

DISCUSSION GUIDE FOR
“GLOBAL ISLAM”
DR. ROBERT CREWS

- Organizing Questions
- What does the term “global Islam” mean?
 - How have technology and globalization impacted Islamic networks over the last 150 years?
 - How have Islamic institutions and leaders adapted their faith in the face of globalization and technology?

Summary In June 2025, Dr. Robert Crews, Professor of History at Stanford University, recorded a 32-minute video covering the interaction of Islam with globalization. He traced the impact of globalization on Islam beginning in the late 19th century to today and explained how the religion has adapted to the forces of globalization in addition to being shaped by them. He ends with an explanation of how Islam has evolved with the rise of the Internet.

In this discussion guide, students prepare for the video by researching the extent of Islam worldwide and in their local community. After watching the video, they work as a class to investigate the ways in which technology has influenced global Islam before reviewing what they learned throughout the unit. This discussion guide is appropriate for advanced secondary students and university students.

Note: For students who aren't familiar with the basics of Islam, we recommend all or part of SPICE's [“Islamic Civilization and the Arts”](#) curriculum unit.

- Objectives Through the course of this discussion guide, students will
- define “global Islam” and understand the ways in which members of the faith see themselves as united;
 - explore how technology and migration have impacted Islamic networks;
 - analyze several of the ways Muslims have responded to globalization over time and across different regions; and
 - assess the role of advances in communication and transportation in spreading Islam.

Materials Handout 1, *Pre-Lesson Quiz*
Handout 2, *Islam Globally and Locally*

Handout 3, *Video Notes*

Handout 4, *Timeline*

Handout 5, *Tracing the Impact of Technology on Islam*

Handout 6, *Notes on Presentations*

Handout 7, *Post-Lesson Quiz*

Answer Key 1, *Pre-Lesson and Post-Lesson Quiz*

Answer Key 2, *Islam Globally and Locally*

Answer Key 3, *Video Notes*

Answer Key 4, *Timeline*

Answer Key 5, *Tracing the Impact of Technology on Islam*

Teacher Information, *Video Transcript*

Video, "Global Islam," online at <https://spice.fsi.stanford.edu/multimedia/global-islam>

Equipment

- Computer with Internet access and an HTML5-supported web browser
- Computer projector and screen

Teacher Preparation

Instructions and materials are based on a class size of 30 students. Adjust accordingly for different class sizes.

1. Make the appropriate number of copies of handouts.
2. Preview Video, "Global Islam" (running time: 32 minutes). You can use Teacher Information, *Video Transcript*, as a reference for the video content.
3. Become familiar with the content of the handouts and answer keys.
4. Set up and test your class computer and projector before starting the lesson.
5. Communicate your expectations around whether or how students can use large language models (LLMs) and other forms of generative artificial intelligence to complete the assignments in this unit.

Time

Three 50-minute class periods, plus homework between class periods

Procedures Day One

1. Explain to students that over the next few class periods they will learn about global Islam and how it has responded to globalization and technological advances in the modern world. This unit is based on a video by Stanford historian Dr. Robert Crews.
2. Distribute one copy of Handout 1, *Pre-Lesson Quiz*, to each student. Let students know that this quiz is designed to determine how much they know about the topic of global Islam at this point; it will not be collected or assessed. Allow students 10 minutes to complete the quiz. Ask students to keep the handout until the end of the lesson.

3. Distribute one copy of Handout 2, *Islam Globally and Locally*, to each student. For Part B, provide what you believe to be the most useful definition of “community” given your local context.
4. Allow students the remainder of the class period to complete the handout. Students may work individually or in groups.
5. End the class period by distributing one copy of Handout 3, *Video Notes*, to each student. Instruct students to watch the video and complete this handout before the next class period.

Before Day Two Students watch the video and complete Handout 2, *Islam Globally and Locally*, and Handout 3, *Video Notes*. Tell students to reserve 90 to 120 minutes to watch the video and complete the handouts.

Day Two

1. Organize the class into groups of three students.
2. Distribute one copy of Handout 4, *Timeline*, to each student.
3. Allow students 10 minutes to complete the assignment. Students may work with their groupmates at your discretion.
4. As students work on the handout, write the following on separate sections of your whiteboard (or on separate sheets of butcher paper):
 - How did colonialism affect Islamic unity?
 - In what ways have the technologies mentioned in the video enhanced Islamic unity?
 - In what ways have the technologies mentioned in the video diluted Islamic unity?
5. After 10 minutes, collect Handout 4 from each student for assessment. Instruct students to take a marker and spend 15 minutes walking around the room writing their responses under each of the three questions you wrote on the walls. Encourage them to comment on their classmates’ responses, in a similar way to an online comment thread.
6. After 15 minutes, bring the class back together and facilitate a whole class discussion on students’ written responses to the three questions.
7. At the end of the class period, distribute one copy of Handout 5, *Tracing the Impact of Technology on Islam*, for students to complete as homework. Ensure that each group of students assigns someone to each of the three time periods before the end of the class.

Before Day Three Students complete their research per the instructions on Handout 5, *Tracing the Impact of Technology on Islam*.

