

# UNDERSTANDING ISLAM

## THE BASICS

Islam is a religion based on the teachings of the prophet **Muhammad** in the Arabian Peninsula (570 CE – 632 CE). Through conversion and military conquests Islam spread rapidly throughout the Middle East, North Africa and South Asia. By the 8<sup>th</sup> century the *caliphate* stretched from Spain through Central Asia. The historical divide of Islam into Sunni and Shiite was caused more by political dispute over successors than doctrinal differences, although differences gradually assumed theological and metaphysical overtones. Both Sunni and Shiite have enumerated creeds and rituals. Sunni creed is based in the **Five Pillars of Islam** and rituals are portrayed through the **Six Articles of Belief**. The **Shiite** creed is the **Roots of Religion** and its rituals are contained in the **Branches of Religion**. Other denominations have different enumerations of creeds, although this does not necessarily mean that one denomination rejects creeds not enumerated. For example, Shiite enumerates **Jihad**, while Sunnis do not, but both agree that it's an indispensable creed.

### **3 Main Islamic works:**

- ***Qur'an*** - believed by Muslims to be the divine word of God revealed to Muhammad by the Angel Gabriel. It is the central religious text and the source of Islamic law (Sharia).
- ***Sunnah*** – based on Muhammad's practices and his examples, it is not an actual text but guides the practical matters of Islamic worship.
- ***Hadith*** – contains narrations of Muhammad's sayings, deeds, and actions.

### **3 Major Branches of Islam:**

- ***Sunni***: Those who follow the *Sunnah* and believe in the caliphate. Sunni constitute 85 percent of the world's Muslims. Sunni Muslims believe that because Muhammad did not designate a successor, the best or most qualified person should be either selected or elected as leader (caliph). Because the Quran declared Muhammad to be the last of the prophets, this caliph was to succeed Muhammad as the political leader only. Sunnis believe that the caliph should serve as the protector of the faith, but he does not enjoy any special religious status or inspiration.

❖ four major Sunni **Shariah** or schools of theological law:

- **Hanafi**, dominant in the Arab Middle East, India, Pakistan and Afghanistan;
- **Maleki**, in north, central and west Africa and Egypt;
- **Shafii**, in east Africa, Indonesia and southeast Asia; and
- **Hanbali**, in Saudi Arabia.

- ***Shiite***: Those who follow Ali ibn Abi Taleb (the 4<sup>th</sup> Caliph and Muhammad's cousin and son-in-law). Iman Ali was Muhammad's first convert to Islam. Shiites reject the authority of the first 3 caliphs and believe that succession to the leadership of the Muslim community should be hereditary,

passed down to Muhammad's male descendants. These Imams serve as both religious and political leaders. The Shiites believe that no caliph since Ali has been legitimate. Shiites use a different interpretation of the Hadith and consider the sayings, deeds, and writings of their Imams to be authoritative religious texts. Shiite constitutes 15 percent of the world's Muslims. Today there are approximately 120 million Shi'ite Muslims in the world.



❖ four major Shiite **Shariah** or schools of theological law:

- **Ithna Ashariya or Imami**, the state religion in Iran, dominant in Iraq and also found in Afghanistan;
- **Nizari Ismaili**, present throughout the Muslim world, including Afghanistan, led by the Aga Khan;
- **Zaidiya**, in Yemen;
- **Mutazila**, in Syria and Lebanon.

❖ **Shiite Denominations:** *Shiites* split into three main divisions as a result of disagreement over the number of Imams who succeeded Muhammad.

- ❖ **Jafaryia (Twelvers):** They believe in twelve Imams, the number of imams recognized by the majority of Shiite after the death of Muhammad. The term Shi'a is usually meant to be synonymous with the Jafaryia/Twelvers. The largest Shi'a school of thought (80%), they are predominant in Azerbaijan, Iran, Iraq, Lebanon and Bahrain.
- ❖ **Ismailiyah/Ismaili (seveners):** believe the first five Imams were the rightful successors of Muhammad, but *believe the succession should have continued through the sons of the Sixth Imam, Ja'far as-Sadiq*. The Ismailis became those who accepted Ja'far's eldest son Ismail as the next Imam, whereas the Twelvers accepted a younger son, Musa al-Kazim. They are also the only Islamic sect that has a true Imamate. They have a direct succession of 48 Imams. The current and 49<sup>th</sup> Ismaili Imam is Aga Khan IV.
- ❖ **Zaidiyah/Zaydi (fivers):** The Zaydī separated from the twelve and Ismaili sects over a disagreement as to who the fifth Imam was. Twelvers and Ismailis believe it was Muhammad al-Baqir, while Zaidis hold that it was his half-brother, Zayd ibn Ali.

### Other Shi'a Sects:

- ❖ **Alawi:** The Alawi are classified under Twelver Shi'a Islam, but differ in a special regard for Ali as a Manifestation of God. They broke away from the Shiite in the 9<sup>th</sup> century under the leadership of Ibn Nucair Namin Abdi. Alawites are considered a secretive group, and do not accept converts or openly publish their texts. Found almost exclusively in Syria and Turkey. The ruling party in Syria is Alawite.

- ❖ **Alevi:** Alevi are sometimes categorized as part of Twelver Shi'a Islam, and sometimes as its own religious tradition. They have many Sufi characteristics and express belief in the Qur'an and the Shi'a Imams, but reject polygamy and accept religious traditions predating Islam, like Turkish Shamanism. They are significant in East-Central Turkey.
- ❖ **Dawoodi Bohras:** Dawoodi Bohras are the main branch of the Bohras (a Musta'li subset of Ismaili Shi'a Muslims) based in Pakistan and India. The Bohras believe that the 21st Imam, Imam Taiyab abi al-Qasim (a direct descendant of Muhammad via his daughter Fatima\_Zahra) went into seclusion and established the offices of the Da'i al-Mutlaq, Ma'zoon and Mukasir.
- **Kharijites:** Broke away from both Sunni and Shiite during late 7<sup>th</sup> century succession. They follow the 5 pillars of Sunni Islam but add Jihad as a 6<sup>th</sup> pillar.
  - ❖ 4 major sects: Azraqi, Sufri, Ibadi, and Haruriyya. Only Ibadi still exist in significant numbers in Oman and in smaller numbers in Tunisia, Algeria, Libya and Zanzibar.

