into those of the ancient world, those of medieval Islam, and those of the modern Middle East. Although this practice reflects our training (especially the languages we learn), you, as a student first learning about the Middle East, should not dismiss as irrelevant the history of the area before Islam. The achievements of the ancient Egyptians and Mesopotamians in hydraulic engineering have lasted (with periodic renovations) up to now. The world's first law code was proclaimed in Mesopotamia by Hammurabi. The development of monotheism by the Egyptians and especially by the Jews was a necessary precursor to both Christianity and Islam. Greek philosophy and Roman law are part of the heritage of the Middle East as well as the West. The doctrinal disputes in early Christianity eventually set the direction of Catholic and, hence, of Protestant theology, although they also undermined Christian resistance to Islam's expansion. Sassanid Persia's imperial kingship, bureaucratic traditions, and tolerance of dissident faiths set a pattern for later Muslim-ruled, multicultural, dynastic states. The experience of the Arabs before Islam formed the matrix for the rise of Muhammad and his mission as a prophet. Ancient institutions and customs lived on in medieval Europe and the early Muslim world. Some, indeed, still do.

## 3 Muhammad and the Rise of Islam

Around 570 CE an Ethiopian army marched northward from Yemen with a baggage train of elephants and tried to take Mecca. It failed. Legend has it that birds flew over the Ethiopians and pelted them with stones. Smallpox broke out among the troops, and they withdrew to Yemen. Soon afterward they were driven out of Arabia entirely. From then on, the “Year of the Elephant” was remembered by the Arabs—especially Meccans—as a lucky one. Most people think Muhammad was born in that year, a few months after his father’s death. Before Muhammad was six, his mother also died. His grandfather, taking responsibility for the boy, sent him out to live with Arab Bedouin. Meccans often farmed out their children so that they might learn to speak better Arabic and get a healthier start in life than they could have in the city. When his grandfather died, Muhammad’s upbringing was taken over by his uncle, a caravan merchant named Abu-Talib, from whom he learned the business of buying, selling, and transporting goods. Muhammad’s family was the clan of Hashim, or Hashimites. They were a reputable, if relatively poor, branch of the ruling Quraysh tribe.

### **Muhammad’s Early Life**

Despite the handicaps of being orphaned and lacking property in a materialistic society, Muhammad grew up to be a capable and honest merchant. When he was a young man, a merchant widow named Khadija entrusted him with the care of her caravan. When he had done his job well, she broke with Arab custom and proposed marriage to him. Although she was said to be fifteen years older than Muhammad, the marriage proved to be happy. She bore six children; Muhammad took no other wives during her lifetime. The business thrived. In the normal course of events, Muhammad should have become one of Mecca’s leading citizens, even though the Umayyads and Makhzum, the strongest clans in the Quraysh tribe, looked down on his Hashimite kinsmen.

### **Confrontation with Pagan Arab Values**

Muhammad was not wholly content. The *muruwwa* code of ideal Arab behavior, which upheld bravery in battle and generosity to the poor as

noble ideals, was no longer a priority for Mecca's leaders, who now strove to get rich as merchants and shrine keepers. The Arabs' polytheistic animism and ancestor worship were no longer a living faith, even though pilgrimages to the Ka'ba and other shrines continued and provided much of Mecca's income. The clan of Hashim was entrusted with taking care of the Ka'ba and providing food and water to the pilgrims, the most honorable task in Mecca. The nomads believed in their gods only so long as they did what the nomads wanted. They were more apt to fear the *jinn*s (genies), invisible creatures who could do both nice and nasty things to people. A few Christians lived in Mecca, and whole tribes and cities elsewhere in Arabia had converted to Judaism or to some sect of Christianity. There were other pious folk, neither Christian nor Jewish but leaning toward monotheism, known as Hanifs. But Mecca's merchants, profoundly practical, scoffed at such notions as the bodily resurrection or Judgment Day and at holy laws that might interfere with their pursuit of money. Muhammad thought the Jews, Christians, and Hanifs just might have solutions to the problems that gnawed at the core of pagan Meccan society. On many evenings he went to a nearby cave to meditate.

### **First Revelation**

One night in 610 CE, during the Arabic month of Ramadan, Muhammad was visited by an angel, who exhorted him to read aloud. In awe and terror, he cried out, "I cannot read" (Muslims believe Muhammad was illiterate). Hugging him until he almost choked, the angel again ordered:

Read: in the name of thy Lord who created,  
created mankind from a blood-clot.  
Read: for thy Lord the most generous;  
He has taught by the pen  
taught man what he knew not.

(Qur'an, 96:1-5)

Wherever he looked, he saw the same angel looking back at him and saying, "O Muhammad, thou art the messenger of God, and I am Gabriel." Fearing that he had gone mad, Muhammad hurried home and asked Khadija to cover him with a warm coat. His quaking subsided, but then he saw Gabriel again, and the angel said:

O thou who art shrouded in thy mantle,  
rise and warn!  
Thy Lord magnify,  
Thy robes purify,  
And from iniquity flee!

