

Islam's Surprising Impact on Daily Life

by Daniel Pipes

Islam's "flavor is unmistakable on whatever it touched."
— Gustave von Grunebaum

The Qur'an forbids Muslims to eat, drink, smoke, or engage in sexual relations during daylight hours in the month of Ramadan. But the Qur'an says nothing about aspects of twenty-first-century Ramadan: shortened office hours, parties through the night, holiday pastries, special television programs, vacations in countries with less-strict regimens, or escapes to cooler climes with shorter daylight hours. The Qur'an

knows even less about "[the Ramadan effect on retail](#)" or on health. Fasting, notes the head of the Emirates Diabetes Society, causes observant Muslims to exercise less, and festive nights mean they "tend to overeat upon breaking their fast," usually consuming "heavy, fatty foods that are high in calories." Sixty-percent of respondents in a [Saudi](#) survey reported excessive weight gain after Ramadan.

None of these modern customs is a religious obligation, but all follow logically from Islam's rules. Together, they constitute the lived experience of Ramadan. As this example suggests, while Islam tends to be seen in terms of its texts and precepts, it is also something much larger, a mix of traditions and innovations. In the aggregate, they form the civilization of Islam.



Ramadan is, ironically, a month of both fasting and overeating. Sugar is an important part of the nightly meals. In Turkey, the feast to end Ramadan is known as "the feast of sweets."

Islamicate

In the 1960s, the historian Marshall G.S. Hodgson coined the term *Islamicate* to describe this larger phenomenon. As he defined it, Islamicate refers

not directly to the religion, Islam, itself, but to the social and cultural complex historically associated with Islam and the Muslims, both among Muslims themselves and even when found among non-Muslims.

He modeled the “Islam-Islamicate” pairing on “Italian-Italianate.” This concept greatly helps to understand Islam’s subtle impact on daily life.

Islamicate customs have three principal sources: the Qur’an and Hadith (sayings and actions of Islam’s prophet Muhammad), which give general injunctions, such as to offer charity or treat dogs as unclean; “fences” (*ihtiyat*), which reduce the chance of inadvertent transgression by adding secondary prescriptions; for example, the burqa (an all-encompassing garment) takes an ambiguous [Qur’anic verse \(24.31\)](#) about female modesty and, to be on the safe side, turns women into mobile tents. Finally, a general mentality can become standard practice; Qur’anic exhortations about the superiority of Muslims over non-Muslims became encoded in the *dhimmi* status, a second-class citizenship available to those Jews and Christians who acknowledge Muslim rule.

Islamicate customs combine abstract Islamic laws (the Shari‘a) with actual Muslim practice. In other words, the religion’s formal requirements provide only the narrow base for

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a much wider structure of customs that extend the dictates of Islam, stretching them in unexpected, unplanned, and sometime surprising ways.

Thus, the annual pilgrimage to Mecca, the Islamic *hajj*, turned into a unique meeting place that served as a transfer point for Muslims. It could be ideas, as in the eighteenth century, when [Islamist views](#) spread via Mecca to Morocco, West Africa, Libya, northwest India, Bengal, Indonesia, and China. It could be trade, such as luxury goods like ivory, or plants such as rubber and rice. Finally, it can be diseases, such as [meningococci](#), [pyoderma](#), [infectious diarrhea](#), [respiratory tract infections](#), and [polio](#).

The Qur’anic ban on artistic representations of the human form led to the development of artistic motifs based on vegetal and geometric designs and the Arabic script. The result is a discrete and recognizable style. Flip casually through a book showing artistic treasures from around the world, the [historian George Marçais](#) notes, and one intuitively sees that Muslim-made artifacts, such as a wall panel from Spain, an illustrated Qur’an from Egypt, or an engraved copper bowl from Iran, share common features: “Without being capable of identifying in which country any of these was made, you are not inclined even for an instant to attribute them to any place other than the Muslim world.”