Day Three

1. Ask students to reconvene in their groups of three. Distribute one copy of Handout 6, *Notes on Presentations*, to each student.
2. Inform students that they have 15 minutes to share their research with the other members of their trio. Instruct students to write down what

they learn on the physical copy of Handout 6, *Notes on Presentations*, which you will collect for assessment.

3. As students present, write down the most important cutting-edge technologies somewhere easily visible to the entire class (whiteboard, Smartboard, projector). You can choose the list of technologies yourself or ask the class to nominate some technologies and narrow them down; possibilities include
 - a. Immersive virtual reality (VR) and augmented reality (AR)
 - b. Generative AI and AI-driven automation
 - c. Autonomous vehicles and robotics
 - d. Precision medicine
 - e. Next-generation clean energy
4. After 15 minutes, collect Handout 6 from each student for assessment.
5. Direct the class's attention to the list of top technologies and lead a whole-class discussion on these questions:
 - a. Given what you learned in this unit, how might these technologies impact global Islam?
 - b. What are some possibilities for how global Islam might adapt to these technologies?
 - c. Which of these adaptations do you believe is most likely? Why?
6. When 10 minutes remain in the class period, distribute one copy of Handout 7, *Post-Lesson Quiz*, to each student. Allow students up to 10 minutes to complete the handout.
7. Collect Handout 7, *Post-Lesson Quiz*, from each student for assessment.

Extension

1. Write an essay in response to one of the following prompts:
 - a. Given what you learned, in what ways do you believe Islam will look different in 25 years?
 - b. Why is understanding global Islam essential to understanding the modern world?
2. Create a digital infographic showing the major technological influences on global Islam over the past 150 years.
3. Develop a one-page supplement to what your world history textbooks say about Islam from 1850 to now.

Assessment

The following are suggestions for assessing student work in this lesson:

1. Evaluate student responses to Handout 2, *Islam Globally and Locally*, based on Answer Key 2, *Islam Globally and Locally*.
2. Evaluate student responses to Handout 3, *Video Notes*, based on Answer Key 3, *Video Notes*.
3. Evaluate student responses to Handout 4, *Timeline*, based on Answer Key 4, *Timeline*.
4. Evaluate students' notes on Handout 6, *Notes on Presentations*, based

on Answer Key 5, *Tracing the Impact of Technology on Islam*, and how accurately and completely they capture their classmates' remarks.

5. Use Answer Key 1, *Pre-Lesson and Post-Lesson Quiz*, to evaluate how much students learned from this unit based on their improvement between Handout 1, *Pre-Lesson Quiz*, and Handout 7, *Post-Lesson Quiz*.
6. Assess student participation in group and class discussions, evaluating their ability to
 - clearly state their opinions, questions, and /or answers;
 - provide thoughtful answers;
 - exhibit sensitivity toward different cultures and ideas;
 - respect and acknowledge other students' comments; and
 - ask relevant and insightful questions.

7. About what percent of the population of sub-Saharan Africa is Muslim?
 - a. About 1 in 10
 - b. About 1 in 5
 - c. About 1 in 3
 - d. About 1 in 2

8. What is Hajj, and why is it so important to Muslims?

9. Which three late-19th century technologies most transformed global Islam?
 - a. Railroad, steamship, and printing
 - b. Airplanes, telegraph, and radio
 - c. Phonograph, electric light bulb, and the camera
 - d. Automobiles, bicycles, and telephones

10. About how many people fought for al-Qaeda at its height?
 - a. Hundreds of people
 - b. Thousands of people
 - c. Tens of thousands of people
 - d. Hundreds of thousands of people
 - e. Millions of people

ISLAM GLOBALLY AND LOCALLY

Despite increased awareness of the diversity within Islam and its global reach, many people still have outdated notions of the faith. To gain a better sense of the Muslim community both in your local community and worldwide, work with your classmates for the rest of the class period to complete the activities below.

Part A: Islam Globally

On the world map on the following page:

1. Find and label the 10 countries with the largest Muslim populations.
2. List the approximate number of Muslims (in millions) in each of these countries.

Use online resources, an atlas, your textbook, or other class notes to find the most accurate information.

Part B: Islam Locally

First, define your local community (for example: your town, city, county, state, or region) per your teacher's direction.

Use this definition to answer the following questions:

1. **Mosques and Islamic centers:** How many mosques and local Islamic centers are in your community today? How has this number changed over the last 20 years?

2. **Halal food options:** What options for halal food are available in your community today? How has this changed over the last 20 years?

3. **Muslim population:** Approximately how many practicing Muslims are in your community? How has this number grown over the last 20 years? Roughly what percentage are **converts** versus **immigrants**?