(Qur'an, 74:1-5)

Khadija, as it happened, had a cousin who was a Hanif (or, some say, a Christian). She visited him. He assured her that Muhammad, far from being mad, was God's long-awaited messenger to the Arabs. She returned to her husband and gave him the backing he needed. Hesitantly, Muhammad realized that what he had heard was God's exhortation to make the divine presence known to the Arabs. Also, he had to warn them (just as God had sent earlier prophets to warn the Jews and the Christians) of a Judgment Day when all would be called to account:

When the earth shall quake with a predestined quaking,  
 When the earth shall bring forth her burdens,  
 and men shall ask, "What ails her?"  
 Upon that day shall she tell her news  
 with which thy Lord has inspired her,  
 Upon that day shall men come out in scattered groups  
 to be shown what they have done.  
 Then he who has done one atom's weight of good shall see it  
 And he who has done one atom's weight of evil shall see it.  
 (Qur'an, 109:1-8)

Being God's messenger to the Arabs was an awesome task for an unlettered, middle-aged merchant, an orphan who had gained a precarious hold on a little wealth and status. Muhammad was tempted to shirk the responsibility. Yet, when he received no messages for a while, he feared that God had abandoned him. During this time, he kept asking himself whether he really was a prophet, but his wife never doubted him. A few of his friends and relatives believed in him, too. Once new revelations reached Muhammad, he came to know that his mission was real.

### **The Early Muslims**

The first believers, although they came from every class and many of Mecca's clans, were mainly upper-middle-class youths—the "nearly haves" from which so many revolutions elsewhere have sprung—rather like Muhammad himself. Some converts were sons or younger brothers of the leading merchants; others were notables who had lost (or failed to attain) the status they sought within pagan Mecca. A few were "weak," meaning that they came from outside the system with no clan to protect them against other Arabs, or that their families lacked the political clout of the Umayyads or the Hashimites. Even though Muhammad's uncle, Abu-Talib, never embraced Islam, he always protected his nephew. Abu-Talib's son, Ali, raised in Muhammad's home, was probably his first male convert. Later, he would marry the Prophet's daughter, Fatima, and become a leader of early Islam. Other early converts were Abu-Bakr, Muhammad's best friend and a man of wealth and social standing; Al-Arqam, a member of the strong clan

of Makhzum, who let the Muslims meet at his home; Umar, an imposing figure from a weak clan; Uthman, a quiet youth of the powerful Umayyad family; Bilal, an Ethiopian slave freed by Abu-Bakr; and Zayd ibn Haritha, a captured Christian Arab whom Muhammad adopted.

Let us make some terms clear. During Muhammad's mission, those who believed in him as God's messenger came to be known as Muslims. The Arabic word *muslim* means "one who submits"—to God's will. The act of submission is *islam*, which became the name of the religion. Do not call it "Mohammedanism." Muslims detest the term: Muhammad is only a prophet through whom Islam was revealed. Muhammad's message disrupted families and threatened the established order. W. Montgomery Watt, whose books on the life of the Prophet have won wide acceptance, summarized his early message in five main points:

1. God is good and all-powerful.
2. God will call all men and women back to himself on the Last Day and will judge and reward them on the basis of how they acted on earth.
3. People should thank God, through worship, for the blessings he has given the earth.
4. God expects people to share their worldly goods with others needier than themselves.
5. Muhammad is God's designated messenger to his own people, the Arabs.

Later revelations taught that Muhammad was a prophet for all humanity.

### **Meccan Opposition**

The Meccans who rejected this message feared that Muhammad might try to take away their wealth and power. Even if the early Muslims had kept a low profile, they would have attracted the notice—and hostility—of Mecca's leaders. If the pagan tribes accepted Islam, would they stop making their annual *hajj* (pilgrimage) to the Ka'ba and Mecca's other shrines? We now know that Muhammad respected the Ka'ba and never wanted to displace it as a center for pilgrims. Nor was he trying to undermine Mecca's economy. Unable to attack Muhammad while he had Abu-Talib's protection, the Meccans tried a boycott against the whole Hashimite clan. It failed. Still, they could torment the most vulnerable Muslims, some of whom fled to Christian Ethiopia. Then Muhammad made what, to the pagan Meccans, was a still more incredible claim. Following a Qur'anic revelation, he said that he had journeyed in one night on a winged horse, first to Jerusalem, then up through the seven levels of heaven, where he saw the celestial Ka'ba and received from God the fundamentals of the Islamic creed, and that he had talked to Moses during his return to earth. Although the Qur'an confirmed Muhammad's claims, the pagans mocked them. They averred that he had slept that whole night in his own bed.