Alcohol worldwide is consumed to celebrate, to console, or to distract; but Muslims, due to the Islamic prohibition against it, turned instead to its non-intoxicating equivalent, sugar. Sugar consumption among Muslims, historically has, therefore, tended to be high. As [Josie Delap](#) points out,

If you can't do shots in Dubai, you can belly up to the milkshake bar and get a high from guzzling a chocolately ice cream concoction. After dinner, sweetened tea takes the place of an aperitif. Juice and sugar-cane stalls replace pubs and bars on street corners.

Sugar has even become integral to religious festivals: "Ramadan brings a nightly feast in which sweets play an important role. In Turkey, Eid al-Fitr, the feast to celebrate the end of Ramadan, is known as Şeker Bayramı, the feast of sweets."

The ban on pork is ritual and Islamic, but its consequences are geographic and Islamicate. Not consuming pork led to the disappearance of pigs and that, the geographer [Xavier de Planhol](#) explains, opened "the wooded ranges to sheep and goats, and thus indirectly brought about a catastrophic deforestation. This is one of the basic reasons for the sparse landscape particularly evident in the Mediterranean districts of Islamic countries." Or, as Israel's first president, [Chaim Weizmann](#), observed, "The Arab is often called the son of the desert. It would be truer to call him its father." Looking at the Mediterranean, the region around Marsala in western Sicily receives on average 17.7 inches of rainfall annually but is distinctly more verdant than the nearby region around Tunis, with an average 20 inches a year. Note the evolution from Qur'anic dietary injunction to desertification; the scriptural command was not intended to cause ecological damage, but it did.

Beyond these somewhat random influences, Islamicate practices have done much to [obstruct Muslims from modernizing](#). They affected three types of relationships: personal ones, intra-Muslim, and those with non-Muslims.



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Personal Relations

Islamic rules have much to say about male-female relations; Islamicate patterns then vastly extend these to most aspects of family life.

Islamic texts assume that women enjoy sexual intercourse as much or more than men. Accordingly, Islam portrays female desire transforming women into predators and men into prey. This alleged female lust is a powerful force for disorder by giving women power over men that rivals God's. Accordingly, women's sexuality [threatens the social order](#), prompting enormous effort to contain it. An imperative to repress female sexuality explains a range of Islamicate customs designed to separate and minimize

contact between the sexes: the covering of women's faces and bodies; confining women to their residential quarters (the harem); social separation, as in elevators or restaurants; and a weak husband-wife relationship relative to the strong mother-son bond.

Two aspects of combatting female desire deserve special note. First, female genital mutilation (FGM) most directly suppresses women's sexuality by making intercourse painful. Other than trivial exceptions in [Latin America](#), it occurs only among Muslims and their non-Muslim neighbors such as the [Copts](#). Once restricted to places like [Somalia](#), [Iraq](#), and [India](#), it now extends to the West, for example, to [Sweden](#), [the United Kingdom](#), and [Michigan](#).

Second, some Muslim women wear full head and body coverings ([niqabs and burqas](#)) to separate more fully from men, causing health problems to them and their newborns. Their outfits render exercise difficult, increasing obesity. Insufficient sunlight results in vitamin D deficiency, which can lead to bowlegs and thickened wrists and ankles, muscle and bone pain, pelvic fractures during childbirth, dementia, rickets, osteomalacia, and perhaps multiple sclerosis. Also, rashes, headaches, and respiratory disease sometime result or even [strangulation](#). Babies suffer from seizures, growth retardation, and muscle weakness and fractures.

Polygyny is Islamic but its implications are Islamicate. Wives who worry that their husbands will marry another woman suffer from permanent anxiety; conversely, husbands enjoy immense leverage in the marriage. Polygyny also leads to what is termed *excess men*, males who remain unmarried due to females engaged in polygamous marriages. (Female infanticide then further distorts the gender balance, whether by crudely killing off newborns in olden times or by ultrasound tests and abortion today.) The presence of excess men leads to heightened [criminality and violence](#)



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while rulers eager to dispose of this restless population are more prone to [make war](#).

A system of male guardianship (*wilayat ar-rijal*) gives a close male relative (grandfather, father, brother, husband, cousin, son, even grandson) the authority to make a woman's key decisions in life, such as leaving the house, acquiring an education, receiving medical attention, traveling, working, and getting married. In this spirit, some traditional Muslim weddings take place between two men—the groom and the bride's guardian. Although only the Saudi government has imposed guardianship as a legal structure, this Islamicate institution can be found privately in many Muslim societies where it not only infantilizes women but also invites abuses of power.