POLITICAL WORLD MAP (NOT LABELED)



Key Terms (in order of mention)

Hajj—pilgrimage to the holy city of Mecca, required once in a lifetime for all able Muslims; one of the Five Pillars of Islam

Shi'i / Shi'a Islam—a major branch of Islam that differs from Sunni Islam in beliefs about the leadership of the Muslim community after Muhammad's death

Sunni Islam—the largest branch of Islam, holding that the community should choose its leaders

jihād—often translated as “struggle,” can refer to personal spiritual effort or, in some contexts, military struggle for a cause (often misunderstood in Western media as only violent holy war)

Society of the Muslim Brothers / Muslim Brotherhood—Sunni Islamist political and social movement founded in Egypt in 1928 that promotes Islam as a complete way of life

Tablighi Jamaat—non-political Islamic missionary movement founded in India in 1926, focused on encouraging Muslims to be more observant

mujahideen—guerrilla fighters in Islamic countries, especially those who are fighting against non-Muslim forces

al-Qaeda—militant Islamist organization founded in the late 1980s that carried out the 9/11 attacks on the United States as well as many other attacks

ISIS (Islamic State of Iraq and Syria)—violent extremist group that split from al-Qaeda and aimed to establish a global Islamic caliphate through warfare

Sahel—region in Africa south of the Sahara Desert where Islamist militant groups have recently emerged

halal—Arabic for “permissible;” refers to what is allowed under Islamic law, especially in relation to food, fashion, and finance

hijab—headscarf worn by many Muslim women as part of modest dress, based on religious and cultural interpretations

TIMELINE

Place these 12 key events in global Islam in the correct order in the table on the next page.

Soviet Union invades Afghanistan	According to estimates, the global population of Muslims reaches two billion people
Muslim Brotherhood founded in Egypt	Soviet Union completes withdrawal from Afghanistan
Tablighi Jamaat founded in India	Ottoman Empire is founded
Al-Qaeda attacks the United States, which launches the War on Terror in retaliation	The Islamic Golden Age, so named because of intellectual, cultural, and scientific advances in majority-Muslim regions, especially in the Abbasid Caliphate
First year of the Islamic calendar (marked by the migration from Mecca to Medina)	France invades and occupies Algeria, marking the first European colonial incursion into a Muslim state
According to estimates, the global population of Muslims reaches one billion people	The Ottoman Empire, a Sunni Muslim state, captures Constantinople from the Byzantine Empire and renames it Istanbul. This marked the end of the Eastern Roman Empire.

Timing	Description
622	
~750 to ~1350	
1299	
1453	
1830	
1926	
1928	
1979	
Late 1980s	
1989	
September 11, 2001	
2020	

TRACING THE IMPACT OF TECHNOLOGY ON ISLAM

Dr. Crews spent much of the video discussing how technology impacted Islam during three time periods:

- Late 19th century
- Mid-20th century
- Early 21st century

Each member of your group will research one of these time periods to better understand how technology impacted Islam and how Islam adapted to these technologies during that time period.

Step 1: Choose Your Time Period

First, assign each of the three time periods to someone in your group. Enter the name of the student assigned to each time period in the table below.

Timing	Description
Late 19th century	
Mid-20th century	
Early 21st century	

Step 2: Conduct Research and Prepare to Share Your Response

Work individually to answer the questions below for your assigned time period. You should find all the information you need in Dr. Crews' video, but feel free to do additional research.

Document your response to each question and bring your written notes to the next class period, where you will have three to five minutes to share what you learned with the other members of your group.

1. What were the main advances in communications and transportation technology during your assigned time frame?
2. How did these impact global Islam?
3. How did global Islam adapt to these technologies?

NOTES ON PRESENTATIONS

Use the table on the following pages to take notes on your groupmates' presentations. Your teacher will collect this handout for assessment.

Time Period	Late 19th Century
Presenting Student	
NOTES	

handout 6

Time Period	Mid-20th Century
Presenting Student	
NOTES	

Time Period	Early 21st Century
Presenting Student	
NOTES	

7. About what percent of the population of sub-Saharan Africa is Muslim?
 - a. About 1 in 10
 - b. About 1 in 5
 - c. About 1 in 3
 - d. About 1 in 2

8. What is Hajj, and why is it so important to Muslims?

9. Which three late-19th century technologies most transformed global Islam?
 - a. Railroad, steamship, and printing
 - b. Airplanes, telegraph, and radio
 - c. Phonograph, electric light bulb, and the camera
 - d. Automobiles, bicycles, and telephones

10. About how many people fought for al-Qaeda at its height?
 - a. Hundreds of people
 - b. Thousands of people
 - c. Tens of thousands of people
 - d. Hundreds of thousands of people
 - e. Millions of people

11. What is at least one way in which the story of global Islam challenges common media portrayals of Muslims?

PRE-LESSON AND POST-LESSON QUIZ

1. Roughly how many Muslims were there worldwide as of 2025?
 - a. 500 million
 - b. 1 billion
 - c. 2 billion
 - d. 3 billion

2. About what share of the world's population is Muslim?
 - a. 1 in 10
 - b. 1 in 6
 - c. 1 in 4
 - d. 1 in 2

3. About what percent of your country's population identifies as Muslim?

Answers will vary by country. Estimates for some countries follow. Note these estimates are not precise and, in some cases, come from census data from 2022 or earlier.