In 619 Muhammad lost the two people who had most helped him in his early mission: Khadija and Abu-Talib. Muhammad would later marry many women, but none could match the loyalty and support of his first wife. And without his uncle, Muhammad had no protector within the Hashimite clan, and so the persecution intensified. The Muslims realized that they would have to leave Mecca, but where else could they go?

### **The Emigration (*Hijra*)**

During the pagan pilgrimage month in 620, Muhammad was visited by six Arabs from an agricultural oasis town called Yathrib (now Medina), located about 270 miles (430 kilometers) north of Mecca, just after they had completed their *hajj* rites at the Ka'ba. They reported that fighting between Yathrib's two pagan tribes had grown so bad that they could no longer protect themselves against the three Jewish tribes with whom they shared the oasis. Seeing Muhammad as an honest man, they asked him to come and arbitrate their quarrels. The next year more pilgrims came from Yathrib, and some embraced Islam. In return for Muhammad's services as an arbiter, they agreed to give sanctuary to the Meccan Muslims.

This was a great opportunity for Muhammad. He quickly grasped that his mission as God's spokesman would be enhanced once he became the chief judge of a city rather than the spiritual leader of a persecuted band of rebels. Besides, the Jewish presence in Yathrib made him hope that he might be accepted as a prophet by people who were already worshiping the one God—his God—revealed to the Jews by earlier scriptures. In the following months he arranged a gradual transfer of his Muslim followers from Mecca to Yathrib. Finally, he and Abu-Bakr left in September 622.

This emigration, called the *hijra* in Arabic, was a major event in Islamic history. Rather than a “flight,” as some call it, the *hijra* was a carefully planned maneuver by Muhammad in response to his invitation by Yathrib's citizens. It enabled him to unite his followers as a community, or (to use an Arabic word with no direct English translation) as an *umma*. From then on, Muhammad was both a prophet and a lawgiver, both a religious and a political leader. Islam was both a faith in one God as revealed to Muhammad (and the earlier prophets) and a sociopolitical system. Muhammad and his followers propounded the Constitution of Medina as a concrete expression of their *umma*. No wonder the Muslims, when they later adopted their own calendar, made the first year the one in which the *hijra* had occurred.

### **The Struggle for Survival**

Once the *umma* was set up in Yathrib, renamed Medina (or *madinat al-nabi*, “the city of the Prophet”), Muhammad faced new challenges. Medina's Arabs did not become Muslims at once, their quarrels proved hard to settle, and it was harder still for him to win the allegiance of the city as a whole. If the Jews

of Medina had ever harbored any belief in Muhammad as the Messiah, or the messenger of God, they were soon disillusioned. His revelations differed from what they knew from the Bible. Muhammad's divine revelations, which were now becoming known as the Qur'an, repeatedly called Abraham a Muslim, a man who submitted to God's will. Muhammad had brought into Islam some Jewish practices (as he understood them), such as fasting on Yom Kippur (the Day of Atonement) and leading Muslim worship while he and his followers faced Jerusalem. The Jews were not convinced, and they rejected his religious authority. Even the Medinans who converted to Islam, called *ansar* (supporters), grew tired of supporting the Meccan emigrants, who showed no aptitude for farming, the economic basis of their oasis. The emigrants were cut off from commerce so long as pagan Mecca controlled the caravan routes.

If Muhammad was ever to lead Medina's Jews and *ansar*, the emigrants would have to find ways to support themselves. The Qur'an suggested that they might raid the Meccan caravans:

To those against whom war is made  
Permission is given [to those who fight] because they are wronged;  
and surely God is able to help them.

(Qur'an, 22:39)

Perhaps, in time, they would control enough of the trade route between Syria and Mecca to compete with the Meccans. This challenged the Muslims, for the Meccans' caravans were armed and had the support of many of the Bedouin tribes. But raid they did, and, after a few fiascoes, Muhammad and his men hit the Meccans hard enough to hurt. They attacked even during the month in which pagan Arabs were forbidden to raid because of their traditional pilgrimage to Mecca. This shocked many Arabs, but a Qur'anic revelation stated:

They will question you about the holy month and fighting in it,  
Say "Fighting in it is wrong, but to bar from God's way,  
and disbelief in Him,  
and the sacred Ka'ba, and to expel its people from it—  
that is more wicked in God's sight;  
and persecution is more wicked than killing.

(Qur'an, 2:213)

The pagan Meccans did not agree. In the second year after the *hijra*—March 624, to be exact—the Muslims were zeroing in on a rich Umayyad caravan returning from Syria, just as Mecca was dispatching a retaliatory army of almost a thousand men. They met Muhammad's forces (86 emigrants, 238 *ansar*) at an oasis called Badr, southwest of Medina. Clever tactics helped the Muslims win, but nothing succeeds like success. To Muhammad's people, victory was a tangible sign of God's favor, a chance to gain captives and booty. The latter

was divided among the warriors, except for a fifth that the Prophet took to support poor members of the *umma*.

