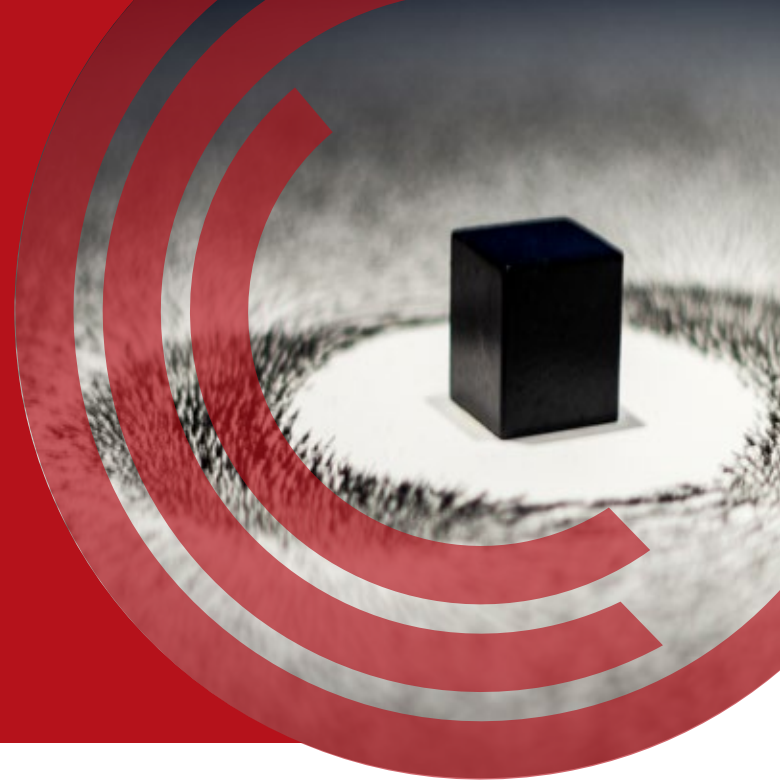




# ISLAM: THE FIVE PILLARS

This guide introduces the five pillars of Islam, the basic requirements of Islamic practice, and the teachings associated with them.



**“ The five pillars constitute the basic requirements of Islamic practice and are accepted by Muslims globally, irrespective of ethnic, regional or sectarian differences. ”**

## THE FIVE PILLARS EXPLAINED

The principal duties of Muslims are referred to as *arkan al-Islam*, the five pillars. They are accepted and adhered to by Muslims everywhere, irrespective of their differences. They are considered obligatory for those who are sincere in wishing to follow the example of Muhammad and to lead a virtuous and responsible life.

Like other religions, Islam considers certain beliefs and practices to be standard, but that does not mean that all people who identify as Muslims will adhere to them. Personal variations occur in the number of times people pray each day, whether or not they keep the fast or go on Hajj, and how much they give to charity.



### THE FIVE PILLARS

- Shahada* – The declaration of faith
- Salah* – Prayer
- Zakat* – Alms-giving
- Sawm* – Fasting
- Hajj* – Pilgrimage

Header image “Longing for Mecca” by Hans Splinter, licensed under CC BY-ND 2.0.

## WHAT WERE THE ORIGINS OF THE FIVE PILLARS?

All five pillars are referred to many times in the Qur'an, but in different chapters (*sura*). Further details about these obligations are given in the *Hadith*, or sayings of the Prophet Muhammad. Although somewhat similar practices were performed in pre-Islamic Arabia and by Jews and Christians at the time of Muhammad, they were transformed in the Qur'an and *Hadith*, given a strictly monotheistic focus, and related to the life and example of the Prophet.

In the Qur'an, although the *Shahada* does not appear in full, Sura 8.20 exhorts those who believe to obey God and his Messenger. Prayer is referred to over eighty times, with prayer times mentioned in Sura 20.130, and the acts of bowing and prostrating in 48.29. In several chapters, Muslims are exhorted both to pray and give alms (e.g. Sura 5.12), though what, when and to whom donations should be made is explained in more detail in the *Hadith*.

