



League of Arab States  
Intercultural Dialogue Department

# Brief Guide to Understand Islam





Sector of Social Affairs  
Intercultural Dialogue

# **Brief Guide to Understand Islam**

## **Preface**

*Within the context of rising indications of Islamophobia in different parts of the world, we came up with a conclusion that **“the widespread misconception and misunderstanding of Islam, is one of the major causes of Islamophobia”***

*A tangible measure to combat the growing Islamophobia trend is to shed light on the main values and principles of Islam, aiming to disseminate the correct image of this religion.*

*This Booklet is a brief guide to help you understand Islam in a proper way, by shedding light on specific topics that simplifies the experience of familiarizing oneself with Islam.*

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## The Five Pillars of Islam

The Five pillars of Islam are the framework of a Muslim's life they are the following:

### **1) The Testimony of Faith**

- The testimony of faith is saying with conviction: “La ilaha illa Allah, Muhammed Rasoulu Allah” This saying means; There is no true God but Allah (Allah is the Arabic word for one true God) and none has the right to be worshipped but God alone.
- And that God has neither partner nor son, and Prophet Mohammad is the messenger of God.
- This testimony of Faith is called “**The Shahada**” a simple formula which should be said with conviction in order to convert to Islam.

### **2) Prayer**

- Muslims perform five prayers a day.
- Each prayer does not take more than a few minutes to perform.
- Prayer in Islam is a direct link between the worshipper and God, and there is **no intermediate**.
- Prayers are performed at dawn, noon, mid-afternoon, sunset, and night. A Muslim can pray almost anywhere and it is not necessarily to pray in the mosque. Hence, he can pray in fields, offices, factories, or universities and etc.
- In prayer, a person feels inner peace, happiness and comfort.

### 3) Giving “Zakat”

- Giving zakat is an obligation in Islam which means “giving a specified percentage of your money and properties such as gold, silver to poor people.
- Zakat or this amount of money is given once per year.
- Zakat contributes to the purification of one’s possessions it helps him avoiding becoming greedy. It also contributes to fostering social cohesion within the society.
- A Muslim is also allowed to give - as much as he or she pleases - money to poor people as voluntary alms or charity.

### 4) Fasting the Holy Month of Ramadan

- Every year in the month of Ramadan- which is the ninth months of the Islamic calendar- Muslims fast from dawn until sunset, abstaining from food, drink and sexual relations.
- Although the fast is beneficial to health it is regarded principally as a method of spiritual self- purification. Furthermore, a fasting person gains true sympathy with poor, hungry people.

### 5) The Pilgrimage to Makkah

- The pilgrimage (so called; Hajj) To Makkah (In Saudi Arabia) is an obligation once in a lifetime for those who are physically and financially able to perform it in the twelfth month of the Islamic Calendar.
- Pilgrims turn around the Kaaba seven times praying God asking for His forgiveness.
- The Kaaba is the place of worship which God commanded the prophet Abraham and his son Ismael to build.

## Dialogue in Islam

- Islam gives the concept of dialogue a special importance that it underlines the concept as “the best way for people to get to know each other and to familiarize.” In addition to the importance of dialogue in conflict prevention, avoiding war and disasters.
- The dissemination of Islamic religion or the so called “Dawa” depended on dialogue (as one of its means) to persuade humanity with the principles of Islam and its teachings, whereas Islam called upon for extending the Dawa to non-Muslims to **convert to Islam** through **calm discussion** based on rationality and logic.
- History has not recorded one incident where Muslims killed the populations of territories where they expanded. Islam came liberating the population and freeing them from the tyrants that were ruling them using the method of dialogue with the populations of the territories where Muslims have expanded.
- Islam calls for dialogue and discussion with followers and allies as well as with enemies and opponents.
- The word “dialogue” has been mentioned in the Holy Quran, and what indicates debate and discussion more than a 1700 times.
- Dialogue in Islam is based on **two fundamental rules** and they are: wisdom and good preaching. So dialogue should not be aggravated and reckless without, rules and disciplines or else it will backfire and will not be productive. In addition,

dialogue should be launched in a good manner, far from violence, intimidation and skepticism.