In addition, the victory at Badr enhanced the prestige of Islam—and of Medina—among the tribal Arabs. Even though the Meccans avenged themselves on the Muslims in 625 at Uhud, just north of Medina, they could not take the city itself. The *umma* survived. Islam was taking root and could not be wiped out. In 627 Mecca sent a larger force to capture Medina, but the Muslims foiled the army by digging a trench around the city's vulnerable parts. The ditch was too broad for the Meccans' horses and camels to cross, so they turned back in disgust. Meanwhile, Muslim raids from Medina were endangering the Meccan caravan trade. The Arab tribes began to break with Mecca and make treaties with Muhammad to join in these lucrative attacks.

### **Muslim Life in Medina**

Muhammad now became the head of both a large household and a small state. God's revelations laid down laws about marriage and divorce, inheritance, theft and other crimes, and interpersonal relations more than they told of God's power and the impending Judgment Day. Muhammad's own sayings and actions concerning practical matters unaddressed by the Qur'an or traditional Arab customs were becoming an authoritative guide for Muslim behavior. Generally, a non-Muslim can readily admire the humane common sense that underlay Muhammad's conduct of his public and private life and thus respect his role as a model for Muslims. Some non-Muslims note two accusations leveled against him: his lust for women and his mistreatment of the Jews. If we raise these issues now, we risk judging a seventh-century Arab by the standards of our own time and place. Is this fair? We will present some facts and let you draw your own conclusions.

### **Muhammad's Marriages**

Before Islam, Arab men took as many wives as they could afford. Various forms of extramarital sexual relations were accepted. Seeking to limit this license, the Qur'an allowed Muslim men to marry as many as four wives, provided that they treated them equally, but this permission was granted in the context of a revelation concerning the welfare of widows and orphans—a natural concern, given Muhammad's own background and the heavy loss of young men in raids and battles. After Khadija died, he gradually took other wives, possibly as many as ten. Several were widows of his slain followers, for whom he provided support. Other marriages involved the daughters of tribal leaders whom Muhammad wanted as allies. Aisha, who became his favorite wife, was the daughter of Abu-Bakr, his best friend, and she was nine when she came to live with him (see Box 3.1). Muhammad's critics noted his marriage to Zaynab, whom he came to know while she was married to his adopted son, Zayd. A new Qur'anic revelation allowed Zayd to divorce her,

but even Aisha was quick to scold Muhammad for marrying her. Muhammad believed that his marriages were prescribed for him by God, and he always enjoyed the company of women. One can find other inconsistencies in his behavior: He forbade wailing at funerals until his infant son died. He forgave many of the foes he faced in battle, but not the poets who mocked his mission. Prophets were human beings, not plaster saints.

### **Box 3.1 Aisha bint Abu-Bakr (614–678)**

Aisha, Muhammad the Prophet's third wife, is one of the heroines of early Islam. She was born in 614 CE, the daughter of Abu-Bakr, who was Muhammad's closest companion. He would eventually become Islam's first caliph.

The marriage between Aisha and Muhammad, a political one, was contracted to seal the bond between the Prophet and the family of Abu-Bakr. Little attention was paid, therefore, to the age difference between bride and groom. When the contract was made, Aisha was six years old. She was nine when she moved to Muhammad's home (623 CE). The Prophet was fifty. Such marriages were common in the seventh century and, for that matter, in biblical times.

The historical records, mostly based on *hadiths*, of which many are attributed to Aisha herself, tell of a basically happy marriage ended by the Prophet's death in 632 CE. Aisha remained an active leader of the Muslim community for some fifty years following her husband's passing.

Aisha was one of the foremost authorities on the Prophet's life, which made her an important contributor to the early compilation of an authentic version of the Qur'an and the *sunna* (Muhammad's own words, habits, practices, and silent approvals). In other words, much of the early basis for Islamic religious law (the Shari'a) comes through the memory and accounts of Aisha. Assertive, self-confident, and politically active, she clashed with one of the Prophet's early companions, Ali.

Early in Aisha's marriage, while on a trip through the Arabian Desert, she became separated from Muhammad and the rest of their caravan. Muhammad ordered a search for her. She was eventually located and brought back to the main group by a young male Muslim. Aisha and her young escort probably spent several hours alone together. Soon gossip started, and Aisha's reputation and Muhammad's and Abu-Bakr's honor were in danger. It was at this point that Ali, Muhammad's son-in-law and cousin, recommended that Muhammad divorce her. Then Muhammad received a revelation from God condemning all such gossip and setting strict requirements for proving adultery.

But Aisha never forgave Ali, and many years later she would seek revenge by participating in a rebellion against Ali, who had become the fourth caliph. Aisha helped lead a famous military engagement, the Battle of the Camel, so named because she exhorted the rebel troops from the back of a camel.