 - *United States: approximately 1 to 2 percent*
 - *Ireland: around 2 percent*
 - *Australia: around 3 percent*
 - *Canada: around 5 percent*
 - *United Kingdom: between 6 and 7 percent*
 - *Germany: between 6 and 7 percent*
 - *France: between 7 and 10 percent*

4. According to the video, how many countries did not have a mosque in 2025?

Only six countries, according to Dr. Crews.

5. In which geographic region are the four most populous Muslim countries?
 - a. Middle East
 - b. Asia
 - c. Europe
 - d. North Africa
 - e. Sub-Saharan Africa

6. Approximately what percentage of all Muslims live in the Middle East and North Africa?
 - a. About 60%
 - b. About 40%
 - c. About 20%
 - d. About 5%

7. About what percent of the population of sub-Saharan Africa is Muslim?
- About 1 in 10
 - About 1 in 5
 - About 1 in 3
 - About 1 in 2
8. What is Hajj, and why is it so important to Muslims?
- Hajj is the annual pilgrimage to the holy city of Mecca in Saudi Arabia. It is one of the Five Pillars of Islam, meaning it is a core religious obligation. Every Muslim who is physically and financially able is expected to perform Hajj at least once in their lifetime.*
9. Which three late-19th century technologies most transformed global Islam?
- Railroad, steamship, and printing
 - Airplanes, telegraph, and radio
 - Phonograph, electric light bulb, and the camera
 - Automobiles, bicycles, and telephones
10. About how many people fought for al-Qaeda at its height?
- Hundreds of people
 - Thousands of people
 - Tens of thousands of people
 - Hundreds of thousands of people
 - Millions of people

Only on Handout 7, Post-Lesson Quiz:

11. What is at least one way in which the story of global Islam challenges common media portrayals of Muslims?
- Student responses will vary; Dr. Crews mentions the following in the video:*
- Most Muslims do not live in the Middle East and are not ethnically Arab
 - Islam is not anti-global or isolated from global trends, communications, and technology
 - Islam is not monolithic or uniform; there is significant diversity, debate, and disagreement among the global Muslim community
 - Militant groups like al-Qaeda or ISIS represent a tiny minority of all Muslims
 - Muslims are active participants in global society; use of the Internet to answer religious questions and seek guidance is common and growing
 - Islam has adapted to modernity throughout its history

ISLAM GLOBALLY AND LOCALLY

Part A: Islam Globally

According to Dr. Crews and the Pew Research Center’s 2025 report, *How the Global Religious Landscape Changed From 2010 to 2020*, the 10 countries with the largest Muslim populations in 2020 were as follows:

Country	Approximate Muslim population (in millions)
Indonesia	239
Pakistan	227
India	213
Bangladesh	151
Nigeria	120
Egypt	104
Iran	88
Turkey	84
Sudan	46
Algeria	43

Part B: Islam Locally

Responses to this part will vary by community. You should be able to find approximate answers through government agencies and Internet searches. Consider contacting the Islamic Society of North America (www.isna.net) or local mosques for more definitive responses.

VIDEO NOTES

1. How does Dr. Crews define global Islam?

Dr. Crews defines global Islam as “the study of Islam in an era of globalization.” More specifically, he says “it’s the story of how we can interpret a religious tradition that has been reshaped by the processes of globalization and how particular actors in that tradition have, in turn, adapted the tradition to the forces of globalization.”

2. In order, which ten countries have the largest Muslim population? How many of these are in the Middle East?

- a. Indonesia
- b. Pakistan
- c. India
- d. Bangladesh
- e. Nigeria
- f. Egypt
- g. Iran
- h. Turkey
- i. Sudan
- j. Algeria

Only three of these countries (Egypt, Iran, and Turkey) are in the area traditionally considered the Middle East.

3. Which three technological advances in the late 19th century reshaped interactions among Muslims around the world? How did they do so?

1. **Railroads:** Railroads massively increased the number of Muslims who were able to travel, and in particular to go on the Hajj. The increased ease and frequency of travel brought Muslim elites into more frequent contact with each other.
2. **Steamships:** Similarly, steamships meant people could travel greater distances and allowed many more people to go to Mecca on the Hajj. They also enabled pilgrimages to other important shrine centers.
3. **Expansion of printing:** Journals, newspapers, and books written in Arabic, Persian, or Turkish could be read by more people. These written materials and increased literacy levels allowed Muslims to participate in a truly global conversation about Islam, how to interpret the tradition, and how Islam might or might not assist in thinking about contemporary politics and global affairs.

4. How did Muslim societies respond to colonization by European powers?

Wide-scale colonization of Muslim countries by European powers led to a sense of crisis in Muslim societies. Many Muslim leaders asked why so many of their societies had lost control of their own populations; some questioned whether some aspect of Islam was to blame.