The Qur'an sanctions (4:22-24, 33:50) but does not encourage first-cousin marriage. Tribal customs and historical practice then make this practice widespread in Muslim societies for it retains daughters' honor, fertility, and financial resources within the family. The genetic consequences of such marriages over as many as fifty generations have been incalculably harmful, leading to [lesser cognitive performance](#) and such [disorders](#) as thalassemia, sickle cell anemia, spinal muscular atrophy, diabetes, deafness, muteness, and [autism](#). To cite one statistic, ethnic Pakistanis in the [United Kingdom](#) account for 3 percent of births but 30 percent of children with genetic illnesses.

Nothing in Islamic doctrine sanctions honor killings, defined as family killings (usually young females but at times older women or [males](#)) to purge a perceived public stain on the family's reputation. The practice emerged out of an intense focus on virginity and stringent restrictions on sexual conduct, mixed with a heightened emphasis on family honor. The result is an epidemic of murders, now occurring also [in the West](#). In addition to the actual crimes, fear of this punishment takes a huge psychological toll on female Muslims.

Finally, and unconnected to male-female relations: orphans have a status in Islamic law (called *kafala*) that derives from an incident in Muhammad's life (he married the former wife of his adoptive son). *Kafala* prohibits orphans from becoming part of their adoptive family. Although not intended to lead to an inferior status, this was the result: Muslim orphans today remain [discriminated against](#), even by Muslims living [in the West](#).

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Intra-Muslim Relations

Islam creates unrealistically high expectations of rulers (for example, by permitting them to tax only at impractically low rates), which almost invariably causes those rulers to breach the Shari'a. In response, Muslim subjects reject their rulers and try to avoid working for them. In premodern times, this reluctance created a personnel crisis that impelled Muslim rulers to seek administrative and military staff from beyond their borders. Their preferred method was systematically to acquire, train, and deploy slaves coming from such places as Africa, the Caucasus, and the Balkans. Indeed, [servile administrators and soldiers](#) became a mainstay of Islamicate statecraft from Spain to Bengal in the millennium 800-1800 C.E. This historic reluctance continues, as manifested by recent anti-government demonstrations in Muslim-majority countries.

Islam offers no rules for peaceful transition of power or guidelines for succession—to this day, Sunnis and Shiites still dispute the rightful successor to Muhammad—and recurrent problems with dynastic succession increased Islamicate political instability. In premodern times, the lack of a system like primogeniture led to such exotica as Mamluk slaves succeeding their masters as rulers in Egypt and institutionalized royal Ottoman fratricide. In modern times, the lack of democracy contributed to Syria boasting four presidents in one year (1949), the chaotic [Saudi family tree of rulers](#), and [Arab dictators](#) trying to install their sons as successors.

Islam's rules reflect its origins in a tribal environment, and however remote seventh-century Arabia from a megalopolis like today's Cairo or Istanbul, [tribal imperatives](#) remain a powerful force. The Islamicate tribal code based on family and clan solidarity can be summed up by the retrograde adage, "I against my brother, I and my brothers against my cousins, I, my brothers, and my cousins against the world." Or, in [Osama bin Laden's](#) formulation, "When people see a strong horse and a weak horse, by nature, they will like the strong horse." This mentality conflicts with modern ideas of individualism, universal values, and the rule of law. It leads to anemic institutions, poor economic performance, military weakness, and tyranny.

Other Islamicate patterns include the establishment of dynasties through conquest, not internal change; power leading to wealth, not the reverse; the weakness of municipal governments and the attendant inadequate regulation of cities; and laws arising from ad hoc decisions, not formal legislation.

Relations with Non-Muslims

Islamic scriptures encourage a sense of Muslim superiority, a disdain for the faith and civilization of others, and a revulsion against non-Muslim rule. In modern times, Islamicate attitudes obstruct Muslims from ending the practice of beheading and slavery, learning from the West, joining the global economic system, or dealing realistically with problems.