For Sunni Muslim women through the ages, Aisha has been, and continues to be, a role model. Shi'a Muslims revile her. Nonetheless, the memory of her actions encourages active and independent-minded women to challenge some of the patriarchal customs often used to justify gender inequality in the Muslim world. The current struggle for Muslim women's rights to an active public life has a strong precedent in the role played by the Prophet's favorite wife so long ago.

### **Muhammad and the Jews**

Muhammad's relations with Medina's Jews deteriorated as his own power grew. Islam viewed many biblical figures as prophets, men to whom God had spoken. He respected Jews and Christians as "People of the Book," who worshiped God as revealed by sacred scriptures. Why could he not have been more magnanimous? In part, he expected Medina's Jews to recognize him as God's messenger, just as he had accepted their prophets; but they could not reconcile his Qur'an with their sacred scriptures. There were too many discrepancies. They opposed the Constitution of Medina, and they were turning some of the less sincere *ansar* against him, publicly mocking him and his followers. The split widened. Following a Qur'anic revelation, Muhammad changed the direction of prayer—south toward Mecca instead of north toward Jerusalem. The Yom Kippur fast ceased to be obligatory, and Muslims started fasting instead during the daylight hours of Ramadan, the month when Muhammad's first Qur'anic revelations occurred. Sabbath observance was replaced by Friday congregational worship with a sermon. Dietary laws were eased. Islam was becoming more distinct and also more Arabian.

After winning at Badr, Muhammad expelled one of the Jewish tribes for conspiring with his Meccan foes but let its members keep their property. The Muslims expelled another Jewish tribe after their defeat at Uhud, seizing the tribe's date palm groves. According to traditional accounts, the last of the three tribes suffered the worst fate: the men were killed, and the women and children were sold into slavery. Muhammad believed that this tribe, despite its feigned loyalty, had backed the Meccans in 627 during their siege of Medina's trench. He sought the advice of an associate who seemed neutral but who in fact coveted the Jews' property. His advice led to a slaughter that enriched some Muslims and raised Muhammad's prestige among the Arab tribes, for it showed that he had no fear of blood reprisals.

We should understand the situation as people then saw it. The Jews were not defenseless. The Muslims could have lost their grip on Medina and fallen prey to the Meccans and their tribal allies. Neutralizing their enemies was essential to their security, indeed to their survival. Partly because of these confrontations, the Qur'an contains some harsh words against the Jews. These events did not poison later Muslim–Jewish relations, nor did Muhammad's policies cause what we now call the Palestinian–Israeli conflict.

### **Winning Mecca**

It is a historical irony that Mecca's pagans who persecuted Muhammad later embraced Islam and then prospered under the new order, whereas Arabia's Jews, whose beliefs were closer to his, rejected him as a prophet and then suffered severely. Mecca's final capitulation seems almost anticlimactic. The emigrants in Medina missed their homes, their families (many were the sons and daughters of leading Meccan merchants), and the Ka'ba, so in 628 Muhammad led a band of would-be pilgrims toward Mecca. They encountered Meccan troops at Hudaibiyya, north of Mecca, and the two sides made a truce that ended their state of war. The Muslims had to return to Medina then but would be admitted into Mecca the next year as pilgrims. Thus the Meccans accepted the Muslims as equals. Three months after the Hudaibiyya truce, two of the best Arab fighters, Khalid ibn al-Walid and 'Amr ibn al-As, embraced Islam and eventually went on to greater glory as warriors for the *umma*. Muhammad won more key Meccan converts during that pilgrimage in 629. The next year, accusing some clans of breaching the truce's terms, he led 10,000 troops toward Mecca. Its leaders, overawed, quickly surrendered, letting the Muslims occupy the city peacefully. Soon almost everyone in Mecca became Muslim.

Bolstered by Meccan troops, the Muslims defeated a large coalition of Arab tribes from around Taif. The Hijaz (western Arabia) was now united under Islam. From then on, other tribes and clans, recognizing Muhammad's power, began sending delegations to Medina, which remained the capital of the new state. As a condition for his support, Muhammad required the tribes to accept Islam and even to pay taxes, a condition that the Quraysh tribe had never managed to impose. Traditional accounts maintain that by 632 nearly all the Arab tribes were Muslim. More probably, though, only some clans, factions, or persons within each tribe embraced Islam.

### **Muhammad's Death**

The Prophet's final years were clouded by worries about rivals in Arabia, heavy political responsibilities, marital problems, the death of his infant son and several daughters, and failing health. He did lead a final pilgrimage to Mecca in March 632. Thus he finished incorporating into Islam the rituals of the *hajj*, which he had cleansed of its pagan features. In his final sermon he exhorted his followers, "O ye men, listen to my words and take them to heart: Every Muslim is a brother to

every other Muslim and you are now one brotherhood.” Soon after his return to Medina, Muhammad retired to Aisha’s room. He appointed her father, Abu-Bakr, to lead public worship in his place. Then, on 8 June 632, he died.