There is a significant passage on fasting in the Qur'an (Sura 2.183-7), which refers to the month of Ramadan and sets out the detail on who should and should not fast, for how long and under what circumstances. On the subject of the Hajj, the longest Qur'anic passage (Sura 2.196-203) prescribes the time and place of the pilgrimage, the conduct and activities of those who take part, exhorting them to have God in mind at all times.

The pillars were systematised by Abu Muslim 'Abd al-Qahir al-Baghdadi in the early eleventh century, in his theological work, 'On the Roots of Religion' (*Kitab usul al-din*):

"The Prophet said concerning this topic: 'Five things are obligatory upon the children of Islam: witnessing that there is no god but God, rising for the prayer, and giving of charity, fasting in the month of Ramadan, and performing the pilgrimage to the house in Mecca.'"

## KEY POINTS

- The five pillars guide the religious lives of Muslims globally, and are a key part of a Muslim's religious identity
- They are considered obligatory for all committed Muslims, male and female
- They are an important part of the law governing Islamic conduct
- They are a unifying feature of Islam and are adhered to by all Muslims whether Sunni, Shi'a or Sufi, with only minor differences
- They are referred to repeatedly in the Qur'an, but not altogether in a single chapter



Prayers in Mecca, Photo by Menj. Licensed under CC BY-ND 2.0



The Shahada in a cave under the Dome of the Rock, Jerusalem, Asim Bharwani, Licensed under CC BY-NC-ND 2.0

## SHAHADA, THE PROFESSION OF FAITH

“There is no god but God (*Allah*), and Muhammad is His messenger.” (*la ilaha illa-llahu muḥammadun rasulu-llah*)

The *Shahada* is the fundamental statement of faith and commitment made by Muslims, and the principal mark of Islamic orthodoxy. Although it is only short, it contains two important ideas. First, that there is only one God (*Allah*), not multiple deities. This is a statement about the oneness or unity (*tawhid*) of God. The second is the commitment to Muhammad as a messenger (*rasul*) of God, one who disseminates divine law (*shari'ah*).

The recitation of the *Shahada* distinguishes Muslims from other religious believers. Reciting it three times in front of witnesses is the first requirement of becoming a Muslim. As such, it is the principal step in a person's conversion to Islam.

The *Shahada* is a central feature of flags of groups such as the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant, al-Shabaab, Boko Haram and before them the Afghanistan Taliban. However, it has also appeared on the national flags of Saudi Arabia, Afghanistan and Somaliland and in many instances of Islamic art.



Flag of Saudi Arabia



Flag of Afghanistan



Flag of Somaliland



Flag of ISIS, Boko Haram and al-Shabaab

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## SALAH, PRAYER

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*Salah* (also *salaat*, *namaz*) is the ritual prayer of Islam in which Muslims conform to the will of Allah. Muhammad set the example by purifying and organising what in Pre-Islamic Arabia had become a neglected ritual. The prayer he and his followers performed included ablution, recitation, bowing and prostration. Designated times were set, and prayer was to be conducted in the direction of Mecca (*qibla*). Friday was prescribed as the day for congregational prayer (*Jum'a*).



Men Pray at Id Kah Mosque in China, Photo by Preston Rhea, Licensed under CC BY-SA 2.0

Sunni Muslims are required to pray five times each day, at dawn, midday, late afternoon, sunset and during the night. Times differ according to the position of the sun. Some Shi'a Muslims combine these into three prayers. In Muslim countries, a public call to prayer (*adhan*) is broadcast. *Salah* gives a regular rhythm to the day, and unites Muslims locally and globally.

Prayer can be done alone or with others. When two or more pray together, one is designated the imam or prayer leader. The imam is not a priest or intermediary. The orthodox view is that a woman should not lead men in prayer, but may lead other women. Women are not required to participate in congregational prayer, though many do so by attending

mosque on a Friday or at other times. In most cases, men and women pray separately.

There are various prescriptions about ritual purity, dress and ablution (*wudu*) prior to prayer. The removal of shoes and covering of the head are common practice. Having the right intention and setting aside other thoughts is important.

Depending on the time of day, a set number of units (*raka*) are performed, each comprising various bodily movements and Qur'anic recitations which include the first sura of the Qur'an, "*Allahu akbar*" (God is great) and the *shahada*. *Salah* can be carried out anywhere, in homes, offices, public places, and mosques.