- The important fruits of dialogue in Islam constitute bringing of views closer together and bridging the gap of dispute between interlocutors and the convergence of their views with regard that through calm dialogue there is an ability to reach a compromise that satisfies all interlocutors.
- In order for a dialogue to be productive and rational, Islam has established a **set of principles and ethics** such as the following:
  1. The intention of the ongoing dialogue must be reaching the truth and identifying what is right. Dialogue should not be built on the need to show off intellectual superiority, or discuss trivial matters for the sake of arguing.
  2. Modesty and mutual respect between interlocutors' sides' and avoiding arrogance and being condescending.
  3. The interlocutor must master the skill of listening to the other, whereas the dialogue must not be one sided.
  4. Commitment to sincerity in dialogue and avoiding lies and deception.
  5. The interlocutors must be fully aware of the topic of discussion, and should not discuss matters they have no knowledge about otherwise the dialogue would be weak and would have no useful output.
  6. Depending on evidence, established facts, proofs and correct information, not on rumors or false information.

## Islam and Accepting the Other

- Islam has emphasized the necessity of peaceful coexistence between citizens in the Islamic state, and on the importance of having social relations between Muslims and followers of other religions based on understanding, mutual respect, tolerance and peaceful coexistence.
- Islam respects the culture of others and encourages the acceptance of the other regardless of faith, color, gender and social class.
- The state based itself in Islam on respecting the rights of all of its citizens whether they were Muslims or non-Muslims.
- Islam is keen to recognize **the rights of non-Muslims** and people of other religions and cultures in terms of security, peace, freedom and mutual defense and ensures that they are not forced into accepting Islam as a religion and are allowed to keep their own religion and to practice it. Furthermore, Islam guarantees that their houses of worship to be protected and unharmed.
- Islam does not recognize what is called now “religious persecution”, whereas it makes consent and conviction the way to entering the religion and forbids forcing and oppression.
- The constitution put by the Prophet Mohammad for the Islamic state contained the specification of the rights and duties of non-Muslim minorities (Jewish at the time) and the

protection of the rights of all citizens in the diversity of their religions, nations and nationalities.

- Islam establishes **social relations with non-Muslims** on the principles of tolerance and peaceful coexistence, namely Islam permits the following:
  1. Visiting, socializing and interactions with non-Muslims, and attending the feasts they prepare
  2. Trading with them and entering in trade deals with them
  3. Consoling them in their calamities and sharing with them their joy, social and religious celebrations
  4. Allowing them to share their opinions in issues of society
  5. Allowing a Muslim man to marry a non-Muslim (Christian or Jewish)
- Based on what has been presented, Islam is considered to be several centuries ahead of international covenants in the field of implementing the principles of religious freedoms and the adoption of the principles of security and social peace based on the principle of national unity between people of different religious faiths.

## **Political System in Islam**

- The political system in Islam is the system of governance that identifies the relationship of the individual and his/her society as well as with his/her country. It also identifies the relationship between the Islamic nation with other nations.
- The principles on which the system of governance is based upon in Islam are the following:
  1. The nation is the source of authority, and the ruler derives his authority from the nation.
  2. The people govern themselves through proper representation by the view of the majority.
  3. Freedom of the individual and solidarity of the community
- Islam sets **three clear pillars for governance** that are suitable for all societies in all times and places, which are the following:
  - Consultation
  - Human rights
  - Justice

### **Consultation:**

- Islam encourages individuals to choose the ruler they see capable to carry out the duties and responsibilities of ruling. Muslims during the times of the Islamic State used to gather in order choose the ruler known as the “Khalifa”.
- Islam also affirms that the ruler has to consult the wise figures, scholars and people of experience aiming to reach

the correct decisions on issues to be faced such as political issues, choosing governors and managing the military.