How can we evaluate Muhammad and his deeds? For Muslims he has always been the exemplar of Muslim virtues, such as piety, patience, humor, kindness, generosity, and sobriety. Non-Muslims, recalling Christian battles and disputations with Islam, have often judged him harshly. These different assessments remind us that observant Jews and sincere Christians do not believe, as Muslims must, that Muhammad was obeying God’s commands as revealed to him by the Angel Gabriel.

The life of any famous person becomes a lens or mirror by which other people, as individuals or in groups, view themselves and the world. The biographer or historian stresses some facts and omits or downplays others. The reader seizes upon a few points and expands them to fit a preconceived image. How, then, to assess Muhammad? Surely he was a kind and sincere man who came to have an overwhelming faith in God and in himself as God’s final messenger. As such, he had to warn the Arabs and other people about the impending Judgment Day and to form the *umma*, a religious community, within which Muslim believers could best prepare themselves for that dreaded occasion. Yet he had a sense of humor, saying, “Let a man answer to me for what waggeth between his jaws, and what between his legs, and I’ll answer to him for Paradise.” He let his grandsons climb on his back even while prostrating himself in worship. He was a skilled political and military tactician, for who else has ever managed to unite the Arabs? He took terrible chances when he accepted his prophetic mission and forsook his home city for an unknown future. But what you can conclude about Muhammad’s life will depend on how well you know Islam, the religion for which he did so much.

### **Pillars of Faith: What Do Muslims Believe?**

When we write about Islam—or any religion that has lasted for a long time—let us consider that it has evolved through history and will continue to do so. It has varied from time to time, from place to place, and even from one person to another. As personal belief systems, religions are hard to describe, for each person’s truest and deepest thoughts are unique. Nevertheless, Muslims tend to abide by some general principles of faith.

In Islam, faith (*iman*) is the act of submission to the will of God (*Allah* in Arabic). *Iman* is a prerequisite to *islam* and implies belief beyond reason. It must conform to God’s rules, or to what atheists might call nature’s laws. Rocks and trees, birds and beasts all submit to God’s will because they were created to do so. Human beings, creatures capable of reason, have been made free to choose whether and how to do what God wills. Many refuse out of ignorance or because they have forgotten the divine commandments they once knew. Some Christians and Jews may have been misled by their scriptures or by the way they have interpreted them. But anyone who submits to God’s will, worships him,

and expects his reward or punishment in the next world is, broadly speaking, a *mu'min* (believer). Muslims believe in the following principles:

### ***God's Unity***

In common usage, a Muslim is one who believes that God's will for all humanity was last revealed through the Qur'an to Muhammad. What is God? To Muslims, God is all-powerful and all-knowing, the creator of all that was and is and will be, the righteous judge of good and evil, and the generous guide to men and women through inspired messengers and divine scriptures. God has no peer, no partner, no offspring, no human attributes, no beginning, and no end. All who profess Judaism or Christianity agree that there is only one God, but monotheism means more than rejecting a pantheon of gods and goddesses. There can be no other Absolute Good; all material blessings—our houses, furniture, cars, clothing, and food—are worth less than the one true God. The pleasures we pursue are (if lawful) fine, but finer yet is the satisfaction of God's commands. Spouses and consorts, parents and children, friends and teammates may be dear, but they must remain second to God in our hearts. God is the giver of life and death. Some Muslims think that God has predestined all human actions. Others argue that God has given us free will, making us strictly accountable for what we choose to do. God wants willing worshipers, not human robots.

### ***Angels***

Muslims believe that God works in a universe in which dwell various creatures, not all of whom can be seen, heard, or felt by human beings. *Jinns* (genies), for instance, do much good and evil here on earth and are addressed in some Qur'anic revelations. But more powerful in God's world are angels, the heavenly servants who obey his will. God did not reveal the Qur'an directly to Muhammad but sent the Angel Gabriel to do so. Angels taught him how to pray. An angel will blow a horn to herald the Judgment Day. When each of us dies, we will be questioned by a pair of angels. Satan, called Iblis or al-Shaytan in Arabic, was a *jinn* who flouted God's command to bow down to Adam. Having fallen from grace, he now tries to corrupt men and women. He seems to be doing well.

### ***Revealed Books***

How was God's existence made known to humanity? How does the Infinite reveal itself to finite minds? Christians say that the Word became flesh and dwelt among us: God became a man. But Muslims argue that God is revealed by the words placed in the mouths of righteous people called prophets or messengers. These words have become books: the Torah of the Jews (consisting of the first five books of the Bible), the Gospels of the Christians, and the Qur'an of the Muslims.