Although Friday is a time of congregational prayer and is usually performed, together with a sermon, in a mosque, there are few requirements. In its simplest form, a mosque (*masjid*) is a public space in which ritual prostration can be performed, where the direction of Mecca is indicated (*qibla*), and space is set aside for the imam to give a sermon (*khutba*).



Women pray at Idul Adha in Indonesia, Photo by Chris Lewis. Licensed under CC BY-NC 2.0

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## ZAKAT, GIVING TO THE POOR

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Meaning 'purity', *zakat* refers to the obligatory giving of a portion of a person's surplus wealth. It is best seen as a tax rather than a charitable gift, and is levied at 2.5% of capital assets (over and above the *nisab*, the minimum needed to get by). It should be donated to the poor. Traditionally, *zakat* differs from *sadaqa*, voluntary alms-giving.

*Zakat* is important for reminding Muslims that it is better to alleviate another's poverty than accumulate wealth that one does not need.

In several Muslim countries, such as Pakistan, *zakat* is collected by the state, sometimes directly from

bank accounts. In most places, however, it is left up to the individual or company to give according to their means. Today, *zakat* calculators are available online to help people work out what they should pay. Islamic charities, such as Muslim Aid and Islamic Relief, answer 'Frequently Asked Questions' about *zakat*, and encourage donors to use their services to relieve suffering and help those most in need. Donations can be given at any time, to help refugees, victims of environmental disasters, the urban poor and those in conflict zones. The boundary between the obligatory *zakat* and voluntary *sadaqa* may be more blurred now than it was in the past.

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## SAWM, FASTING IN THE MONTH OF RAMADAN

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Ramadan has always been an important month for Muslims, not only because it was designated as the month for fasting, but because it was on the 27th, the 'Night of Power', that the Qur'an was sent down by God to Muhammad.

Adult Muslims in sound health are expected to fast each day during the ninth month, Ramadan. Between sunrise and sunset, they should abstain from food and drink, sexual activity and smoking. If they are not able to keep the whole fast, they are encouraged to make up missed days at a later stage. The elderly, and pregnant or breast-feeding women are exempt. Children are not required to participate, but many wish to emulate other family members and will often try to fast for all or part of the month.

As the Islamic months are based on a lunar calendar, Ramadan is not fixed. It begins at the first sighting of the crescent moon, and this often generates differences of opinion about start date and time. As the dates of the month of Ramadan shift, so the fast takes place at a different time of year, with dawn and sunrise shifting accordingly. This

has consequences for Muslims who live far from the Equator in Northern Europe or North America. When Ramadan falls in May, June and July, the period between sunrise and sunset is considerably longer in duration, making the fast more arduous, especially as temperatures will be higher in the northern hemisphere at this time.

In addition to the fast itself, Ramadan becomes an opportunity for spiritual reflection, prayer and reading the Qur'an. Drawing near to God, charitable giving and seeking forgiveness are important.

After sunset each day, Muslims break the fast with a meal, often eaten with family and friends. A further meal will generally be eaten before sunrise. The day following the end of Ramadan is marked by a festival and religious holiday, *Eid al-Fitr*. Muslims attend congregational prayers, and visit family and friends. An Eid meal is served, gifts given and hospitality offered.

## HAJJ, PILGRIMAGE TO MECCA



Farewell Tawaf during Hajj, Photo by Fadi El Binni. Licensed under CC BY-SA 2.0

Completing the Hajj, the pilgrimage to the birthplace of Islam, is a duty that every Muslim is expected to perform before he or she dies. It is undertaken in the final month of the Islamic calendar, *Dhu al-Hijjah* (pilgrimages made at other times of the year are known as *umrah*). Although it was once an arduous journey that few Muslims living outside the Middle East would have made, the availability today of air travel, hotel accommodation and organised Hajj trips allows many more to undertake the pilgrimage. A *Hajji* or *Hajja* – one who has completed the pilgrimage – is widely respected.