- Under the reign of Al-Khalifa Omar Ebn Al-Khattab a council of shura (consultations) was established. No decision was made, or canceled unless the matter has been presented to and discussed by the council.

### **Human Rights:**

- Human rights in and human freedom - whether individually or collectively - are considered in Islam to be necessary requirements to achieve the humanity of individuals. Islam envisage freedom as an element that embodies the meaning of life for the individual.
- The prominent rights that Islam reaffirms are the following: right of life and security, right of freedom of opinion and thought, right of freedom in belief and religion, right of property and freedom to dispose it. Also, right of earning money, right of education, right of equality and political rights.

### **Justice**

- Justice between people without any discrimination - due to religion, color, gender, race and nationality - is considered to be a main pillar of governance in Islam.
- Islam ensures equality between all citizens in exercising their rights and being committed to their duties. Social justice is guaranteed for everyone.

- Islam rejects injustice and discrimination in all various forms and calls for combating and confronting it by all means. Islam is considered to be the religion of tolerance.

### **International Relations in Islam**

- Islam is concerned with relations between states and countries. It calls for mutual knowledge, understanding and interactions among different countries and peoples regardless of their races, languages and long distances.
- Islam emphasizes the importance of establishing relations among countries and peoples based on cooperation, brotherhood, mutual respect and understanding, aiming to promoting peace and prevention of wars.
- One of the most important principles in Islam in terms of international relations is respecting agreements and international treaties and avoiding breaching them. Islam also underlines the respect of the nations' freedom and avoiding any interference in their internal affairs.

## **Economic System in Islam**

- Islam gives priority to organizing economic relationships and matters, aiming to the achievement of best interests of the individual and the community.
- Islamic economy is characterized by comprehensiveness, as it is not only concerned with financial and material issues, but it is also concerned with moral and humanitarian aspects, such as the commitment to the values of honesty, sincerity, transparency and keeping promises and respect of trade deals.
- In this context Islam forbids all means of cheating, exploitation, monopoly, lying, betrayal, breaking promises and bribery. Also, it forbids delaying, procrastination and taking advantage of the needs of people by increasing prices.
- Islam permits private property which has beneficial return for the individual as well as for the society, and which also contributes to the revitalization of the state economy. Islam also permits the development and investment of capital in all fields.
- In addition, Islam promotes the establishment of economic relationships among individuals on the basis of brotherhood and compassion. In this regard, Islam imposes “Zakat” on rich people.
- Zakat means “giving a specified percentage of your money and properties to poor people. This amount of money is given once per year. Zakat constitutes the purification of

one's possessions as well as contributing to social cohesion within the society.

Based on the mentioned above, the Islamic economic system depends on the following **three economic principles**:

- **Dual property**
  - Islam permits the individual to have private property, as long as it does not cause any harm or damage to the interests of others. Islam also distinguishes between private and public property. Public property is the property designated for all members of the society such as: hospitals, schools, public parks and other.
- **Restricted economic freedom**
  - Economic freedom in Islam is not absolute, but is limited to a set of moral and humanitarian rules. If interests contradict each other, then the interests of the society shall be preferred over the individual interests.
- **Social Justice**
  - Social justice means equal distribution of income and identifying the proper ways of spending money based on justice.
- Islamic economy differs from the concepts of capitalism and socialism. In **capitalism**, private property is the general principle and public property is an exception. In **socialism**, public property is the general principle and private property is an exception. But in Islam, different forms of property are permitted; public and private property are both allowed as long as benefits are achieved for the entire society.