**Other Sects:** *The followers of these sects consider themselves to be Muslim, but are not recognized as such by the mainstream.*

**Ahmadiyya/Ahmadis:** founded in 1889 in the Punjab and based on the teachings of Mirza Ghulam Ahmad (1835-1908). Ahmad claimed to be the appearance of the promised Messiah (or, according to some the manifestation of the Prophet Muhammad as well as an incarnation of Jesus and the Hindu god Krishna). Ghulam Ahmad taught that Jesus feigned his crucifixion and resurrection, then lived to be 120 years old in India, contradicting the orthodox Muslim doctrine that Jesus was taken up into heaven before his death. Ahmad also reinterpreted *jihad* as a nonviolent battle against nonbelievers, using as its weapon the pen instead of the sword. These doctrines, along with the teaching that Ahmad was a prophet like Muhammad, have led Ahmadiyyas to be denounced as heretics by most of orthodox Islam. Upon the death of Ahmad, Mawlawi Nur-ad-Din was elected as successor (caliph). When he died in 1914, the Ahmadiya group split into two groups:

- **Qadiani**, who recognize Ahmad as a prophet; and
- **Lahore**, who regard Ahmad only as a reformer of Islam.

Today there are about 170 million Ahmadiyya Muslims in the world. Qadianis reside mainly in Pakistan, where they are zealous missionaries for Islam and the two prophets Muhammad and Ahmad. Lahore Ahmadiyyas also seek converts, but more to Islam in general than to their particular sect. Ahmadiyya Islam is also associated with several Sufi orders, most notably the Al-Badawi order of Egypt, named for an Islamic saint who died in 1276.

**Zikri:** Zikri is based around the teachings of Syed Mohammad Jaunpuri, a 15th century Mahdi claimant. In religious practice, the Zikris differ greatly from mainstream Muslims, and there is debate about whether to call them Sunni, Sufi, or a sect of their own. Zikris perform five times daily prayers

called **Zikr** in which sacred verses are recited, as compared to the orthodox practice of **Salah**. Most Zikris live in **Baluchistan**, but a large number also live in **Karachi**, interior **Sindh** and **Iran**.

### **Other Groups/Movements:**

**Wahhabism:** Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahhab began a campaign of spiritual renewal in the smaller city states of Arabia in the mid- 1700s. His extremely traditional group opposed all innovations within Islam, often using violence to enforce its views. The group threatened to become the first nation state in Arabia, prompting a crackdown by the Egyptian army in 1818. Today, Wahhabism is quite strong in Saudi Arabia. It demands punishment for those who enjoy any form of music except the drum and severe punishment up to death for drinking or sexual transgressions. It condemns as unbelievers those who do not pray, a view that never previously existed in mainstream Islam. Wahhabism has been an inspiration to Osama bin Laden.

**Sufism:** a spiritual practice followed by both Sunni and Shiite. Sufis generally feel that following Islamic law or jurisprudence is only the first step on the path to perfect submission; they focus on the internal or more spiritual aspects of Islam, such as perfecting one's faith and fighting one's own ego.

**Salafism:** Salafis preach Islamic **monotheism**, or **tawhid**, and gained significant teachings from **Ibn Taymiya**, a 14th century Syrian scholar. Salafism is in general opposed to Sufism and **Shi'a Islam**, which they regard as heresies. Salafi theology advocates a puritanical and legalistic stance in matters of faith and religious practice. They see their role as a movement to restore **Islam** from what they perceive to be innovations, superstitions, deviances, heresies and idolatries.

**Islamism:** Islamism is a term that refers to a set of political ideologies derived from various fundamentalist views, which hold that Islam is not only a religion, but a political system governing the legal, economic and social imperatives of the state. The religious views of Islamist organizations vary. The most prominent group is probably **Al-Qaeda**, other groups include the **Muslim Brotherhood**, the largest opposition party in Egypt, and Hezbollah in Lebanon. Although violence is often employed by some organizations as a means to an end, not all Islamist movements are violent.

## **CREEDS AND RITUALS**

### **Sunni 5 Pillars of Islam:**

- **Shahada:** profession of faith, the belief in one God (Allah) and that Muhammad is his prophet
- **Salah:** prayers five times a day (dawn, sunrise, noon, dusk, sunset) dawn, noon, mid-afternoon, sunset and nightfall
- **Zakat:** alms giving to the poor are obligatory and are basically 2.5% of the income based on the lunar calendar.
- **Sawm:** fasting is required for the holy month of Ramadan. Muslims are prohibited from eating, drinking, smoking, and engaging in sexual intercourse from dawn to dusk. It can also be done voluntarily if one feels the need.

- **Hajj**: a pilgrimage to Mecca required once in a lifetime for all Muslims financially and physically able to go.

### **Sunni 6 Articles of Belief:**

- **Tawhid** – Belief in God, Oneness
- **Nabi and Rusul** – Belief in all the Prophets and Messengers sent by God
- **Kutub** – Belief in the Divinely Revealed Books
- **Mala'ikah** – Belief in the Angels
- **Qiyamah** – Belief in the Day of Judgment and in Resurrection
- **Qadar** – Belief in Destiny (Fate)

**Shiite Branches of Religion** (Shiite believe in the same 5 Pillars as the Sunni but categorize them differently)

- **Salat**—“Namaaz” in Persian (Prayer) – performing the five daily prayers
- **Sawm**—“Roozeh” in Persian (Fast) – fasting during the holy month of Ramadan
- **Haji** (Pilgrimage) – performing the pilgrimage to Mecca. Also, one who has performed this Pilgrimage gains a prefix of “Haj—“ in front of his name, similar to one who gains the title of Dr. after acquiring a PhD. People with the title are treated with great respect as this is a great honor in Islam.
- **Zakat** (Poor-rate) – paying the poor-tax
- **Khums** (One-fifth of savings) – paying tax
- **Jihad** (Struggle) – struggling to please God. The greater, or internal Jihad is the struggle against the evil within one’s soul in every aspect of life. The lesser, or external, Jihad is the struggle against the evil of one’s environment in every aspect of life. This is not to be mistaken with the common modern misconception that this means “Holy War.”
- **Amr-Bil-Ma’rūf** – commanding what is good
- **Nahi-Anil-Munkar** – forbidding what is evil
- **Tawalla** – loving the Ahlul Bayt and their followers
- **Tabarra** – dissociating oneself from the enemies of the Ahlul Bayt

## **Shiite Roots of Religion**

- **Tawhīd** - The Oneness of God
- **Adalah** - The Justice of God
- **Nubuwwah** (Prophethood): God has appointed perfect and infallible prophets and messengers to teach mankind the religion (that is, a perfect system of how to live in “peace”(“submission to God”)).
- **Imamah** (Leadership): God has appointed specific leaders to lead and guide mankind — a prophet appoints a custodian of the religion before his demise.
- **Qiyamah** (The Day of Judgment): God will raise mankind for Judgment

An additional Shiite doctrine is ***Dissimulation***, which is the dissimulation of one’s religious beliefs when one fears for one’s life and/or the lives of one’s family.