At a high level, three potential responses emerged:

- *Take up arms to fight colonial powers*
- *Embrace modern science and technologies and teach them in schools to strengthen Muslim societies*
- *Unify all Muslims across the globe to give them greater power*

5. Which two Islamic reformist movements from the early 20th century does Dr. Crews mention?

Dr. Crews mentions two reformist movements from the early 20th century:

- *Society of the Muslim Brothers / Muslim Brotherhood: a Sunni Islamist political and social movement founded in Egypt in 1928 that promotes Islam as a complete way of life*
- *Tablighi Jamaat: a non-political Islamic missionary movement founded in India in 1926, focused on encouraging Muslims to be more observant*

6. What made the retreat of the Soviet Union from Afghanistan in 1989 such a watershed event in global Islam?

Many Muslims interpreted the Soviet Union's withdrawal from Afghanistan in 1989 as proof that religiously motivated fighters could defeat a global superpower. The Soviet-Afghan War created transnational networks of Muslim fighters and helped shift some Islamist movements from local or national concerns to a global mission, laying the groundwork for groups like al-Qaeda.

7. What does Dr. Crews identify as the six biggest trends in global Islam today?

Dr. Crews identifies the six biggest trends in global Islam today as:

1. *Growth of the Hajj*
2. *Communications tech for Muslims to discuss what their religion means among themselves*
3. *The democratization of Muslim doctrine across the world: new communications technologies make it easier to hear anyone's interpretation of Islam and its traditions, eroding the relative authority of some local imams/leaders*
4. *Expansion of the halal industry*
5. *Migration of Muslims*
6. *Conversion to Islam, often through the Internet*

TIMELINE

Timing	Description
622	First year of the Islamic calendar (marked by the migration from Mecca to Medina)
~750 to ~1350	The Islamic Golden Age, so named because of intellectual, cultural, and scientific advances in majority-Muslim regions, especially in the Abbasid Caliphate
1299	Ottoman Empire is founded
1453	The Ottoman Empire, a Sunni Muslim state, captures Constantinople from the Byzantine Empire and renames it Istanbul. This marked the end of the Eastern Roman Empire.
1830	France invades and occupies Algeria, marking the first European colonial incursion into a Muslim state
1926	Tablighi Jamaat founded in India
1928	Muslim Brotherhood founded in Egypt
1979	Soviet Union invades Afghanistan
Late 1980s	According to estimates, the global population of Muslims reaches one billion people
1989	Soviet Union completes withdrawal from Afghanistan
September 11, 2001	Al-Qaeda attacks the United States, which launches the War on Terror in retaliation
2020	According to estimates, the global population of Muslims reaches two billion people

TRACING THE IMPACT OF TECHNOLOGY ON ISLAM

Check that students' responses roughly reflect the sample responses below.

1. Late 19th Century

- What were the main advances in communications and transportation technology during your assigned time frame?

The late 19th century saw the rise of the railroad, steamship, and printing press as transformative technologies. Railroads and steamships drastically shortened travel times and made it cheaper and easier for people to move across regions. The expansion of printing enabled the mass production of books, newspapers, and journals in languages like Arabic, Persian, and Turkish, spreading ideas and correspondence more quickly and widely than ever before.

- How did these impact global Islam?

These technologies created a new level of interconnectedness among Muslims across different regions. More Muslims could now make the Hajj pilgrimage to Mecca, meeting fellow Muslims from across the world and sharing ideas. Print media allowed religious debates and reformist ideas to circulate widely, creating a truly global conversation about Islamic interpretation and responses to modernity and colonialism.

- How did global Islam adapt to these technologies?

Muslim elites and scholars quickly embraced these technologies. They used print media to share theological arguments, reformist ideas, and scientific knowledge across continents. Pilgrims returning from Mecca brought back not just spiritual experiences but also new political and religious perspectives. This period marked the beginning of pan-Islamic movements, where a sense of global Muslim solidarity began to emerge in response to colonial pressures.

2. Mid-20th Century

- What were the main advances in communications and transportation technology during your assigned time frame?

During the mid-20th century, new technologies such as radio, television, and improved air travel emerged. These tools connected distant parts of the world almost instantly and allowed for faster, more affordable movement of people and ideas across continents.

- How did these impact global Islam?

Radio broadcasts and television programs helped create a sense of a shared Islamic identity beyond local or national communities. Religious sermons, lectures, and even political messages could reach millions simultaneously. Air travel made the Hajj pilgrimage accessible to millions more Muslims, transforming it from a journey for the wealthy elite to an experience open to middle-class Muslims worldwide.

- How did global Islam adapt to these technologies?

Muslim communities used these technologies to teach, mobilize, and organize. Religious scholars broadcast programs over radio and television to educate communities. Increased accessibility to the Hajj strengthened global networks among a wider range of Muslims and expanded the exchange of cultural, religious, and political ideas. This era also saw the rise of mass Islamic organizations and movements, like the Muslim Brotherhood and Tablighi Jamaat, who used media to promote their reformist visions globally.

3. Early 21st Century

- What were the main advances in communications and transportation technology during your assigned time frame?

The Internet, social media, smartphones, and digital platforms revolutionized communication in the early 21st century. Air travel has become even more accessible and affordable, allowing for rapid global movement.

- How did these impact global Islam?