## Islam and Combating Extremism

- Islam is the **religion of moderation** and keeping the balance between worships on one hand and treatments among individuals on the other hand
- Islam generally prohibits exaggeration and extremism in all forms whether in terms of faith, worships and treatments. Moreover, Islam prohibits “monastic life” which means taking performing worship to the extreme.
- Islam emphasizes the establishment of justice between people regardless of their religion, color or nationality
- Islam promotes **tolerance, forgiveness and compassion** in terms of treatment with others even if they differ in belief or opinion. Moreover, Islam promotes launching a dialogue with others who disagree in opinion and even with enemies and prohibits any signs of agitation or being offensive.
- Islam urges the acceptance and respect of other religions and opening up to others and coexisting with them as well as acknowledging their rights and basic freedoms. This indicates that Islam prohibits religious intolerance.
- In Islamic history a lot of Christians and Jews experienced the **tolerance of Islam**. The British historian “Thomas Arnold” clarifies in his writing “The Call for Islam” that Muslims have treated Christians with great tolerance, and that Arab/Christians living until the current moment is a great proof for the tolerance of Islam
- In recent times, several movements and organizations that adopt extremist thoughts using the umbrella of Islam, have

risen which led some to link Islam with extremism. This caused the distortion of the civilizational image of Islam.

- The reality is, **Islam is innocent of these extremist organizations**. It is a religion based on moderation, justice and tolerance.
- We are all aware of a truth; that extremism is not limited to the followers of a certain religion. The behavior of extremism is found in followers of several different religions.

## Stance of Islam towards Terrorism

- Islam is the religion of peace, even the word “Islam” means peace. Islam calls for the prevailing of peace based on justice in its comprehensive sense.
- Terrorism - which means the aggression directed towards innocent people, or by threatening and horrifying them leading to depriving them from the sense of safety and security - in all its forms is prohibited in Islam, it is not permitted to undertake or contribute to or plan for it.
- Islam forbids all forms of violence including killing, damaging of shops, destroying of mosques and churches as well as any behavior which harms public properties.
- Islam considers violence and terrorism as “deadly sins” and envisages aggression on one personal life as equivalent to an aggression towards mankind
- Islam allows fighting only in one case which is self-defense while being under aggression
- Studying the wars which Prophet Muhamad (PBUH) was engaged in, we will find out that these wars were **not out of his need for fighting, but were out of self-defense.**
- The Prophet stayed in his hometown “Mecca” for 10 years and **did not engage in war or fighting**, despite being exposed to different forms of torture and abuse
- It is mentioned in several publications -specialized in distorting the image of Islam and its civilization- **that Islam was spread by the sword. This is not true**, due to the fact that all individuals who embraced Islam were through

conviction and belief of its values and principles, and **not through force or use of violence**

- With the dissemination of terrorism in various parts of the world -which has become a transnational phenomenon- several terrorist organizations using Islam as an umbrella have risen in the recent period. This led to the distortion of the image of Islam to the extent that some Arab/Islamic states were accused of exporting terrorism, whereas Islam is entirely innocent from all these terrorist acts.
- In reality we all know terrorism as a phenomenon is not specific to a certain religion or population, it is actually disseminated in various countries of the world. Consequently, we might find terrorist incidents taking place in the USA, various European countries as well as various Arab/Islamic countries. These acts were carried out not only by some Muslims, but also by followers of other religions.

## Concept of Jihad in Islam

- The word “**Jihad**” is mentioned 31 times in the holy book (Quran), whereas the word “**Harb**” meaning “**war**” appears 4 times only.
- “Jihad” in Islam means resistance against an enemy. Hence, the command to perform “Jihad” **does not** necessarily mean killing; instead it means fighting back enemies as a means to resist and deter aggression.
- Therefore, the obligation of “Jihad” – that some continuously attempt to distort – is only a means to defend one’s self-belief and homeland.
- In the Islamic philosophy, “Jihad” has not been legislated for the purpose of state expansion, invasion, seizure of others’ resources, or exercise of oppression or persecution against other people or any materialistic purposes that constitute the main motives in ancient as well as in modern civilizations
- Islam is unique in how it forbids intentional killing and imposes severe penalties upon the killer.
- Even “**war**” in the Islamic philosophy is controlled by norms of moral and humanitarian ethics. In this context:
  - ✓ Islam forbids killing enemies’ children, women, elders and also handicapped persons
  - ✓ Prohibition of mutilating dead bodies of the enemies
  - ✓ Islam urges the humanitarian treatment of war prisoners

