



Center for Middle Eastern Studies

Notes

Slide 1: Title page – Introduce the topic by telling students that the goal is to look at some commonly held American ideas – and misconceptions – about the Middle East. Everyone should feel free to share what they’ve heard, whether or not it turns out to be accurate.

Slide 2: Myth #1: All Middle Eastern people are Arabs. Why might this not be true? (Many non-Arabs live in the Middle East: Iranians; Afghanis; millions of Kurds who make large minorities in Turkey, Iran, Iraq, and Syria; Israelis, Turks.

Slide 3: Map - The Arab countries are the ones going from Syria and Iraq down through the Arabian peninsula and across North Africa. Note that there are millions of Arabs – Palestinians – in Israel too.

Slides 4 and 5: A written review of the information discussed above (under the notes for Slide 3).

Slide 6: Myth #2: All Middle Eastern people are Muslims.

Slide 7: Not true. There are **Jews**, not just in Israel but living in Iran and throughout the Arab world. Jews have traditionally been a part of Middle Eastern life – Jews and Muslims have historically been on good terms with each other, and many Jews took refuge from persecution in Europe by coming to the Middle East in the 15th – 20th centuries. After the creation of Israel, there has been tension, but for political, not religious reasons. **Zoroastrians** – the ancient religion of Iran, very influential in early Christian history (for example, Persian Zoroastrians were probably the three wise men that followed the star to the baby Jesus, and many early Christian “heresies” were similar to Zoroastrian beliefs). Today in Iran, they are not persecuted because the religion pre-dates Islam. **Baha’is** – developed in Iran in the 19th century. They ARE persecuted by the Islamic Republic of Iran because they developed after the arrival of Islam and are therefore considered as people who left the faith. **Christians** – have lived quite compatibly through most of history in the Middle East. Many Lebanese and Palestinians are Christians; there are Chaldean Christians in Iraq and Iran; there are Coptic Christians in Egypt; and Armenians (including the Armenian minorities in Iran and Palestine) are Christians.

Slide 8: Pictures of non-Muslim places of worship in the Middle East today.

Slide 9: Myth #3: You can believe Western stereotypes of Muslims.

Slide 10: Not! Let's look at: who/where they are, what they believe, and their alleged support for killing civilians.

Slide 11: True or false? Most Muslims are Arabs who live in the Middle East.

Slide 12: False. Only 1/5 Muslims are Arabs. Remind them that Turks, Kurds, Iranians, and Afghanis are not Arabs but DO live in the Middle East. And most Muslims live *outside of* the Middle East.

Slide 13: Fun fact – if you want to win “Jeopardy” or “Who Wants to Be a Millionaire”:
Which country has more Muslims than any other in the world?

Slide 14: Indonesia with over 200 million Muslims. (Look at its location on the map.)

Slide 15: Map of Islam in the Eastern hemisphere. Note the prevalence of Islam in many areas of sub-Saharan Africa (especially along the trade routes). Also, point out the spread of Islam in South Asia (Pakistan, parts of India), Central Asia, Malaysia/Indonesia.

Slide 16: 5 million Muslims in the U.S. (which may be a very low estimate). Notice the different appearances and styles of dress of the people on the “Newsweek” cover.

Slide 17: True or false? Muslims have a strange religion and worship a god called ‘Allah.’

Slide 18: False. Muslims are *monotheistic* and worship the same God as Jews and Christians. In fact, they share many of the same holy books. Muslims believe they are descended from Abraham like the Jews (Muslims from the oldest son, by Abraham's slave; Jews from Isaac, the son of Abraham's wife). Muslims also respect Jesus (though they see him as a prophet, not as the son of God).

Slide 19: ‘Allah’ is not a separate deity but just the Arabic word for ‘God’ (like ‘Dios’ in Spanish or ‘Bog’ in Slavic languages). Note that Arabic-speaking Christians pray to ‘Allah’ too.

Slide 20: True or false? Most Muslims dislike Jews and are anti-Semitic.

Slide 21: False. (a) Muslims, throughout history, have respected Jews and Christians as fellow worshippers of the one God. (b) Westerners like to think that we invented religious toleration, yet traditionally, even before Islam, there was discussion of religious tolerance (example: the declaration of the Persian king, Cyrus, 2500 years ago – and his allowing the Jews to return to Israel following the ‘Babylonian Captivity.’) (c) A linguistic issue: Arabs are a Semitic people too, so it's hard to say they are ‘anti-Semitic.’ (d) What is perceived in the West as Muslim opposition to the Jews is really opposition to the politics of Israel. Thus, most Arabs are not prejudiced against the Jews; they are just angry about Israeli actions.

Slide 22: Myth: Muslims believe it is OK to kill civilians in a holy war (“jihad”).

Slide 23: Only Muslim extremists – a tiny minority – believe this. Most Christians don’t think that an extremist Christian who bombs an abortion clinic represents THEIR beliefs. So too the vast majority of Muslims were horrified when the planes crashed into the towers on Sept. 11. In fact, one devout Muslim woman commented: “Terrorists hijacked my religion.”

Slide 24: Most Middle Eastern women wear veils over their faces and are treated very badly.

Slide 25: Reality: (a) Muslim women in different countries have very different styles of dress, and most do NOT cover their faces. (b) The treatment of women varies from country to country and from family to family. (Just like we wouldn’t want a story about an American man who abuses his wife to be taken as an example of ALL American men, Middle Easterners don’t like this stereotype being applied to their country.) (c) The question of the social/political status of women can be looked at in many different ways. For example, American women DO have lots of rights, but there has never been a female president – while in the Muslim country of Pakistan, there HAS been a female prime minister.

Slide 26: Comparative Islamic women’s dress: Pakistan and Saudi Arabia. Notice that the Saudi woman wears a flowing black dress and covers her face as well as her hair, while the Pakistani Muslim wears a long, colorful tunic and pants and wears a scarf around her neck rather than over her hair.

Slide 27: Only Afghani women wear burqas. Even in neighboring countries, Muslim women wouldn’t dream of covering their faces like this.

Slide 28: Speaking of Afghanistan’s neighbors, look at this picture of a woman in Iran. Note that she is driving a car. (In Saudi Arabia, women can’t drive; in Iran they DO.) She is wearing jewelry, make-up, and a head scarf that covers most – but not all – of her hair. (Styling bangs is a big business for Iranian hair stylists since that is a part that shows....) Of course, if a Revolutionary Guard came around, women would pull the scarf so that it covers more hair, but otherwise, many of them don’t approve of the “dress code.”

Slide 29: If time, watch the video “A Land Called Paradise” to get an overview of Muslim diversity in the U.S. <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sbcmPe0z3Sc>

Slide 30: Myth #5: “They hate our way of life.”

Slide 31: Definitely untrue! Middle Easterners love American culture, watch American movies, and listen to American music (even if, as in Iran, it’s against the rules).

Slide 32: As with their feelings toward Israel, Muslims often like Americans but DISLIKE some of the policies of the American government (for example, our support for Israel, our actions in Afghanistan and/or Iraq, our threatening of Iran).

Slide 33: Conclusions: (a) There are many peoples, languages, and cultures in the Middle East, not just one. (b) There are several religions in the Middle East, not just Islam. (c) Many Muslim beliefs are similar to – and related to – our Judeo-Christian ones. (d) The status of Middle Eastern women is complex. (e) Middle Eastern attitudes toward the U.S. are complicated.