Muslims also believe that God's earlier revelations, in the form we know them, were corrupted and had to be corrected by the Qur'an. Modern

scholarship has shown that the books of the Bible were written down only after some time had passed after they were revealed. Some Muslims aver that the Jews changed some passages of the Torah to depict themselves as God's chosen people (a concept rejected by Islam) and that Christians rewrote the Gospels to prove the divinity of Jesus of Nazareth (for Muslims maintain that no human can be God). The Qur'an, by contrast, is God's perfect revelation. It has existed in heaven since time began. It will never be superseded. After Muhammad's death it was carefully compiled ("from scraps of parchment, from thin white stones, from palm leaves, and from the breasts of men," wrote an early Muslim) by his followers. Some parts had actually been written down while Muhammad was still alive. If any passage had been misread, a Muslim who had heard Muhammad give the passage would surely have put it right. Seventh-century Arabs had prodigious memories.

The Qur'an is not easy reading. It is the record of God's revelations, via the Angel Gabriel, to Muhammad. It contains laws, stories from the past, and devotional pieces intended for guidance and recitation, not for literary entertainment. Most of its 114 chapters bring together passages revealed at different times. The chapters, except for the first, are arranged in order of length. Those revealed in Medina, filled with injunctions and prohibitions, tend to precede the Meccan chapters, which stress God's power and warn of the coming Judgment Day. Because the Qur'an was revealed in Arabic, most Muslims do not think it can or should be translated into any other language. As its usage reflects that of seventh-century Meccans, even Arab Muslims may now need help to understand parts of what they read. The Qur'an's language is rhymed prose (not metrical like poetry), but it can sound lyrical when chanted by a trained reciter. Try to hear one. Muslims venerate the Qur'an for many reasons: its Arabic language and style are inimitable, the book sets Islam apart from all other religions, and its teachings have stood the test of time. The speech and writing of pious Muslims are studded with Qur'anic expressions. No other book has affected so many minds so powerfully for so long.

The Qur'an in some respects can be viewed as a clarification and addendum to the Old and New Testaments, collectively referred to as the Book, thus deeming Jews and Christians Peoples of the Book. The Qur'an refers to the Torah and Gospels, assuming the reader knows these scriptures. It even refers to books that were not accepted as canonical, such as the Infancy Gospels of Jesus, dealing with his early life. If the Qur'an explicitly denies the divinity of Jesus, it does not repudiate Christianity itself. It does distinguish itself from its Orthodox interpretation, being closer to the beliefs of Arian Christians at that time. When the neighboring Byzantines heard of the emerging Muslims, they took them to be Arian heretics.

### ***Messengers***

Although Islam stresses that Muhammad was the last of the prophets, Muslims recognize and venerate many others, including Adam, Noah, Abraham, Moses,

Jonah, and Job. Biblical personages (such as King Solomon) reappear in the Qur'an as prophets. Christians are often astonished that Muslims count Jesus as one of God's messengers. The Qur'an affirms that he was born of the Virgin Mary, that he is a "word" of God, and that someday he will return, but denies that he was crucified or that he was the son of God. All prophets must be revered; no one prophet, not even Muhammad, may be exalted above the others.

Many people nowadays do not know what prophets can do. They do not predict what will happen or perform miracles unless God enables them to do so; they are just good people chosen to bring God's message to other men and women. According to Islam, no more prophets will come before Judgment Day.

### ***Judgment Day***

Among Islam's basic tenets, none was preached more fervently by Muhammad than belief in a final Judgment Day, from which no one can escape. On this day of doom, all living people will die, joining those who have gone before them. All will be summoned before the heavenly throne to be judged for their good and evil deeds. Later Muslims built up the imagery: a tightrope will stretch across the fires of hell, and only the righteous will cross safely into heaven. The Qur'an depicts paradise as a shaded garden with cooling fountains, abundant food and drink, and beautiful maidens for the eternal bliss of righteous men. Righteous women, too, will enter heaven, but the Qur'an is less specific on what they will find. Popular Islam teaches that they will revert to the age at which they were most beautiful. Both men and women will know peace, live in harmony, and see God.

Hell is everything that Arabs dread: fearsome beasts, fiery tortures, noxious vapors, foul-tasting food to eat, and boiling water to drink. There will be no peace and no harmony. God will not be present, and for the worst sinners the torments will never end.

### **Pillars of Practice: What Must Muslims Do?**

How can the believer obey God? What are the divine commands? The Qur'an and Muhammad's teachings are full of dos and don'ts, for Islam (like Judaism) is a religion of right actions, rules, and laws. We cannot cover all of the Islamic rules. They are symbolized by five obligatory acts: the five pillars of Islam.

#### ***Bearing Witness (Shahada)***

This is the first of the famous five pillars of practice in Islam. "I witness that there is no god whatever but Allah, and that Muhammad is the messenger of God" (*Ashhadu an la ilaha illa Allah, Muhammad rasulu Allah*). Anyone who says these words—and really means them—is a Muslim. It can be found in the muezzin's call to worship; it is emblazoned in white letters on the green flag of Saudi Arabia. Any Muslim who associates other beings with God or denies

believing in Muhammad or any of the other prophets is no longer a Muslim but an apostate. Apostasy may be punished by death.