## The Twelve Shiite Imams

Ali ibn Abu Talib (600-661)

Hasan ibn Ali (625-669)

Husayn ibn Ali (626-680)

Ali ibn Husayn (658-713)

Muhammad ibn Ali (676-743)

Jafar ibn Muhammad (703-765)

Musa ibn Jafar (745-799)

Ali ibn Musa (765-818)

Muhammad ibn Ali (Taki) (810-835)

Ali ibn Muhamad (Naki) (827-868)

Hasan ibn Ali (846-874)

Muhammad ibn Hasan (868-disappears in 940)

## ISLAMIC TERMS

**Ayatollah:** *Sign of God* Title given to highly ranked religious scholars in Shia'ism.

**Caliph (khalif):** deputy or successor. A political leader of the Muslim community (ummah). The most important of these were the four Rightly-Guided Caliphs who ruled after the death of Muhammad.

**Hijira:** The Prophet's flight to Medina in 622 AD, marking the beginning of the Muslim calendar.

**Imam:** literally, leader; e.g. a man who *leads* a community or *leads* the prayer; the Shi'a sect use the term only as a title for one of the twelve God-appointed successors of Prophet Muhammad.

**Imamah or imamate :** successorship of Prophet Muhammad and the leadership of mankind.

**Islam :** is name of the religion and means submission to the will of God. This means living a life of faith and practice as defined the Quran and participating in the life of the community of believers (the Ummah).

**Jihad:** ("striving"). Holy war; the defense of Islam against its enemies. Sufism focuses on the "greater" *jihad* against sin in oneself.

**Mufti:** Islamic judge or scholar who is an interpreter or expounder of Islamic law (Sharia), capable of issuing fataawa (plural of "fatwa")

**Muslim:** is a follower of Islam who makes submission to God

**(pbuh)-** "Peace be upon him" always said or written after quoting Muhammad

**Qur'an:** ("recitation). The sacred text of Islam, revealed to Muhammad over a 20-year period by the Angel Gabriel.

**Ramadan:** The ninth month in the Islamic calendar, for the duration of which Muslims fast during the daylight hours to commemorate the giving of the Qur'an.

**Ummah:** the community of Islam

## IMPORTANT DATES IN ISLAM

622 CE Hijira – Muhammad and followers flee to Medina. Islamic calendar (AH, Anno Hegirae) begins.

632 Death of Muhammad. Abu Bakr chosen as caliph

633-42 Muslim armies take the Fertile Crescent (Egypt, Syria, Palestine, Mesopotamia), North African coast, parts of Persian and Byzantine Empires

c. 650 Caliph Uthman has the Qur'an written down.

656 Uthman is murdered; Ali becomes fourth caliph

657 Battle of Siffin. Mu'awiya, governor of Syria, claims the caliphate

659 Arbitration at Adruh is opposed by Ali's supporters

661 Ali is murdered; Mu'awiya becomes caliph. Beginning of Umayyad Caliphate (661-750).

680 Death of Husayn marks beginning of the Shi'at Ali ("party of Ali") or Shi'a sect

685-705 Reign of Abd al-Malik. Centralization of administration - Arabic becomes official written language (instead of Greek and Persian) and Arab coinage is established

732 Muslim empire reaches its furthest extent. Battle of Tours prevents further advance northwards.

765 Division within Shi'ites - majority are the modern Imamiyya (Twelvers) who co-exist with Abbasid

caliphs; minority are more extreme Isma'iliyya (Seveners).

800s Written collections of Hadith (sayings of the Prophet) are compiled

940 Muhammad al-Mahdi, the twelfth imam, disappears. Twelvers still await the future return of the "Hidden Imam."

1453 Mehmet Fatih (rules 1451-81) conquers Constantinople. The two halves of the Ottoman Empire are

united and the sultan becomes Byzantine emperor.

1501 Isma'il (1487-1524) claims to be the Hidden Imam and is proclaimed Shah (king) of Persia. Twelver Shi'ism becomes official religion of Persia.

1700s Muhammad Abd al-Wahhab rejects Sufism and all innovation (bid'a). Founds what becomes the Saudi Arabian kingdom.

1918 Fall of Ottoman Empire. League of Nations grants Britain mandatory status over Palestine and Iraq, and France over Lebanon and Syria.

1927 Tablighi Jamaat reform movement founded in India.

1928 Ikhwan al-Muslimun (Muslim Brothers) founded in Egypt.

1941 Jamaat-i Islami reform movement founded in Lahore, India.

1947 Pakistan founded as an Islamic nation. Islam becomes a minority religion in India.

1979 Shah of Iran is overthrown by Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, who establishes strict fundamentalist rule of Shi'a principles.

One of the foremost of these Islamic fascists, Iranian President Mahmud Ahmadi-Nejad, recently claimed that the Holocaust was a hoax dreamed up by the Allies and their Zionist cohorts. In addition, he blames the state of Israel for all that's wrong in the Arab world: "The peoples of the Middle East have also borne the brunt of the Holocaust. By raising the necessity of settling the survivors of the Holocaust in the land of Palestine, they have created a permanent threat in the Middle East in order to rob the people of the region of the opportunities to achieve progress... The collective conscience of the world is indignant over the daily atrocities by the Zionist occupiers, destruction of homes and farms, killing of children, assassinations and bombardments."

Thus, as far as the Islamists are concerned, Zionists and the West are in the same boat. "God willing, with the force of God behind it," Ahmadi-Nejad has said, "we shall soon experience a world without the United States and Zionism."

Now, as Thursday's United Nations-imposed deadline for Iran to halt its nuclear fuel production has come and gone, the rogue state remains defiant. "[The West] should know the Iranian nation will not yield to pressure and not accept any violation of its rights," said Ahmadi-Nejad. "Arrogant powers are against Iran's peaceful nuclear progress."

Anticipating Iran's response, the Bush administration has come out swinging and—we are pleased to say—building on the President's Islamic fascist theme.