Pilgrims should be in good physical and spiritual health in advance of the ritual journey, and should leave behind all attachments and wealth. Their destination is Mecca (*Makkah*), where Muhammad was born and received revelations from God, the

focus being the *ka'aba* or sacred centre of the Great Mosque, around which pilgrims circulate. Medina (*Madinah*), to which Muhammad and his followers migrated in 622, may also be visited. Pilgrims are required to be ritually pure and to dedicate themselves to God. They all wear white clothes, representing their simplicity and equality before God, and must formally state their intention to complete the Hajj.

Whilst in Mecca, pilgrims complete a series of individual and collective actions on the various days of their visit, following a pattern set by Muhammad who, in turn, drew on earlier traditions (often reversing or altering them and giving them a new meaning). Pilgrims join with many thousands of other Muslims, all performing the same rituals irrespective of their many differences.

Despite the theological message of unity and equality, how Muslims prepare for the pilgrimage, who they travel and stay with on the journey, and how they interpret and then reflect on and talk about the Hajj are coloured by where they come from, who they are, their background, ethnicity, language, class and gender.

In 2015, about two million Muslims from around the world went on Hajj, two-thirds of them from outside the local area. All pilgrims are now required to organise their travel through a government scheme or a recognised tour operator. This, together with the extensive improvements made in Mecca and Medina, has improved travellers' experiences and their health and safety. As a result of the immense numbers in confined spaces, accidents and fatalities nevertheless continue to occur, including the death of some 800 people in 2015.



## BRITISH HAJJIS

Each year some 25,000 British Muslims complete the Hajj. Their experiences have been the subject of extensive research by Séan McLoughlin at the University of Leeds (<http://arts.leeds.ac.uk/hajj/>). He surveyed and interviewed pilgrims before and after, as well as tour operators and guides. They discussed issues such as raising the funds needed (between £3,000 and £5,000), taking time off work, tourist packages, spiritual preparation, and the lasting memories and benefits gained.

## STAGES OF THE HAJJ

<i>Ihram</i> : purification (preparatory stage)	Undertaking ritual purification and dressing in special white clothing
<i>Niyah</i> : intention (preparatory stage)	Declaring one's intention to complete the Hajj and to refrain from impure activities
<i>Tawaf</i> (preparatory stage)	Walking around the <i>ka'aba</i> in Mecca seven times counter-clockwise, praying to God and asking for blessings
<i>Sai</i> (preparatory stage)	Running between the hills of al-Safa and al-Marwa seven times (now under cover), remembering the story of Hagar and Ismail
<i>Mina</i> : place where pilgrims perform the daily prayers	Travelling to Mina for the five daily prayers, ending after morning prayer on the second day
<i>Wuquf</i> : vigil at Arafat	Walking to the valley of Arafat, standing before Allah and repenting, then spending the night praying in the open air at Muzdalifah
<i>Rami al-Jamarat</i> : the stoning of the pillars of Jamarat	Throwing stones at the pillars of Jamarat as a symbolic stoning of the devil (on three separate occasions, separated by <i>Tawaf</i> )
<i>Qurbani</i> : animal sacrifice	Sacrificing a lamb or sheep and distributing meat to the poor. This coincides with the festival of <i>Eid al-Adha</i> .
<i>Halak</i> : hair removal	Shaving (men) or cutting (women) of hair
<i>Tawaf al-wada</i> : farewell	Walking around the <i>ka'aba</i> seven times counter-clockwise, praying to God and asking for blessings

## GLOSSARY

*adhan*: call to prayer

*arkan al-Islam*: the five pillars of Islam

*Eid al-Fitr*: festival of the breaking of the fast

*Hadith*: narratives reporting the sayings of the Prophet

*imam*: prayer leader

*Jum'a*: Friday prayers

*ka'aba*: principal sacred site in Mecca

*khutba*: sermon

*qibla*: direction of Mecca

*raka*: unit of prayer

*sadaqa*: voluntary alms-giving

*shari'ah*: Islamic law

*sura*: a chapter in the Qur'an

*tawhid*: the oneness of God

*tawaf*: anti-clockwise circumambulation of the *ka'aba* seven times

*umrah*: pilgrimage made outside the month of Dhu al-Hijjah

*wudu*: ablution before prayer

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