# Networks and Exchange in the Islamic World

*By Eman M. Elshaikh*

From Malacca to Timbuktu, a vibrant Islamic network emerged during Era 4. Through trade, pilgrimage, and missionary work, a global Islamic community came together.

900L

## Locating the Islamic world

We often hear the phrase, the "Islamic world" or "Muslim world." But where, exactly, was the Islamic world in Era 4? Was it everything within the borders of the early caliphates (Muslim empires)?
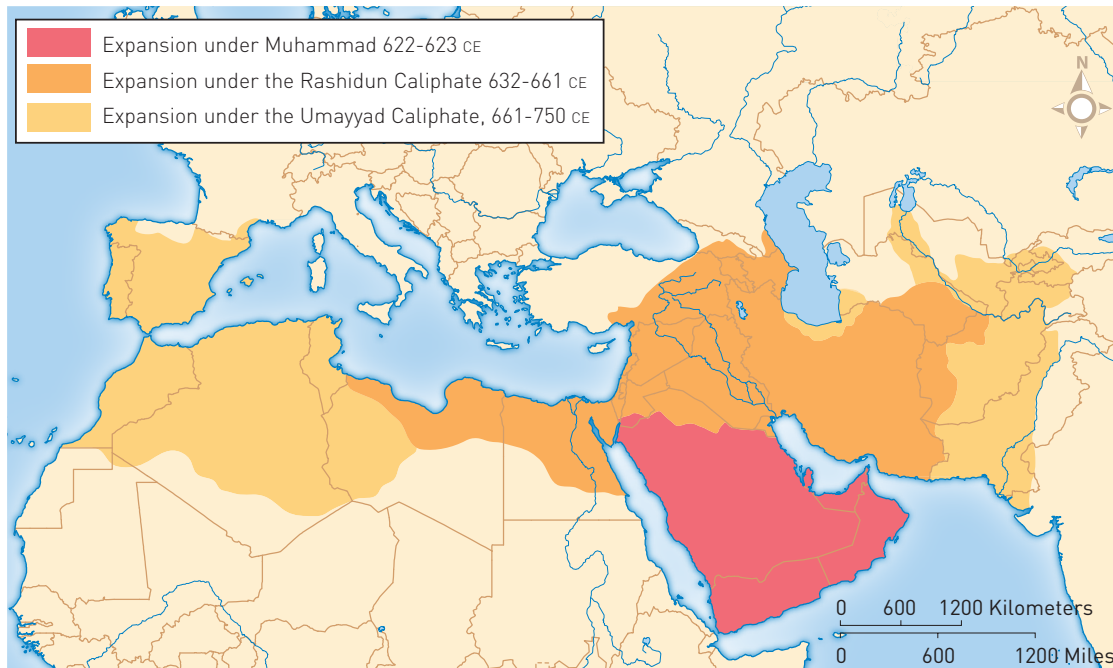


*A map showing the expansion of Muslim-ruled states throughout Afro-Eurasia from 622-750 CE. Dark red shows expansion under Muhammad, 622-623. Orange shows expansion under the Rashidun Caliphate, 632-661. Yellow shows expansion under the Umayyad Caliphate, 661-750. By WHP, CC BY-NC 4.0.*



*Abbasid Caliphate at its greatest extent, c.850 CE. By WHP, CC BY-NC 4.0.*

That's one potential answer. But then what happens when these caliphates break up? The map gets messy. After these massive empires become fragmented, we're left with several Muslim states spanning Afro-Eurasia. We could trace around all of their borders. But they are fuzzy and shifting. Are we leaving anyone out? What about Muslims living outside the bounds of Muslim states, in communities along trade and pilgrimage routes, or even farther afield?

These questions push us to think about what, exactly, pulled the Islamic world together.



*Map of former Abbasid territories in 1050. By WHP, CC BY-NC 4.0.*

## The Islamic trade zone

Trade and the Islamic world are tightly connected. Trade is the main way that Islam spread across so many regions. The political and military expansion of Muslim caliphates led to many new Muslims. And later, smaller dynasties spread Islamic teachings at the local level. But really it was merchants, teachers, pilgrims, and mystics[1] who spread the message. They traveled far beyond the borders of the caliphate.