Speaking at the annual convention of the American Legion, Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld recounted the history of World War II and the Cold War, warning against those who counsel appeasement and retreat today: "I recount that history because, once again, we face similar challenges in efforts to confront the rising threat of a new type of fascism, but some seem not to have learned history's lessons," the Secretary said. Indeed, just as Adolf Hitler would not be appeased as he pressed his grand plan for war, so also today's fascists will find only encouragement in the West's accommodations.

“With the growing lethality and the increasing availability of weapons,” Rumsfeld went on to ask, “can we truly afford to believe that somehow, some way, vicious extremists can be appeased?”

On the 67th anniversary of Nazi Germany’s invasion of Poland, we cannot again be lulled into the false comfort of complacency and appeasement against a new fascist foe.

In a policy address of his own at Nebraska’s Offutt Air Force Base this week, Vice President Dick Cheney voiced the same theme. “This is not an enemy that can be ignored, or negotiated with, or appeased,” he said, “and every retreat by civilized nations is an invitation to further violence against us. Men who despise freedom will attack freedom in any part of the world, and so responsible nations have a duty to stay on the offensive, together, to remove this threat.” Today, as the world marks the 67th anniversary of Nazi Germany’s invasion of Poland, we cannot again be lulled into the false comfort of complacency and appeasement against a new fascist foe.

What, specifically, is the threat posed by these Islamic fascists? Is the threat limited to the occasional believer mowing down a few American Jews with an SUV?

Of course not. Nor is the threat limited to the sort of mass murder we witnessed five years ago this month in New York, the Pentagon and a field in Pennsylvania.

Rather, as this column has stated time and again, **the real threat posed by Islamic fascism comes in the form of a nuclear device in the hands of a terrorist surrogate.** In the present case, the Cold War’s deterrent doctrine of Mutually Assured Destruction (MAD) does not apply. A nuclear strike against the United States won’t come in the form of a missile launch from silos on the other side of the world, or a submarine lurking off our shores. Rather, as a recent RAND study speculates, a nuclear terrorist attack against the U.S. will come from a cargo container aboard a freighter arrived in a U.S. port, or, alternately, transported across the porous southern border with the same mechanisms used to smuggle tens of thousands of illegal aliens every year.

Hamid Mir, the famed Pakistani journalist who obtained the only post-9/11 interviews with Osama bin Laden and Ayman al-Zawahiri, believes a nuclear attack against the United States is on the horizon, to be coordinated by the cleric-fascist state of Iran and its terrorist surrogate, al-Qa’ida. “Al-Qa’ida and Iran have a long, secret relationship,” Mir says, and they’ve named their plans for a nuclear attack on the U.S.—**using nuclear devices that Mir believes they already possess**—“American Hiroshima.”

The association between Iran and al-Qa’ida, Mir says, dates to June 1996, when bin Laden joined other jihadist leaders in Tehran to discuss their goals. Others in attendance included Muhammad Ali Ahmad of al-Qa’ida, Imad al-Alami and Mustafa al-Liddawi of Hamas, Ahmad Jibril of the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine, Egyptian Islamic Jihad’s Ahmad Salah, Palestinian Islamic Jihad’s Ramadan Shallah, Hizballah’s Imad Mugniyah and Abdallah Ocalan of the Kurdish People Party. The meeting, says Mir, produced the “Committee of Three,” consisting of bin Laden, Salah and Mugniyah, who would be responsible for the “coordination, planning and execution of attacks” on the U.S. and Israel. Shortly thereafter, on 23 August 1996, bin Laden issued his fatwa, “Declaration of War on Americans Occupying the Country of the Two Holy Places.”

In one interview with Mir, bin Laden boasts, “It is not difficult [to obtain tactical nuclear devices], not if you have contacts in Russia with other militant groups. They are available for \$10 million and \$20 million.” At the time, bin Laden claimed already to be in possession of such devices, and Mir believes

that they may already be forward-deployed within the United States. While this information is, of course, not confirmable, and may be no more than enemy misinformation, it *is* plausible.

For these reasons—the nature of our enemy’s threat and his determination to see our destruction—the only applicable defense is the doctrine of pre-emption. Thursday, the same day Iran rejected the deadline for ending its enrichment of uranium, the International Atomic Energy Agency reported finding traces of highly enriched uranium at an Iranian nuclear plant. Uranium of this variety is used *only* for the production of nuclear weapons. Our only strategic option and our best hope of averting a nuclear attack, though it’s certainly no guarantee, is pre-emptive warfare against our enemies. As the five-year anniversary of 9/11 approaches, let us be mindful of Islamic fascism’s deadly determination. Let us match it with a deadly determination of our own.

### **Quote of the week**

“Unless we in the West adapt more quickly than do canny Islamic terrorists in this constantly evolving war, cease our internecine fighting and stop forgetting what we’ve learned about our enemies—there will be disasters to come far worse than Sept. 11.” —Victor Davis Hanson

### **On cross-examination**

“Somehow, despite contrary facts that are palpably clear in the historic record, [American and European leaders] have managed to convince themselves and the world that the most terrible wars of the 20th century occurred because nations didn’t do enough talking to resolve their differences [when in] fact, they occurred because shortsighted, peace-minded leaders allow[ed] good intentions and wishful thinking to take the place of an accurate assessment of the identity and intentions of their adversaries

## **Medieval Islamic History**

[Semitic](#) people probably first moved into the [Arabian Peninsula](#) around 2000 [BC](#), coming from Mesopotamia. They were [nomads](#) when they arrived, who travelled around with their [sheep and goats](#) pasturing them in different pastures at different times of year. And they stayed nomads: many of them are nomads today.

In the southern part of the peninsula, on the other hand, the people were [farmers](#). We’re not sure where they came from, but the [Queen of Sheba](#) mentioned in the [Bible](#) may be one of these people.

By the time of [Alexander the Great](#), we start to know a little more about the Arabs, because the Greeks were [trading](#) with them. The [Romans](#) also [traded](#) with the Arabs, who got spices and other things from [India](#) and sold them to the Romans for [gold](#).

In the long war between the [Sassanids](#) and the [Romans](#), different tribes of Arabs fought on each side. In this Late Antique period, the kingdom of Saba (Sheba) fell apart.

