

Basic Background about Arab Culture, Islam, and the Middle East

In light of the recent attacks on the United States and measures taken to end terrorism, many students are asking questions about Islam and Arab culture. How should a teacher respond? Additionally, in our diverse nation it is important for students to understand that many characteristics make up any individual. This includes being well informed about the many cultures of the world, but also understanding that generalizing the behaviors of an entire culture is not helpful. How can teachers do that too?

Begin by being well informed on these issues. Below is a beginner's guide to Islam and Arab Culture. Use this guide as a starting point - and visit the web sites mentioned. To help students understand the diversity of any people - begin where they are. Ask students to describe how they are different from someone they think is "just like them" (a sibling or close friend). Move on to larger issues by asking, "If there are differences between two people who are so similar, what danger is there in blanket descriptions of behavior of an entire religion or culture?"

Background Information #1

Muslim: Islam:: Christian: Christianity. A Muslim is a person who practices the faith of Islam just as a Christian is a person who practices Christianity. Muslim literally means "anyone or anything that submits itself to the will of Allah (God)." Therefore the term Muslim can describe an individual or group.

Background Information #2

Arabs share a culture, not a religion. Religion, while an integral part of culture, is not always the defining aspect of culture. The defining aspect of Arab culture is the language Arabic and common traditions from the geographic regions in Northern Africa and Southwest Asia (commonly called the Middle East). Traditionally Arab nations include: Algeria, Bahrain, Djibouti, Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, Kuwait, Lebanon, Libya, Mauritania, Morocco, Oman, Palestine, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Somalia, Sudan, Syria, Tunisia, United Arab Emirates and Yemen. Some Arabs are Israeli citizens. Note that Iran is not an Arab nation - Iran is predominantly a Persian culture - most people there speak Farsi. Please also note that Afghanistan is **not** an Arab nation.

Background Information #3

An Arab is not necessarily Islamic and a Muslim is not necessarily an Arab. The majority of Arabs are Muslims however, there are Arabs who are Jewish and many Arabs who are Christian. The predominant faith of the approximately six million Arab-Americans is Christianity. Islam is a world-wide faith with most of its followers in Indonesia, Pakistan, Bangladesh, and India. Arabs only make up 20% of the followers of Islam.

Background Information #4

Islam is the second largest religion in the world. Islam is second only to Christianity in numbers of followers around the world (Christianity 2 billion, Islam 1.3 billion, Hinduism 900 million). Like other world-wide religions practice varies from place to place, mosque to mosque, and individual to individual. Like Christianity there are significant, historic disagreements between different sects. However there are basic beliefs that most agree on:

- Allah is the one God, the same God of Abraham and Christ.
- Muhammad, born as "the last prophet of God" in 570 began the faith through his words and deeds.
- The Qur'an. (Koran) is Islam's main text and outlines the major tenets of the faith:

- 1. There are five pillars of practice in Islam.** A) Profession of faith (Shahadah) in the oneness of God and that Muhammad is the last prophet of God. B) Formal prayer (salah) five times a day. C) Fasting (sawn) during the daylight hours in the month of Ramadan. D) Charity (zakah) - 2.5% of one's savings given to the needy at the end of each year. E) Pilgrimage to Mecca (hajj), the holy city, at least once, if physically and financially able
- 2. There are six articles of faith in Islam.** They are belief in: A) the One and only God B) all the prophets of God C) the original books revealed to Moses, David, Jesus, and Muhammad D) the angels E) the Day of Judgment and the Hereafter F) pre-ordainment.

Background Information #5

Fundamentalism is not necessarily Terrorism. An Islamic Fundamentalist is a person who closely adheres to the Islamic faith as proscribed in the Koran. This includes leading a peaceful life. Throughout history extremists, tyrants, dictators, and many religious leaders have contorted the meaning of various religions to meet their political ends. Often cultural practices that include violence have been associated with religions or encouraged by specific clerics. The vast majority of all sects of all world religions today contain specific prohibitions against the use of violence.

Many media outlets have been using the terms Islamic Fundamentalists and terrorists interchangeably due to the political aspirations of groups such as the Taliban in Afghanistan or political groups called Islamic Fundamentalists (!) in nations such as Egypt and Saudi Arabia. This is confusing to most Americans as we live in a nation founded on the principal that established religion should be clearly separated from the operation of the government. This is not necessarily the case in other parts of the world where governments run by religious leaders (Theocracies) erase the line between political and religious mandates. In these cases, the sources of violence often use the power of religion to meet political ends. Usually these political ends include the forced establishment of the particular religious beliefs of the rulers. Confused? Try this: separation of church and state is a good thing.

Background Information #6

Appearance or attire does not necessarily indicate a particular faith. There are many religions and cultures that encourage or require some form of clothing or headgear covering for men and women. People who wear head coverings are not necessarily Muslims. Islam asks men and women to dress modestly. Men often cover their heads as a sign of respect and women sometimes wear a hijab or covering veil as well. This rule is interpreted differently by Muslims. Some Muslims in the United States do not follow these rules - so the old aphorism sticks - you cannot judge a book by its cover.

Background Information #7

The Middle East - East of What? Textbooks and media often refer to this region as the "Middle East." The division of the world into "East and West" can be traced all the way back to Rome, though the specific term Middle East is leftover from British colonial days. So the "East of What?" would be Britain. The British referred to Egypt, the Ottoman Empire (Turkey) and what was then Palestine as the Near East, Syria, Iraq and Iran as the Middle East, and China and Japan as the Far East. Today the term Middle East is even more expansive including all of the Arab world (as mentioned in #2) which includes parts of North Africa and parts of South Central Asia such as Afghanistan and Pakistan. This broad terminology is probably not helpful. It is akin to referring to the many nations of Europe or Africa as "European" or "African" or grouping Asians on one form on a census. The terminology hides more than it reveals. Students would benefit more from learning about the specific history and traditions of countries in the region than stereotypes for such broad area. A great place for teacher background is the Center for Middle Eastern Studies: <http://link.lanic.utexas.edu/menic/>

Background Information #8

Middle East conflict is not simply Arab vs. Israel. In an attempt to simplify the causes of the recent horrors some have tried to pinpoint United States support of the state of Israel as the prime factor in motivating terrorism. In point of fact the conflicts of Middle East extend back to ethnic rivalries, colonial occupation, and more recent Cold War alliances. As mentioned above, there are many other cultures and religions in the Middle East other than Arabs, Jews, and Muslims. The United States also has strategic and economic interests in the region including oil and the stability of allies such as Egypt and Turkey. To be sure, the Arab-Israeli conflict, especially over the establishment of Palestine, does cause many in the region to choose sides. But to see this as the single determining factor does not help students understand wider U.S. interests. More importantly the role of the United States in supporting the historical expansion of individual rights in democratic governments can be lost through such a narrow focus. Political solutions to these issues must also consider the fact that the Middle East contains holy sites that are significant to Judaism, Christianity and Islam – sometimes in the exact same location.

Web Resources

<http://www.cie.org/AboutIslam.pdf> - About Islam. A free 50 page teacher packet from The Council on Islamic Education

<http://www.cie.org/> - The Council also has teacher information on proper observances of Ramadan, etc.

<http://www.adc.org/> - American Arab Discrimination Committee - has many good resources and links to answers on most anything related to Arab culture.

<http://www.us-israel.org/index.html> - The Jewish Virtual Library - a resource for information about Judaism and Israel.

<http://www.teachingaboutreligion.org/> - A web site with teacher materials and thoughtful approaches to teaching about religion in public schools.