Global Islam is now more interconnected and decentralized than ever before. Social media platforms enable Muslims to share religious content, debate theology, and participate in global conversations instantly. The annual Hajj pilgrimage now attracts 2.5 million pilgrims, reflecting the combination of global mobility and digital infrastructure for organizing and sharing the experience.

- How did global Islam adapt to these technologies?

Muslim communities and scholars have embraced online platforms for education, outreach, and debate. Virtual fatwas, YouTube lectures, and interactive classes allow believers to access religious knowledge from anywhere. However, this democratization of religious authority has also challenged traditional structures, as Muslims can now “shop” for religious guidance online, often bypassing local leaders. At the same time, global industries like the halal market have expanded, offering food, fashion, and lifestyle products tailored for Muslims worldwide, showing how commerce and faith can more easily intertwine in a globalized age.

VIDEO TRANSCRIPT

“Global Islam”

Dr. Robert Crews

Recorded 10 June 2025

Hello, my name is Robert Crews. I teach in the history department at Stanford University, and I’m here to speak to you today about global Islam. This is a term that you may have seen in circulation in news media and history books, online, speaking about what it means to be a Muslim in a highly globalized world.

So for today our use of the term is going to be limited to the study of Islam in an era of globalization. Now the term can mean different things to different people. For us, essentially, it’s the story of how we can interpret a religious tradition that has been reshaped by the processes of globalization and how particular actors in that tradition have, in turn, adapted the tradition to the forces of globalization.

So not just a passive story of the forces of globalization acting upon this tradition, but also of the interaction between, especially Muslim elites and the globalized, the globalizing forces of modernity. So our stress here today is really on the emergence of new forms, new ways of understanding Islam that come out of that process of engaging with globalization.

It’s not about homogenization, that is, it’s not about the kind of narrowing of Islamic tradition or interpretation. Rather, it’s about the proliferation of new ideas that come out of modernity, that come out of globalization, that Muslims themselves have developed. Again, not a story of resisting change, not a story of resisting modernity, but of the adaptation to new forms of mobility, technology, and politics.

But first a few words about the context. You know from your study of geography that we could find Muslims across the planet. Today, Muslims make up the second-largest community of, religious community across the globe today, there are some two billion Muslims. It is the second-largest community after Christianity. Almost one in four people on planet Earth today are Muslims. That’s one-quarter of the global population.

In the last decade, Muslims represent the largest, fastest-growing community, compared to Christianity and other religious traditions. If one looks at an image of, or a slide of the most populous Muslim countries, one finds a very revealing list of what this global population looks like.

So if we look at the top 10 most populous Muslim countries, we find first Indonesia, then Pakistan, India, Bangladesh, Nigeria, Egypt, Iran, Turkey, Sudan, and Algeria. And what you’ll note from examining this list is that the top four countries, the four most populous Muslim countries are, in fact, in Asia. Of the others, three are in Africa, and of those three, two are in North Africa. So this is a striking, I think, illustration for many of us who live in the United States or who are used to the idea that somehow the Middle East and Islam are synonymous, or that Arab countries and Islam represent essentially the extent of the boundaries of this tradition. In fact, 59 percent of Muslims live in Asia. Nearly 20 percent live in sub-Saharan Africa and of the broader, the overall population of sub-Saharan Africa, one in three is Muslim.

Now in the Middle East, we do find, of course, Muslim-majority countries, uh countries. Most of these countries, on average, are almost 94 percent Muslim. But of the total global population of Muslims, they only make up some 20 percent—that is, those who live in the Middle East and North Africa.

So the first thing that we should contend with in thinking about the kind of global history and politics of Islam is that it has a truly global geography, it's present across the globe. Again, this is a contrast to the idea that we're dealing just with the Middle East or just an Arab kind of tradition.

Now the Arabic language is quite important. It is the second language of Islam, and there have been key Arab figures throughout the history of Islam who've made very important contributions. But this is truly a global phenomenon that we have to contend with, thinking about its geography and the many contributions that people from Asia and Africa and elsewhere have made.

In our own lifetimes, the story of the migration of Muslims across the world is also a very important factor. Of 195 countries [in the world], only six do not have a mosque. And these include North Korea; the Vatican, which is the seat of the papacy, it's where the Pope lives; and small European countries like Andorra.

Everywhere else, we find mosques, we find Muslims, we find vibrant communities across the planet. We find them in Russia, Ireland, Mexico, Colombia, the United States, Canada. Name any country outside of the six, and you'll find Muslim communities who are there in large part because of migration in the 20th century, which is also part of one of the central features of globalization.

Now, before the modern era—that is, before the 19th and 20th centuries—Muslim elites did have contact with one another. One thinks of people meeting in Cairo, they met in Mecca on Hajj, one of the five pillars of Islam. In Central Asia, people traveled from city to city to city to exchange ideas, to exchange manuscripts, to exchange poetry. They were connected by networks of scholarship and pilgrimage, really across the globe. Africans, of course, are traveling to Mecca, Southeast Asians traveling to Mecca. There were global networks of exchange and, especially, of pilgrimage, sometimes simultaneously along pathways of trade and diplomacy. But the important shift that I'll highlight here for our purposes in thinking about global Islam takes place in the late 19th century, when new forces sped up communication and radically shortened distances.