The Prophet [Mohammed](#) was born in the northern Arabian trading city of Mecca between 570 and 580 [AD](#). When he was forty years old, he heard the angel Gabriel speaking to him and telling Mohammed

that he was a prophet in the line of [Abraham](#), [Moses](#), and [Jesus](#), who would continue the faith those prophets had started. Mohammed's faith was called [Islam](#) (iz-LAMM). After a slow start, Mohammed made a lot of converts to his religion, and after he won some military battles, most of the other Arabic tribes also converted to Islam. After they had done that, Mohammed's [successors](#) attacked first the [Romans](#) and then the [Sassanids](#) to convert them. By 640 (after the death of Mohammed) the Arabs controlled most of [West Asia](#), and soon after that, under the rule of the [Umayyad caliphs](#), they conquered [Egypt](#). By 711, the Umayyads controlled all of [Western Asia](#) except Turkey (which was still part of the [Roman Empire](#)), and all of the southern Mediterranean: [Egypt](#), Libya, [Tunisia](#), Algeria, Morocco, and most of [Spain](#).

By [800 AD](#), however, under the rule of the [Abbasid caliphs](#), the Islamic Empire had already begun to break down into many smaller kingdoms or caliphates (KAL--if-fates). The main part of it was ruled from Baghdad in modern Iraq. In the 900's control of Baghdad was taken over by the newly arrived Turks or [Seljuks](#), and the [Fatimid](#) dynasty took over [Egypt](#) and Israel and Syria. In the east, the [Ghaznavids](#) took over Afghanistan and then [northern India](#) about 1000 AD.

In 1096 [AD](#), Europeans called [Crusaders](#) invaded and conquered a good deal of Israel and Lebanon from the Fatimids. But by 1200 most of the conquered land had been reclaimed by the [Mamluks](#) and the [Ayyubids](#) (under Saladin). At the same time, the [Almohads](#) had succeeded in forming an empire out of North Africa and Spain.

But during the 1200's, the [Almohad](#) empire began to break apart. In northern Spain, the kingdoms of Aragon, Castile, and Portugal beat the Almohads in 1212, and had conquered most of Spain by 1248. In [North Africa](#), the Almohad empire split into three smaller kingdoms: the Hafsids in the east, the al-Wadids in the center, and the [Marinids](#) in the west. In 1260, the [Mongols](#) invaded West Asia, and conquered the eastern part of the Islamic Empire, as well as northern India and Afghanistan.

During the 1300's and 1400's, the armies of Aragon and Castile gradually forced the Arabs out of Spain (they called this the [Reconquista](#)), finishing up in 1492 [AD](#). By 1453 [AD](#) the [Ottomans](#) (successors to the [Seljuks](#)) had begun to establish the Ottoman Empire by conquering Constantinople (modern Istanbul). In 1517, the Ottomans conquered Syria and Egypt, and by 1639 [AD](#) they had taken Iraq. The Ottoman Empire lasted until the end of World War I in 1918 [AD](#), and takes us out of the period covered on this site.

## Mohammed

Mohammed was born in the Arab trading and pilgrimage city of Mecca, in the [Arabian peninsula](#), between 570 and 580 [AD](#). His parents were part of a family of [traders](#), not among the ruling families of Mecca, but certainly not poor either. Mohammed himself however grew up poor, because both his parents died when he was still very young. Probably his grandfather brought him up.

When he grew up, Mohammed married a wealthy widow named Khadija, whose first husband had been a trader, and so he became well-off again. Probably he became a trader himself.

When Mohammed was almost forty, he heard an angel from God speaking to him for the first time (compare the [story of Moses](#)). The angel, Gabriel, told Mohammed that there was only one God, that it was wicked to worship idols (statues and images of gods), and that the end of the world was coming soon, with the Last Judgment. All of these ideas were already common in Mecca, where there were

some Christians and many Jews, and presumably also some Zoroastrians. Mohammed also heard Gabriel telling him the words of the Koran.

At first the Meccans seem to have felt that Mohammed's preaching was harmless, but later, as he got more support from the lower classes, and really began to say that people should not worship the old gods, the upperclass Meccans threw Mohammed out of town (like Zoroaster). People beat up and even killed his followers, who began to be called Muslims. Some of them fled to Ethiopia. Mohammed himself fled to the nearby town of Medina, where there were a lot of Jews, who ran the town though they were widely hated by the Arabs who lived there. Mohammed's flight to Medina in 622 AD is called the Hejira (hej-EYE-rah) in Arabic, and it is the date where the Moslem calendar begins. Mohammed gathered a following in Medina, though he failed to convince the Jews to join him as he had hoped. In 630 AD he returned to Mecca with an army and conquered it. After he won another victory against Arabic tribes in 630 AD, other Arabic tribes began to send messengers to Mohammed to say that they would submit to his rule, because he was so successful that he must have God on his side.

On June 8th, 632 AD, Mohammed died, at about 50 or 60 years old.

<http://www.historyforkids.org/learn/islam/history/mohammed.htm>

Hellenistic Greece for Kids - who was Alexander the Great? what happened after the Peloponnesian War?

## Hellenistic Greece



### Alexander fighting Darius, the Persian king (mosaic from Pompeii)

After the Peloponnesian War was over, all the cities of Greece were worn out and poor. Many men went and fought for the Persians for money. But others tried to rebuild the cities. This was the time of Socrates and his student Plato, the great philosophers.

Philip of Macedon (on a coin)

But to the north of Greece, in a country called Macedon (MA-suh-donn), King Philip had noticed that the Greeks were very weak. He attacked the Greek city-states and one by one he took them over. When Philip was assassinated in 336 BC, his son Alexander became king, and he also ruled Greece. Alexander was only 20 when he became king. At first a lot of people thought he was too young. But he not only held onto Greece, he also took a big army of Greeks and Macedonians and attacked the Persian Empire!

Alexander was a great general, and the Persians were also weak at this time. So, little by little, Alexander took over the Persian Empire: first Turkey, then Phoenicia, then Israel, then Egypt, then further east all the way to Afghanistan and India (see map). In India Alexander's troops refused to go any further, and he turned back. But a lot of the soldiers died on the way back, and soon afterwards, in 323 BC, Alexander himself died of a fever, in Babylon. He was 33 years old.

Alexander died without any sons old enough to rule, and so his kingdom was split up among his generals. There were three main parts: Egypt, which was ruled by a man named Ptolemy, Seleucia (modern Israel, Syria, Iraq, Iran, and Afghanistan), which was ruled by a man named Seleucus, and Macedon and Greece. Although these three kingdoms often fought each other, still the Hellenistic period was one of prosperity and learning. A great university was founded at Alexandria, in Egypt. The philosopher Aristotle worked in Athens. Scientists and philosophers (all men) visited back and forth between India and Greece. The combination of the knowledge of West Asia and India with that of the Greeks led to great achievements in science, in philosophy, and in art.