## Women's Status in Islam

- One of the main misconceptions about Islam is the issue of “the status of Muslim Women”.
- A number of people in various parts of the world especially in western societies hold such a negative view of Islam, especially when women's issue is raised. They perceive Islam to be the symbol of **subordination and oppression of women.**
- Aiming to reach an objective evaluation of this issue, let us shed light on the status of women **before Islam** .

### Before Islam

- ❖ Women were considered shameful, daughters were considered as sources of shame and as a painful burden to her father to the extent that female children were buried alive.
- ❖ Furthermore, prostitution was rampant, oppression of women was widespread.
- ❖ Divorce was only in the hands of the husband.
- ❖ Inheritance rights were confined exclusively to the male relatives.

### After Islam

- ❖ Islam came and abolished these practices.
- ❖ Islam regards women as precious and valuable, to be respected and honored.

- ❖ Islam gave women rights that women **in the West** have only recently began to enjoy. In the 1930's **Annie Besant- British Socialist & women's rights activist**- observed "it is only in the last twenty years that Christian England has recognized the right of woman to property, while Islam has allowed this right from all times".
- ❖ It is important to mention that the mistreatment of women in some **Middle Eastern countries** or Muslims families is due to cultural factors that some Muslims wrongly follow or wrongly apply the principles of Islam and not because of Islam as a religion.

### **Women's Rights in Islam**

#### **Equal Accountability**

- ❖ Islam offers justice between the Sexes, namely the holy book "Quran" emphasizes - in many verses - that God judges all human beings fairly and equitably.
- ❖ Accountability is dependent upon one's actions and not one's gender.

#### **Rights of knowledge & Work**

- Both men & women are equally encouraged to seek knowledge and to receive education.
- Great female Muslim Scholars existed at and around the time of Prophet Mohammed and had famous male scholars as their students.
- Islam also ensures the right of working- regardless the type of work- for all Muslim women.

### **Rights of marriage**

- Islam has honored women by giving them the right to choose a spouse and keep their **original family name** once they get married.
- Islam, since the seventh century has granted married women the independent personality. In Islam the bride and her family are under no obligation whatsoever to present a gift to the groom.
- It is the groom who must present the bride with a marriage gift. The bride retains her marriage gifts even if she is later divorced.
- Islam underlines the importance of love and mercy in spousal relations, and encouraged men to treat their spouses in the best way.

### **Rights of property & earning**

- The wife's property and earnings are under her full control and for her use alone.
- The husband is **not** allowed to have any share in his wife's property except what she offers him with her free consent.
- No matter how rich the wife might be, she **is not obliged to act as a co-provider for the family** unless she herself voluntarily chooses to do so.

### **Rights of inheritance**

- Before Islam inheritance rights were confined exclusively to males. After Islam Muslim mothers, wives, daughter and sisters received inheritance rights.

- The general rule of inheritance is that the female share is half the male's **Why?**
- These inheritance differences are not viewed as evidences of superiority (of males) or inferiority (of females).
- In Islam the man is responsible for the financial wellbeing of the family while the woman contributes to the family's educational and emotional wellbeing.
- In light of these facts we come up with the fact that **Muslim men**, in general, **have greater financial burdens than Muslim women** and thus inheritance rules are meant to offset this imbalance.



**This Booklet highlights some core issues such as, Islam and Accepting the Other, and Dialogue in Islam. It also addresses several controversial issues such as Islam and Combating Extremism & Terrorism and Women's Rights in Islam**



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