And that makes sense: the Islamic world was at the center of many overlapping Afro-Eurasian trade zones. After about 700 CE, anyone traveling along the Silk Road would go through places where Muslims ruled or traded. Those traveling across the Sahara, or sailing across the Indian Ocean and Mediterranean would, too.

The majority of people traveling along these routes were men, especially merchants. However, in West Africa and Southeast Asia, both men and women worked as merchants. Women played an important role. They created networks. As male merchants traveled, they often married local women, creating new connections to their family networks. They gained valuable knowledge of local trade practices. Women were often involved in the production of goods. In addition, women often used their personal property to finance trade expeditions. They loaned money to their male relatives.

---

1 A mystic is a person who engages in mysticism; mystics attempt to gain religious or spiritual knowledge through prayer and deep thought.

Muslim merchants also spread the Arabic language. Many Muslims learned the language to understand Islamic sources. Arabic—and later Persian, too—became a *lingua franca*. This means it was a bridge language that people spoke alongside their own languages.

Common currencies like the *dinar* made it easy to exchange goods and services. Checks and bills of exchange[2] were easier and safer to move across trade routes than heavy coins. So Muslim traders began to use these new tools.

## A dynamic community

A far simpler technology had a huge impact: the caravan. Caravans were basically traveling communities that used pack animals, especially camels. They carried cargo and people across long distances. People of all professions, not just merchants, traveled in caravans for many reasons. They cooperated with each other. And caravans were slow—covering only a dozen miles a day or so before stopping at a medieval rest area called a *caravanserai*. The constant motion of caravans made communities fluid and dynamic. People were always coming and going. New communities were always springing up around the many *caravanserai*.

The annual *hajj* brought thousands of Muslim pilgrims. They came from faraway corners of Afro-Eurasia. They came to worship at the Ka'aba at Mecca in Arabia. Along the way, people bought and sold all kinds of goods and services.

The Sufis were key players as well. Sufis, Muslim mystics, were responsible for a ton of conversions to Islam. They preached versions of Islam that focused on connection with God. Their versions of Islam could adapt to many different cultures. This was because they included elements of local belief syncretically[3] blended with new ones. They identified local Muslim converts and leaders as saints. They also built monasteries. These became places for people to stop along their travel and mingle with fellow Sufis. Most were for men. But there were a few for female worshippers. Sufis energized the spread of Islam long after the fall of the major caliphates.



*One of the first mosques*, in Kerala India, was reportedly built during the life of the Prophet Muhammad. *Shahinmusthafa, CC BY-SA 3.0.*

---

2 Bills of exchange were informal documents that allowed a merchant to order a banker in another location to make a payment on his behalf to a merchant for goods or services.
3 Syncretism refers to the blending of different forms of belief or practice.

## The fruits of exchange

As people moved, ideas spread as well. Intellectual and scientific knowledge also made their way across large expanses of land and sea. These ideas led to a growth of science and culture.

Some historians describe a "paper revolution" occurring in the Islamic World around the ninth century. People wrote more and read more. Intellectual communities grew. Although literacy was still mostly for the upper class, it grew during this period.

Even Islamic religious thought was changed by these connections. Religious scholars called *ulema* combined the sayings of the prophet, called *hadith*, into collections. They developed and crystallized Islamic law into a canon called *sharia*. It means "the way." Sharia covers everything in Islamic life from trade to marriage. Of course, not everyone agreed on all of these new ideas. Sunni and Shia divisions became clearer institutions between 800-1100 CE. As a result, different groups of Muslims intellectuals and scientists were combined in smaller—but still huge—networks of religious belief and practice.



*An image of scholars at an Abbasid library. Public domain.*

## Muslim networks and global Islam

Empires and dynasties rose and fell. But vibrant networks and solid communities remained. They unified Muslims across distances into a larger community. Many Muslims felt they were part of a universal religious community called an *ummah*. It stretched far beyond the edges of any Muslim state. In Era 4 and beyond, Muslims and people who lived in the Islamic world continued to experience an interconnected community that felt—to them—very global.

You could try to trace the lines along this massive web. But to figure out where exactly the Islamic world begins and ends, you'll need more information than can fit on a map.

## Sources

Arjomand, Said Amir. "Thinking Globally about Islam." *The Oxford Handbook of Global Religions*, October 26, 2006.

Ashtor, Eliyahu. "Banking Instruments Between the Muslim East and the Christian West" 3 (1972).

