

# Religion

While many people incorrectly assume that both Lebanon and (especially) Syria are Islamic states, both are nominally republics. In Lebanon, Muslims make up around 59% of the population, and Christians 40%, with 1% being of other religions. In Syria, Muslims make up around 90% of the population and Christians around 10%. What makes the religious make-up of both countries interesting is the role of the minorities. The president of Syria, for instance, is an Alawite, an offshoot of Shiite Islam that only makes up 11% of Syria's population. In Lebanon, the intriguing Druze (another offshoot of Shiite Islam) have an influential and outspoken leader, Walid Jumblatt, despite only being 7% of the population. In these two countries, where faith plays such an important role in the everyday lives of most inhabitants, understanding the complexities of the religious puzzle leads to a greater understanding of the politics and lives of the people you'll meet.

Muslims are prohibited from eating or drinking anything that contains pork or alcohol. Nor are they allowed to consume the flesh or blood of any animal that has died by natural causes. Meat must be halal (permitted), meaning slaughtered in a prescribed manner.

## ISLAM

Islam was founded in the early 7th century AD by the Prophet Mohammed (570–632), born in Mecca. The basis of Islam is a series of divine revelations in which the voice of the archangel Gabriel revealed the word of God to Mohammed. These revelations started when he was 40 and continued throughout the rest of his life. The transcribed versions of these revelations form the Quran, literally meaning 'recitation', and great care is taken not to change a single letter of the holy Quran.

Mohammed started preaching in 613, three years after the first revelation, but only attracted a few dozen followers. Having attacked the ways of Meccan life – especially the worship of idols – he also made many enemies. In 622 he and his followers retreated to Medina, an oasis town some 360km from Mecca. It is this Hejira, or migration, which marks the beginning of the Muslim calendar.

In Medina, Mohammed quickly became a successful religious, political and military leader. After several short clashes with the Meccans, he finally gathered 10,000 troops and conquered his home town, demolished

### THE FIVE PILLARS OF ISLAM

**Shahada** (The Profession of Faith) 'There is no God but Allah and Mohammed is his prophet.' '*La il-laha illa Allah Mohammed rasul Allah.*' The fundamental tenet of Islam, this is often quoted at events such as births and deaths.

**Salat** (The Call to Prayer) This is the obligation to pray in the direction of Mecca five times a day, when the muezzins call the faithful to prayer from the minarets (see opposite). Prayers can be performed anywhere if a mosque is not available and Muslims often travel with a prayer mat and pray wherever they can. The midday prayers on Friday are the most important of the week and this is when the weekly sermon is given.

**Zakat** (The Giving of Alms to the Poor) A fundamental part of the social teaching of Islam, it has become formalised in some states into a tax, which is used to help the poor. In other countries it is a personal obligation to give and is a spiritual duty rather than the Christian idea of charity.

**Sawm** (Fasting) Ramadan, the ninth month of the Islamic calendar, commemorates the month when the Quran was revealed to Mohammed. In a demonstration of Muslims' renewal of faith, they are asked to abstain from sex and from letting *anything* pass their lips from dawn to dusk for an entire month.

**Hajj** (Pilgrimage) The pilgrimage to Mecca is the ultimate profession of faith for the devout Muslim. Ideally, the pilgrim should go to Mecca during the last month of the year, Zuul-Hijja, to join with Muslims from all over the world in the pilgrimage and subsequent feast. See also The Hajj (p44) for more details.

## THE CALL TO PRAYER

One of the most delightful aspects of travelling through the Middle East is the engaging sound of the muezzins' call to prayer (adhan). In some cities and towns, as one muezzin (the man whose voice leads the call) starts, others in the area follow and as the mesmerising note-bending calls intertwine and reverberate through the streets, they create a unique soundscape. This is not to say that it's always pleasant, if you've been woken at 4am by a not particularly gifted muezzin whose speaker is right outside your window, you might not find it as entrancing!

You'll hear the call to prayer five times a day:

**Fajr** Between dawn and sunrise

**Zuhr** Just after the height of the midday sun

**Asr** In the afternoon

**Maghrib** Just after sunset

**Isha** During the evening

the idols worshipped by the population and established the worship of the one God.

After his death the new religion continued its rapid spread, through the remarkable wave of conquests achieved by Mohammed's successors, the four caliphs (or Companions of Mohammed). By the end of the 7th century Islam had reached across North Africa to the Atlantic and, having consolidated its power, invaded Spain in 710.

## The Faith

Conversion to Islam is simply achieved by a profession of faith (the shahada) in front of two witnesses. This is the first of the five pillars of Islam, the five tenets that guide Muslims in their daily life – see The Five Pillars of Islam (opposite) for more details.

To Muslims, Allah is the same God that Christians and Jews worship. Adam, Abraham, Noah, Moses and Jesus are all recognised as prophets, although Jesus is not recognised as the Son of God. According to Islam, all these prophets partly received the word of God, but only Mohammed received the complete (and final) revelations.

## Sunnis & Shiites

Not long after the death of Mohammed, Islam suffered a major schism that divided the faith into two main sects: the Sunnis and the Shiites. The split arose over disputes about who should succeed Mohammed, who died without an heir.

The main contenders were Abu Bakr, who was the father of Mohammed's second wife Ayesha and the Prophet's closest companion, and Ali, who was Mohammed's cousin and husband to his daughter Fatima. They both had their supporters, but Abu Bakr was declared the first caliph, an Arab word meaning 'successor'.

Ali finally became the fourth caliph following the murder of Mohammed's third successor, Uthman. He in turn was assassinated in 661 after failing to bend to the military governor of Syria, Mu'awiyah. A relative of Uthman, Mu'awiyah had revolted against Ali over the latter's alleged involvement in Uthman's killing and set himself up as caliph.

Ali's supporters continued to hold fast to their belief in the legitimacy of his line and became known as the Shiites (Partisans of Ali). They believe in 12 imams (spiritual leaders), the last of whom will one day appear to create an empire of the true faith.

The Sunnis are followers of the succession of the caliphs.

*The New Encyclopaedia of Islam: A Revised Edition of the Concise Encyclopaedia of Islam* is the newly revised edition of this highly regarded study of the Islamic religion by Cyril Glasse. Authoritative and eminently readable.

Muezzins used to climb the minaret to perform the call, but these days, technology sees the muezzin using a microphone, with speakers mounted on the minaret and a touch of reverb for more atmosphere.