The Qur'an (8:12 and 47:4) sanctions



Forms of slavery exist in eight Muslim-majority countries. ISIS revived slavery, capturing Yazidi women and girls as sex slaves.

beheading; Islamic tradition records Muhammad as having decapitated seven hundred Jewish men of the Banu Qurayza tribe, thereby establishing the precedent and model for [future Muslims](#). This Islamicate custom has the dual goals of striking fear and gaining political advantage. Major states, including those of the Almoravids, Ottomans, and Saudis followed suit, using this form of punishment against non-Muslims and Muslims alike. In recent times, most notoriously, the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS) revived this practice.

Islam, as did most premodern civilizations, permitted slavery; today, however, this remains a significant phenomenon only among Muslims. The regulations that originate in the long-ago Qur'an and Sunna persist because they fit an Islamicate sense of Muslim superiority. Slavery is so central an Islamicate institution that a mainstream [Saudi religious figure](#) claims that rejecting it amounts to apostasy from Islam. A [survey](#) finds it exists in eight Muslim-majority countries, the Islamic State (ISIS), and in lesser forms elsewhere. Slavery has recently

[appeared among Muslims living in the West](#) with frequent scandals concerning a royal, a diplomat, and even a [student](#) charged with slave-holding.

A bitter and roughly equal Muslim-Christian rivalry started at the very origins of Islam and [continued for a millennium](#). By the time European Christians surged ahead and [conquered most Muslim-majority territories](#) between 1764 and 1919, Muslims found it particular [difficult to learn](#) from them. The distant, closed-off Japanese could not get enough of “Dutch learning,” but the nearby Ottomans waited nearly three centuries before permitting movable type printing. This slowness and reluctance led to the Islamicate pattern of Muslims [lagging behind](#), a pattern particularly evident wherever neighboring Muslims and non-Muslims come simultaneously into contact with Europeans, such as in former Yugoslavia, Nigeria, Lebanon, India, Malaysia, and Indonesia.

Living a fully Islamic life requires full implement of the Shari‘a, which in turn requires an observant Muslim as ruler; conversely, living under non-Muslim rule requires emigration or resistance. Accordingly, Muslims are the most rebellious subjects when non-Muslim are in charge. In modern times, this has meant trouble for the French in Algeria, the Italians in Libya, the Greeks in Turkey, the Israelis in Gaza, the British in Sudan, the Ethiopians in Eritrea, the Americans in Iraq, the Soviets in Afghanistan, the Indians in Kashmir, the Burmese in Rakhine, the Thais in Pattani, the Chinese in Xinjiang, and the Filipinos in Mindanao. Fury against foreign conquerors has often impeded learning from or

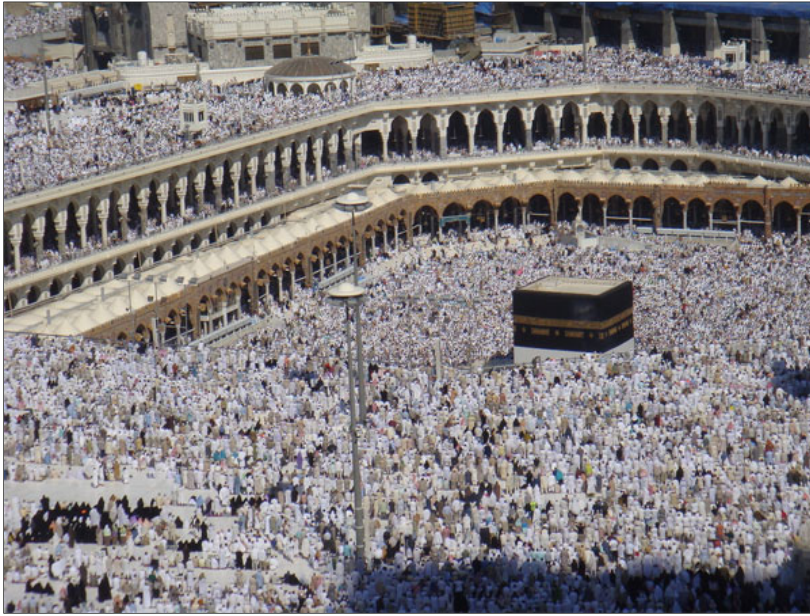
Muslim fury against foreign conquerors has often impeded learning from or cooperating with them.

cooperating with them, as symbolized by Gazans looting the [greenhouses](#) that Israelis had expressly left behind for them to make use of.