### ***Worship (Salat)***

Islam's second pillar is worship, or ritual prayer—a set sequence of motions and prostrations performed facing in the direction of the Ka'ba in Mecca and accompanied by brief Qur'anic recitations. Worship reminds men and women of their relationship to God and takes their minds off worldly matters. It occurs five times each day, at fixed hours announced by the muezzin's call from the minaret (tower) of a mosque, a building constructed for congregational worship. Muslims may worship anywhere, but men are urged to do so publicly as a group; women usually worship at home. All adult men should go to a mosque on Friday at noon, as congregational worship at that time is followed by a sermon and sometimes by major announcements. Before any act of worship, Muslims wash their hands, arms, feet, and faces. Worship may include individual prayers (Muslims may call on God to bring good to, or avert evil from, them and their loved ones); but such invocations, called *du'a* in Arabic, are distinct from *salat*.

### ***Fasting***

Muslims must fast during the month of Ramadan. From daybreak until sunset they refrain from eating, drinking, smoking, and sexual intercourse. Devout Muslims spend extra time during Ramadan praying, reciting from the Qur'an, and thinking about religion; lax ones are apt to sleep in the daytime, for the nights are filled with festivities, bright lights, and visiting friends. The discipline of abstinence teaches the rich what it is like to be poor, trains observant Muslims to master their appetites, and the shared experience of daytime fasting and nighttime feasting brings Muslims closer together. The Muslim calendar has exactly twelve lunar months in each year. With no month occasionally added, as in the Jewish calendar, the Muslim year consists of only 354 days. Thus Ramadan advances eleven or twelve days each year in relation to our calendar and to the seasons. In the Northern Hemisphere the fast is relatively easy to keep when Ramadan falls in December, but great self-discipline is needed when it falls in June (as it does between 2014 and 2019). A Muslim who gets sick or makes a long trip during Ramadan may postpone all or part of the fast until a suitable time. Growing children, pregnant women and nursing mothers, soldiers on duty, and chronically ill Muslims are exempt. Nearly all Muslims who can fast do so, even those who have given up other outward observances of the faith.

### ***Tithing (Zakat)***

All Muslims must give a specified share of their income or property to help provide for the needy. This payment, called *zakat*, though often translated

as “alms,” began as a tax levied on all adult members of the *umma*. In modern times many Muslim countries stopped collecting the *zakat* as a tax, but their citizens still must make equivalent charitable donations. Lately, some Muslim governments have resumed the practice. Wealthy and pious Muslims make additional gifts or bequests to feed the hungry, cure the sick, educate the young, or shelter the traveler. Many fountains, mosques, schools, and hospitals have been founded and maintained by a type of endowment called a *waqf*, about which you will read later. In essence, Islam’s fourth pillar is sharing.

### **Pilgrimage (Hajj)**

The fifth duty is the pilgrimage to Mecca, during the twelfth month of the Muslim year. All adult Muslims should perform the *hajj* at least once in their lives if they are well enough and can afford the journey. Each year, from all parts of the world, observant Muslims, their bodies clad in identical unsewn strips of cloth, converge on Mecca to perform rites hallowed by the Prophet Muhammad, although some are taken from earlier Arab practices. These rites include circling the Ka’ba; kissing the Black Stone set in one of its walls; running between the nearby hills of Safa and Marwa; stoning a pillar near Mina representing the devil, and sacrificing sheep there; and assembling on the plain of Arafa. Some of the rites may have begun as pagan practices, but Muhammad reinterpreted them in monotheistic terms. Thus Muslims believe that Abraham and Ishmael found the Black Stone and erected the Ka’ba around it.

Running seven times between Safa and Marwa commemorates Hagar’s frantic quest for water after Abraham had expelled her and Ishmael from his tent. The sacrifice of a sheep recalls Abraham’s binding of Ishmael (Muslims do not believe it was Isaac) at God’s command and the last-minute substitute of a sacrificial lamb provided by an angel. The day of sacrifice is a high point of the *hajj* and the occasion for a major feast throughout the Muslim world. The pilgrimage rites have served throughout history to bring Muslims together and to break down racial, linguistic, and political barriers among them.

### **Other Duties and Prohibitions**

The five pillars do not cover all Muslim duties. There is another, which some call the “sixth pillar of Islam,” called *jihad*, or “struggle in the way of God.” Non-Muslims think of the *jihad* as Islam’s holy war against all other religions. This is not wholly true. To be sure, the Qur’an calls on Muslims to “fight in the way of God . . . against those . . . who start a fight against you, but do not aggress against them by initiating the fighting; God does not love the aggressors” (2:190). Another Qur’anic passage commands Muslims to

fight against those who do not believe in God or the Judgment Day, who permit what God and His messenger have forbidden, and who refuse