<http://www.historyforkids.org/learn/greeks/history/hellenistic.htm>

## Zoroastrianism

Around 1000 BC (probably), about the same time that people in India were writing the Rig Veda, a man named Zoroaster (also called Zarathustra) was a priest in a small temple in the eastern part of Western Asia, in an area with a lot of small kingdoms and no major power. Zoroaster believed that he heard the voice of his chief god, Ahura Mazda, speaking to him and telling him to start a new religion. He told people that the god was speaking to him, and what the god wanted, but they didn't believe that the god was really speaking to him. The other people in the town just thought he was suffering from mental illness. They laughed at him and made fun of him.

Zoroaster sadly left town and travelled around West Asia looking for somebody who would believe him. Finally he found a king who did believe him. He started to get some followers.

The new religion stayed small for five hundred years, but then they had a big success. We don't know how it happened, but Zoroaster's followers convinced the new king of the Persians, Cyrus, to support Zoroastrianism (named after Zoroaster). With the support of the king, Zoroastrianism soon became very popular.

These are some of the main beliefs of Zoroastrianism as the Persians practiced it. There is one main god, Ahura Mazda. He has twin sons, and one of them is for Truth and the other is for the Lie. On the side of Truth are Light, Good, Justice, and people who settle down in cities and farm their land. On the side of the Lie are Darkness, Evil, and people who travel around and do not farm. While you are alive, if you follow the Truth, you will have a better life: you will find love and money and victory in battle. After you die, you will go across a bridge to a good place. But if you follow the Lie, everything will go wrong for you while you are alive, and after you die you will fall off the bridge and go to a bad place, where it is cold and dark and there is nothing good to eat.

Zoroastrianism was the main religion of the Persian kings for 200 years, until they were conquered by Alexander the Great in 330 BC. The Greeks who ruled West Asia after Alexander didn't care about it much, and neither did the Parthians. But the Sassanids, when they took over the Parthian Empire in 227 AD, were very strong believers in Zoroastrianism. The Sassanids tried to make all the people in their kingdom Zoroastrians. So there were many Zoroastrians in the Sassanid Empire, and the faith even spread into India and all the way to China.

When West Asia was conquered by the Arabs around 650 AD, most people gradually converted to the religion of the Arabs, Islam. But there are still some Zoroastrians in the world today, mostly in northern India, where they are called Parsees (meaning Persians).

## The Persians

Around 1200 BC, some new people invaded West Asia from the north. These people were called the Persians and the Medes. Both of them were Indo-European people, distantly related to the Hittites, the Greeks and the Romans. Like the Scythians, the Medes and the Persians were nomadic people. They travelled around Siberia with their horses and their cattle, and grazed the cattle and the horses on the great fields of grass there. Usually they lived well enough this way.

But sometimes the weather was worse than usual, and the Medes and Persians could not find enough to eat. This time, when that happened, the Medes and Persians headed south into West Asia. Maybe they had heard that there were Dark Ages there and they thought it would be easy to take over. Maybe they just thought it would be nicer in the south, where it was warmer.

They settled in what is now Iran, and we don't hear much about them until about 600 BC. Probably they could not fight the Assyrians and didn't try to. But by 600 BC the Assyrians were getting weaker. At this time the Medes and the Persians mixed into one group, under one king.

### Tomb of Cyrus the Great

At first the Medes were in charge, but in 559 BC Cyrus, who was a Persian, made himself king, and from then on the Persians were in charge. Cyrus (SIGH-russ) soon also conquered the whole rest of West Asia: the Babylonians, the Assyrians, the Jews, the Phoenicians and the Syrians, and also the Lydians and the Greeks in modern Turkey. He is remembered as a good ruler. He managed to unify a very diverse group of people, with many different languages and religions. At the same time, he allowed each group to keep their own religion. This is especially surprising because he himself had recently converted to Zoroastrianism and clearly felt strongly about his new faith.

When Cyrus died in 530 BC, his son Cambyses (cam-BYE-sees) became king. Cambyses added Egypt to the Persian Empire, beating an Egyptian army that also had many Greek soldiers fighting for pay. But according to Herodotus Cambyses suffered from severe mental illness later in his life, and eventually his own people killed him.

In 521 BC Darius (da-RYE-us), who was a Persian and a Zoroastrian but only a distant cousin of Cyrus and Cambyses, seized the throne. He moved the Persian capital to the new city of Persepolis, and hired workmen from all over to work on the new buildings there. Some of the men working at Persepolis seem to have been Greek.

Darius also tried to conquer the Scythians, but failed.

In 490 BC, Darius tried to conquer Athens and mainland Greece. Some of the Greek cities, like Thebes, surrendered to Darius or made treaties with him. But Athens fought back and defeated the Persians, and Darius took his troops and went home.

The next Persian king, Xerxes (ZERK-sees), put down a big rebellion in Egypt and then attacked Greece again in 480 BC. But Xerxes was also defeated, and went home. The Persians pretty much stopped trying to expand their empire then. But they continued to rule from Afghanistan to Turkey and Egypt for another 150 years, until they were conquered by Alexander the Great.

<http://www.historyforkids.org/learn/westasia/history/persians.htm>

# Medieval Islamic History

[Semitic](#) people probably first moved into the [Arabian Peninsula](#) around 2000 [BC](#), coming from Mesopotamia. They were [nomads](#) when they arrived, who travelled around with their [sheep and goats](#) pasturing them in different pastures at different times of year. And they stayed nomads: many of them are nomads today.

In the southern part of the peninsula, on the other hand, the people were [farmers](#). We're not sure where they came from, but the [Queen of Sheba](#) mentioned in the [Bible](#) may be one of these people.

By the time of [Alexander the Great](#), we start to know a little more about the Arabs, because the Greeks were [trading](#) with them. The [Romans](#) also [traded](#) with the Arabs, who got spices and other things from [India](#) and sold them to the Romans for [gold](#).

In the long war between the [Sassanids](#) and the [Romans](#), different tribes of Arabs fought on each side. In this Late Antique period, the kingdom of Saba (Sheba) fell apart.