So the three key developments here that change our story in the late 19th century are the emergence of the railroad, the appearance of the steamship, and finally the expansion of printing. So each of these elements will have a crucial role to play in bringing Muslims from disparate parts of the world together in communication. The railroad, of course, made travel easier, it made it less expensive, it made it faster. And for our purposes, it enabled the massive transformation of the Hajj, this pilgrimage, annual pilgrimage to Mecca. Again, one of the five pillars of Islam. This means that, because of the railroad, more and more Muslims embark on this pilgrimage. More and more Muslims travel to Mecca. More and more Muslims from different parts of the globe come into contact directly with one another on that trip to Mecca.

The steamship also had a related effect because it meant that people could travel greater distances, often connecting the railroads, to engage in the same purpose—the Hajj to Mecca—but also to other shrine centers. For Shi'i communities, there are other important shrine cities, in Iraq, for instance, and Syria.

Printing had an enormous effect on Muslim communities across the globe in terms of bringing them together into conversation and debate because it meant that journals, newspapers, books written in Arabic or Persian or Ottoman Turkish, or later modern Turkish could be read by more and more people. People could, more people who were literate could, engage in debates with one another and could participate in what became a truly global conversation about Islam, about how to interpret the tradition, how Islam might or might not assist us in thinking about the present and contemporary politics and global affairs. All these things had a dramatic effect in the second half of the 19th century and the beginning part of the 20th in terms of creating this global conversation among Muslims from different parts of the globe through a select group of languages. But this is a reminder that many of these elites would have been multilingual, they would have been able to communicate in two or more languages. And so what we see is a giant reading public emerge, especially out of this new printing sphere.

All these processes—the steamship, the emergence of the steamship and of the railroad and of printing—intensified contacts among Muslim elites as well as between Muslims and non-Muslims. And here the crucial context is European colonial expansion. More and more Muslims across the 19th century found themselves subject to European rule, to colonial control led from places like London, Paris, Berlin, and even the United States, even Washington. So this is a major shift in global politics as European empires expand. In the late 19th century, for example, European powers would carve up the entire continent of Africa in this moment of partition. This meant that more and more Muslims were coming under European non-Muslim rule. And this, as you can imagine, inaugurated a moment of kind of crisis. What did it mean that so many Muslims had lost control of their own countries? What did it mean that they had lost sovereignty? Was Islam to blame? Whose fault was it that they had fallen to these European colonial powers?

So this moves to the center of debates among Muslims: What to do about colonial rule? Should Muslims cooperate? Should they resist? Is this a moment when they should engage in a holy struggle, or jihad, against the Europeans? Or is there something, something else, that Muslims might do to adapt to this new political moment?

So what appears at this stage is a kind of confluence of different approaches and responses to the challenge of European power. There is confrontation in some places, some do take up arms—for example, in pockets of North Africa and the Caucasus in Russia—people take up arms against European colonial expansion. But more broadly, there's a pattern of adaptation and of the embrace of these new technologies, which enable Muslims to pursue, to define and then pursue, their own political and religious agendas.

So to cite a few examples: The first is a very dramatic expansion of Hajj traffic. Because of the railroad, because of the steamship, more and more Muslims are able to go on Hajj. And for many of them, this is a deeper way to engage with what they understand to be their religious obligations and to fully enjoy the richness of the tradition.

Now as people are debating what is to be done with the state of Muslim societies, as more and more people are reading across places, they're being connected by the Hajj and other kinds of pilgrimage, and as newspapers are circulating, telling more and more Muslims what's happening, and as the telegraph develops and people are getting news of what's happening elsewhere more and more quickly—more and more of the conversation turns to this challenge of European power.

And one of the primary responses beyond adopting this technology is to call for reform, that is, the internal reform of Islam, and for unity, for the unity of all Muslims across the globe.

Now, different actors devise variations of this scenario of reform and unity in different countries. So we see a school of reform emerging in Egypt among intellectuals who argue that Egypt is an ancient center of Islamic learning; Egyptians should lead the way in unifying all Muslims as a response to European colonial encroachment.

Similarly, we see figures appear in Iran. Some of them take aspects of European political thought in the 19th century—for example the idea that monarchies should have some kind of constitutional constraint—and they begin to try to adapt that to the Iranian context, where there's a monarchy, and where they argue there should instead be a kind of constitutional system: People should have the right to vote, there should be consultation, and that's part of what the Islamic tradition should look like.

In India, there is another group of actors again working under the British colonial context. But increasingly, all these different spokespeople for a new understanding of Islam are in conversation with one another, and they're devising different ways to approach their immediate colonial environment but also thinking globally: What should the Muslim community on a global scale do to mobilize? To first of all reform themselves, adapt the tradition, weed out the things that they argue people have gotten wrong in the past.