Berkey, Jonathan Porter. *The Formation of Islam : Religion and Society in the Near East, 600-1800*. Themes in Islamic History. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003.

Cook, Michael. 1940-, ed. *The New Cambridge History of Islam*. Cambridge ; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010.

Hodgson, Marshall G. S. *The Venture of Islam Conscience and History in a World Civilization. Volume One, The Classical Age of Islam*. Edited by Inc ebrary. Paperback ed. Chicago, Ill.: University of Chicago Press, 1977.

Hoyland, 1966-, Robert G. *In God's Path : The Arab Conquests and the Creation of an Islamic Empire*. Ancient Warfare and Civilization. New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2015.

Laine, James W. *Meta-Religion : Religion and Power in World History*. Joan Palevsky Imprint in Classical Literature. Oakland, California: University of California Press, 2014.

Lapidus, Ira M. (Ira Marvin). *A History of Islamic Societies*. Cambridge Cambridgeshire ; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1988.

———. *Islamic Societies to the Nineteenth Century : A Global History*. Edited by Ira M. (Ira Marvin) Lapidus. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2012.

Lieber, Alfred E. "Eastern Business Practices and Medieval European Commerce." *The Economic History Review* 21, no. 2 (1968): 230–43.

McKay, John P et al. *A History of World Societies*. Boston: Bedford Saint martins, 2014.

Michalopoulos, Stelios, Alireza Naghavi, and Giovanni Prarolo. "Trade and Geography in the Spread of Islam." *The Economic Journal* 128, no. 616 (2018): 3210–41.

Quinn, Stephen F., and William Roberds. "The Evolution of the Check as a Means of Payment: A Historical Survey." *Economic Review*, 2008.

Robinson, Chase F. "The First Islamic Empire." *The Oxford Handbook of the State in the Ancient Near East and Mediterranean*, February 1, 2013.

Silverstein, Adam J. *Islamic History : A Very Short Introduction*. Very Short Introductions ; Oxford ; New York: Oxford University Press, 2010.

Super, 1944-, John C. *Religion in World History : The Persistence of Imperial Communion*. Edited by Briane K. Turley. Themes in World History. New York: Routledge, 2006.

Udovitch, Abraham L. *Bankers without Banks : Commerce, Banking, and Society in the Islamic World of the Middle Ages*. Princeton, N.J.: Program in Near Eastern Studies, Princeton University, 1981.

Valérian, Dominique. "Middle East: 7th–15th Centuries." *The Oxford Handbook of Cities in World History*, February 1, 2013.

## Eman M. Elshaikh

The author of this article is Eman M. Elshaikh. She is a writer, researcher, and teacher who has taught K-12 and undergraduates in the United States and in the Middle East and written for many different audiences. She teaches writing at the University of Chicago, where she also completed her master's in social sciences and is currently pursuing her PhD. She was previously a World History Fellow at Khan Academy, where she worked closely with the College Board to develop curriculum for AP World History.

## Image credits

**Cover**: *Isle of Graia Gulf of Akabah Arabia Petraea*, depicting the Pharaoh's Island in the northern Gulf of Aqaba off the shore of Egypt's eastern Sinai Peninsula. David Roberts, retouched by, GerardM. Public domain. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Isle_of_Graia3.jpg#/media/File:Isle_of_Graia3.jpg

newsela

Articles leveled by Newsela have been adjusted along several dimensions of text complexity including sentence structure, vocabulary and organization. The number followed by L indicates the Lexile measure of the article. For more information on Lexile measures and how they correspond to grade levels: www.lexile.com/educators/understanding-lexile-measures/

To learn more about Newsela, visit www.newsela.com/about.

**The Lexile® Framework for Reading**

The Lexile® Framework for Reading evaluates reading ability and text complexity on the same developmental scale. Unlike other measurement systems, the Lexile Framework determines reading ability based on actual assessments, rather than generalized age or grade levels. Recognized as the standard for matching readers with texts, tens of millions of students worldwide receive a Lexile measure that helps them find targeted readings from the more than 100 million articles, books and websites that have been measured. Lexile measures connect learners of all ages with resources at the right level of challenge and monitors their progress toward state and national proficiency standards. More information about the Lexile® Framework can be found at www.Lexile.com.