The Prophet [Mohammed](#) was born in the northern Arabian trading city of Mecca between 570 and 580 [AD](#). When he was forty years old, he heard the angel Gabriel speaking to him and telling Mohammed that he was a prophet in the line of [Abraham](#), [Moses](#), and [Jesus](#), who would continue the faith those prophets had started. Mohammed's faith was called [Islam](#) (iz-LAMM). After a slow start, Mohammed made a lot of converts to his religion, and after he won some military battles, most of the other Arabic tribes also converted to Islam. After they had done that, Mohammed's [successors](#) attacked first the [Romans](#) and then the [Sassanids](#) to convert them. By 640 (after the death of Mohammed) the Arabs controlled most of [West Asia](#), and soon after that, under the rule of the [Umayyad caliphs](#), they conquered [Egypt](#). By 711, the Umayyads controlled all of [Western Asia](#) except Turkey (which was still part of the [Roman Empire](#)), and all of the southern Mediterranean: [Egypt](#), Libya, [Tunisia](#), Algeria, Morocco, and most of [Spain](#).

Medieval Islamic history for kids - a summary of the origins of the Arabs, the Islamic conquests, and the Islamic empire to the Ottomans.

## Medieval Islamic History

(second page; click here for the [first page](#))

By [800 AD](#), however, under the rule of the [Abbasid caliphs](#), the Islamic Empire had already begun to break down into many smaller kingdoms or caliphates (KAL--if-fates). The main part of it was ruled from Baghdad in modern Iraq. In the 900's control of Baghdad was taken over by the newly arrived Turks or [Seljuks](#), and the [Fatimid](#) dynasty took over [Egypt](#) and Israel and Syria. In the east, the [Ghaznavids](#) took over Afghanistan and then [northern India](#) about 1000 AD.

In 1096 [AD](#), Europeans called [Crusaders](#) invaded and conquered a good deal of Israel and Lebanon from the Fatimids. But by 1200 most of the conquered land had been reclaimed by the [Mamluks](#) and the [Ayyubids](#) (under Saladin). At the same time, the [Almohads](#) had succeeded in forming an empire out of North Africa and Spain.

But during the 1200's, the Almohad empire began to break apart. In northern Spain, the kingdoms of Aragon, Castile, and Portugal beat the Almohads in 1212, and had conquered most of Spain by 1248. In North Africa, the Almohad empire split into three smaller kingdoms: the Hafsids in the east, the al-Wadids in the center, and the Marinids in the west. In 1260, the Mongols invaded West Asia, and conquered the eastern part of the Islamic Empire, as well as northern India and Afghanistan.

During the 1300's and 1400's, the armies of Aragon and Castile gradually forced the Arabs out of Spain (they called this the Reconquista), finishing up in 1492 AD. By 1453 AD the Ottomans (successors to the Seljuks) had begun to establish the Ottoman Empire by conquering Constantinople (modern Istanbul). In 1517, the Ottomans conquered Syria and Egypt, and by 1639 AD they had taken Iraq. The Ottoman Empire lasted until the end of World War I in 1918 AD, and takes us out of the period covered on this site.

Mohammed for Kids - Islamic History - who was Mohammed?

## Mohammed

Mohammed was born in the Arab trading and pilgrimage city of Mecca, in the Arabian peninsula, between 570 and 580 AD. His parents were part of a family of traders, not among the ruling families of Mecca, but certainly not poor either. Mohammed himself however grew up poor, because both his parents died when he was still very young. Probably his grandfather brought him up.

When he grew up, Mohammed married a wealthy widow named Khadija, whose first husband had been a trader, and so he became well-off again. Probably he became a trader himself.

When Mohammed was almost forty, he heard an angel from God speaking to him for the first time (compare the story of Moses). The angel, Gabriel, told Mohammed that there was only one God, that it was wicked to worship idols (statues and images of gods), and that the end of the world was coming soon, with the Last Judgment. All of these ideas were already common in Mecca, where there were some Christians and many Jews, and presumably also some Zoroastrians. Mohammed also heard Gabriel telling him the words of the Koran.

At first the Meccans seem to have felt that Mohammed's preaching was harmless, but later, as he got more support from the lower classes, and really began to say that people should not worship the old gods, the upperclass Meccans threw Mohammed out of town (like Zoroaster). People beat up and even killed his followers, who began to be called Muslims. Some of them fled to Ethiopia. Mohammed himself fled to the nearby town of Medina, where there were a lot of Jews, who ran the town though they were widely hated by the Arabs who lived there. Mohammed's flight to Medina in 622 AD is called the Hejira (hej-EYE-rah) in Arabic, and it is the date where the Moslem calendar begins.

Mohammed gathered a following in Medina, though he failed to convince the Jews to join him as he had hoped. In 630 AD he returned to Mecca with an army and conquered it. After he won another victory against Arabic tribes in 630 AD, other Arabic tribes began to send messengers to Mohammed to say that they would submit to his rule, because he was so successful that he must have God on his side.

On June 8th, 632 AD, Mohammed died, at about 50 or 60 years old.

Sassanids for Kids - hey, that rhymes!

# The Sassanids

Head of a Parthian (from the Louvre)

In 211 AD, a group of Persians called the Sassanids (the descendants of Sassan) took over control of the Parthian Empire from the Parthians. The Sassanids were proud of their Persian heritage, and they wanted to reestablish the borders of the old Persian empire. This meant reconquering all the land to the edge of the Mediterranean Sea from the Romans (Israel, Syria, Lebanon, Jordan, Turkey), and also reconquering Egypt from the Romans.

Like their Persian ancestors, these Sassanid Persians were Zoroastrians, and they also wanted to spread the Zoroastrian faith.

Arshashir

Shapur I, son of Ardashir

The leader of the Sassanids, by 227 AD the king of the Parthian Empire, was named Ardashir (the Greeks and Romans called him Artaxerxes). He organized a very strong and unified government. Then he took the army and invaded Roman territory in West Asia. Neither side won a clear victory, and this set the pattern for the next four hundred years: a lot of fighting but no real change in the borders.

Assyrians for Kids - who were the Assyrians? where did they live? what did they do?

# Assyrians

Sargon of Akkad

We first hear of the Assyrians around 2300 BC, when Sargon of Akkad invaded their small kingdom to the north. After 2000 BC, when Assur became independent of the collapsing 3rd Dynasty of Ur, the Assyrians became well-known traders, who travelled constantly between Assur and southern Turkey with their donkeys, carrying cloth from Assur and tin from beyond the Tigris to the east, and trading it in southern Turkey for gold, silver, and other metals. But as the Hittites took over Turkey around 1800 BC, this trade gradually collapsed. The last Assyrian caravan to Turkey was ca. 1780 BC.