Islamic doctrine allows non-Muslims who accept Muslim rule (*dhimmis*) a degree of autonomy. This led to a pattern of religious communities preferring to live apart in their family and social spheres, in places of residence and work, and to follow their own law codes. Such separation encourages hostile intercommunal relations and impedes the development of a sense of solidarity or national identity. Although deriving from Islamic precepts, these habits of separation have taken on an Islamicate life of their own, remaining in place even in places no longer ruled by Muslims (e.g., Cyprus, Lebanon, [Israel](#), and the West Bank).

A combination of the Qur’anic condemnation on payments of interest and a wish to remain aloof from non-Muslims inspired a South Asian Islamist leader, Abul A‘la Mawdudi, to invent [Islamic economics](#) in the 1930s. Denigrated as a “[mighty deceit](#)” by [Timur Kuran](#) of Duke University, this innovation encourages corruption, strengthens Islamism, and inhibits Muslim integration into the international economy.

Scriptural hostility toward non-Muslims generates an assumption that non-Muslims harbor a parallel hostility toward Muslims. In modern times, this mirror-imaging has created a susceptibility to [conspiracy theories](#), which have had many practical consequences, such as the Iran-Iraq war, suspicions that anti-polio vaccinations render children infertile—making [polio](#) an almost Muslim-only scourge—and wariness about Western-made anti-COVID-19 treatments.



Many important exchanges take place at the annual pilgrimage to Mecca, the Islamic hajj, from ideas to trade goods to diseases.

[Gregory III Laham](#) articulated the essence of Islamicate sentiments in 2005:

We are the Church of Islam. ... Islam is our milieu, the context in which we live and with which we are historically associated. ... We understand Islam from the inside. When I hear a verse of the Koran, it's not something foreign to me. It's an expression of the civilization to which I belong.

Observations

Thanks to a much-increased familiarity with Islam, including its terminology and its concepts, the moment is right to introduce Hodgson's neologism and the Islamicate idea to the public.¹ It helps to understand the civilization of Islam, the history of Muslims, and today's challenges.

Islamicate customs are sometimes adopted by non-Muslim neighbors—such as Christian women in Pakistan covering their heads, Jewish men in Yemen marrying multiple wives, and the examples noted above of Copts engaging in FGM and separate living patterns in several countries. The Melkite patriarch

Some Islamicate customs are unique to Muslims and their non-Muslim neighbors. The architectural decoration known as *muqarnas* (a concave honeycomb of horseshoe arches) is found only in buildings constructed for Muslims. Likewise, the systematic use of slaves as soldiers and reliance on *hawala* brokers for money transfers are Muslim-specific. Nothing in Islamic scripture calls for this specific ornamentation, form of military recruitment, or financial instrument; they all arose from a mix of Islamic sensibilities and Muslim needs.

Islamicate practices are not static but can change over time. Military slavery died out two centuries ago about when conspiracy theories began. FGM is for the first time being fought while polio only became a distinctly Muslim disease in this century.

Islamicate mores are particularly harmful to health: diseases circulating during the hajj, a passive Ramadan lifestyle, FGM, cousin marriage, and full-body coverings.

¹ I devoted [much attention](#) to the Islamicate idea in books published in [1981](#) and [1983](#). But then, to address a wider audience, I abandoned the term.

Fortunately, none of these is required of observant Muslims.

In conclusion, for Muslims fully to modernize requires not just discarding outdated Islamic precepts (polygyny, unrealistic taxation, violent jihad) but also their Islamicate attributes (cousin marriage, tribal codes, bigotry against non-Muslims). Islamicate practices render the road forward longer and harder than generally perceived. But, should Muslims discard historic rules and practices, that road can be successfully traveled. The choice exists.

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