By 1700 BC the Assyrians had been conquered by the Amorites, and later they were controlled by the Hurrians for a long time. But when the Hurrian kingdom collapsed about 1360 BC, the Assyrian governor of Assur, whose name was Assur-uballit, saw his chance and began calling himself the King of Assyria. Assur-uballit and the Assyrians soon had to fight both the Hurrians and the Kassites in order to stay independent, but they won their wars and were able to establish themselves. They made a lot of alliances with the Kassites to their south, with many Assyrian princesses marrying Kassite princes and vice versa.

Under their king Tukulti-Ninurta I (known in the book of Genesis as Nimrod), about 1225 BC, the Assyrians conquered the Kassites and the city of Babylon, capturing the great statue of the god Marduk

there and bringing it back to Assur. But people objected to this sacrilege, and the conquest of Babylon, and a mob led by his son burned Tukulti-Ninurta to death by setting fire to his palace, and freed the Kassites again. A Dark Age overtook West Asia about this time, with the invasions of the Sea Peoples and a lot of movement among the Hittites, the Hurrians, and the Jews, and the gradual collapse of the Kassites as a result.

The Assyrians were the only big kingdom in West Asia not to collapse as a result of the Dark Ages, and so they were in a good position to take over afterward. By 1115 BC, under their king Tiglath-pileser I, they were able to expand south into Babylonia again (being more careful to respect the ancient gods there this time), and west. At first, these were basically plundering expeditions. The Assyrian army, which was feared everywhere, started out pretty much every spring going south along the Tigris river, and then cross to the Euphrates and follow that upstream until it got home again to Assur, around the end of the summer.

Along the way they would collect whatever took their fancy: cloth, gold, artwork, or slaves. Assyrian inscriptions call this "tribute", but people either gave it in order to keep from being attacked, or the Assyrians attacked them and took it anyway. These plundering expeditions continued more or less every year for hundreds of years, down to Assurnasirpal's reign in the 800's BC.

Assurnasirpal's son Shalmaneser III decided to expand the Assyrian empire even more. He took the plundering expeditions even further west, where he first met the Jewish kingdoms of Israel and Judah. At first they resisted him successfully, but by the 830's Shalmaneser seems to have placed pro-Assyrian Jews on the thrones of both kingdoms, and we guess that he collected tribute as well.

But in 827 BC a great revolt, centered on Nineveh, at the end of Shalmaneser's reign forced the Assyrians to abandon their conquests in the west, and they were weaker for some time. The army did not go out every year to plunder anymore, and when the army did go out it was mostly just along the old route to the south. It didn't cross the Euphrates to the west anymore.

A powerful king from a new family usurped the throne of Assyria in 744 BC. His name was Tiglath-pileser III, and he was very ambitious and very strong. He began taking the army out every year again, and he took it not just along the old route, but west again, where he conquered Israel, the Phoenicians, and many other small western kingdoms. In the later part of his reign, there was another Babylonian revolt, but Tiglath-pileser succeeded in putting it down.

By the reign of Sennacherib in 705 BC, the Assyrian army again stopped going out every year on plundering campaigns. They had conquered everything near enough to rule, and even dominated Egypt. Now the kings concentrated more on providing services to the conquered people that would keep them from wanting to revolt. The Assyrian kings now built highways and bridges and water systems, established courts to settle disputes among their subjects, and encouraged scholarship and art with great libraries at their palaces. This was the time of the great kings Esarhaddon and his sons Assurbanipal (in Nineveh) and Shamash-shum-ukin (in Babylon). (the prophet Ezra refers to him as "the great and honorable Ashurbanipal" (Ezra 4:10).) But Assurbanipal and his brother got into a civil war in 652, and by the time Assurbanipal won four years later, the Assyrian empire was terribly weakened.

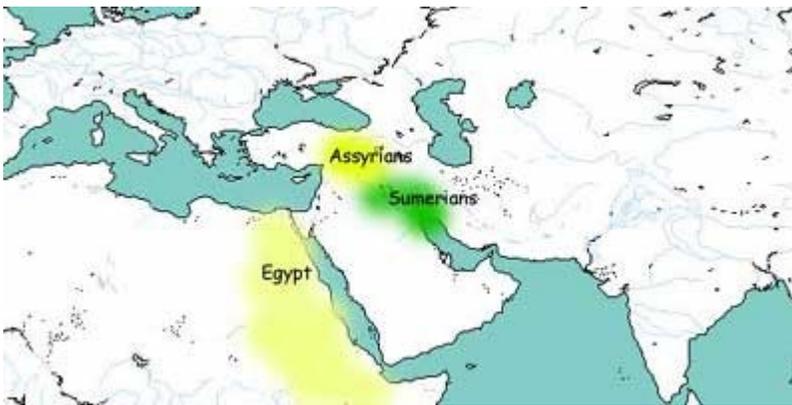
The western territories - Israel, Judah, Phoenicia, and others - began to revolt, and the Babylonian territories to the south as well. By 612 BC only Egypt remained loyal to Assyria, as a great alliance

between the Jews, the Medes, and the Babylonians combined to crush the last, weak Assyrian kings. Egypt's efforts to send help to the last stand of the Assyrians were stopped by Josiah at the battle of Megiddo in 609 BC. By 605, both Assyria and Egypt had to surrender to King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon, and the Babylonians took over control of West Asia.

The Mediterranean and West Asia

## West Asia: Land against Sea

One common theme in the history of West Asia has been the conflict between land-oriented people and sea-oriented people. Often there is a group of people living in West Asia who are mostly land-oriented. These people don't sail boats much, and they think of their kingdom as covering a certain piece of land. They often think that their land should include everything between the mountains of Afghanistan and the Mediterranean Sea. Some people who have thought this way are the Assyrians, the Persians, the Seleucids, the Parthians, the Sassanids, and the Umayyads.



But at the same time there is often a group of people living in West Asia who are mostly sea-oriented. These people sail boats a lot, and they think of their kingdom as being all the land around a certain body of water. These people often think that their land should include everything around the Mediterranean Sea. Some people who have thought this way include the Egyptians, the Greeks, the Romans, the Byzantines, the Crusaders, and the Ottomans.

But it is impossible to make both groups of people happy at the same time. They are always fighting over the strip of land which is in West Asia, but borders on the Mediterranean Sea (modern Turkey, Lebanon, Syria, and Israel). Even today, these are countries where there is a lot of fighting. So the Egyptians fought the Assyrians, the Greeks and the Egyptians fought the Persians, the Egyptians fought the Seleucids, the Romans fought the Parthians and the Sassanids, the Islamic Umayyads fought the Byzantines, and the Seljuks fought the Crusaders.