One constant argument is to adopt a new attitude towards science, to turn science to modern times in a way that is consistent with Islam, they argue. So rather than reject all things from the West, reject all notions of science that come from Britain or France, Muslims, they argue, should selectively adapt those principles, introduce them to schools not in a way that endangers one's faith in Islam and its key principles, but one that is consistent with the Islamic tradition, which of course has a long history of scientific engagement and contributions as well.

The Ottoman Empire, with its center in Istanbul, becomes a major actor in attempting to voice this idea of unity in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. And Ottoman intellectuals and politicians would present the Ottoman sultan as the figure who might have the potential to unify all Muslims.

So there are various movements across the Middle East and South Asia, there are figures from Russia, there are figures from Southeast Asia all of whom are engaging with this moment of crisis and thinking about what can be done. And the consistent answer, again and again, is to find some way to unify Muslims, to create solidarity, to create a kind of united front against these challenges.

In Egypt, again, there are distinctive answers. They become more and more kind of compelling to a broader public in the 20th century. One finds, for example, the Muslim Brothers who emerge with an idea in the early 20th century of confronting not just the challenge of colonial rule but new ideas that are gaining ground across the world. These include liberalism, these include socialism. And after 1917, when the Bolsheviks seize power in the Russian Empire and begin to build a Soviet state, the urgency of answering socialism in some fashion takes on greater and greater urgency.

And for many Muslims, this idea is quite attractive—that there could be a kind of compatibility between socialism and Islam. But for the Muslim Brothers, they hold the line and say in fact that, you know, liberalism is not for Muslims, socialism is not for Muslims. We have instead Islam, which is a total system, which is something that has an answer for everything. It's a rich body of ideas and doctrines and principles, it's a system of social justice. We don't need what is being built in the Soviet Union or what is being built in Europe or the United States. We have what we need here in our own society. So these ideas would catch fire in certain circles around the globe.

Another kind of organization would emerge in India in the 1920s: the Tablighi Jamaat, who argued similarly for kind of reform of the Muslim tradition, and they argued for the embracing of a kind of missionary project to take this message of a reformed Islam across the planet. To reform other Muslims, but also, you know, take the ideas of Islam truly on a global scale. And that that would answer all the challenges of our modern era, that that would be an answer for, you know, the challenges of India's Muslim populations, but it would also address a global political challenge of modern times.

So these groups grow, they proliferate. There are many more that I've not mentioned here, but they take shape in the Middle East, they take shape in India. Some take place, for example, in Indonesia on a national scale, and they become truly mass organizations with more and more people engaging in the use of print, that is to get their message out via newspapers, via pamphlets, via short publications. And they offer a variety of different ways of interpreting the Islamic tradition broadly with the goal of providing answers to contemporary challenges.

These are important avenues that will be introduced into schools, for example in Saudi Arabia and Egypt in the 20th century. They will recruit students from all over the planet to come study and then take the ideas they learn in Saudi Arabia and Egypt, to take them back to their home countries—whether it's Afghanistan or India or Canada—and to share those ideas with others.

So there's a vast missionary project which expands across the globe in the second half of the 20th century, which is built upon these earlier foundations of, you know, technology, the growing ease of travel and of communication. Radio and television now become part of this world and these key centers—in mostly at this stage in the Middle East—become quite powerful in advancing certain ideas which, again, don't create unity across the entire planet, do not create a single understanding of Islam, but actually contribute to the proliferation of different understandings of the tradition and where it belongs in the present.

And the broader overarching spirit is to go back to the essentials of the faith, to its truest foundations, to weed out and get rid of those things that have crept into the tradition that are somehow misinterpretations that are erroneous. And the idea, one of the broad points of consensus, is that returning to the Islam of the Prophet Muhammad and his contemporaries, returning to their understandings, their practices, will restore all that is flawed in Muslim societies. So that would lead to intense debates within these societies about whether or not reform is necessary, and then all this would play out on a global scale.

Now, most of this takes place in contexts in which people are not necessarily involved in politics in a direct sense in their national settings. That is, they're engaging in debates with other Muslims within their countries and across the world, but they're not necessarily always directly involved in contesting politics within their own countries.

But in the 1960s, especially, a new generation of people will emerge, in the 1960s and 70s, who argue that, in fact, pious Muslims should engage in politics. And there'll be a very small subset of these people who will come to the idea that force is necessary, that especially countries ruled by people who are not adequately pious, that is who are Muslims by name only, those who are not living truly Islamic lives, are in power and they must be displaced somehow. And one of the points of critique that they will make about such rulers is that they are too closely allied with Western countries or in some contacts, in some contexts, with the Soviets.

The Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979 would provide a stage for Muslim activists who had come to believe in force as a way to advance their agenda. They gathered in Pakistan, which is next door to Afghanistan. And there they constructed schools, hospitals, various

charitable organizations to contribute to what many people identified as jihad, a holy struggle in Afghanistan. Some went across the border to fight the Soviet Red Army. Others stayed in the city of Peshawar in Afghanistan [*note: Peshawar is actually in Pakistan*] to try to rally Muslims across the world to come to this place to build a proper Muslim society.

So among these figures there were Muslims from across the globe, many from Arab countries—Egyptians, Saudis—that literally across the planet, people came to fight for what they thought to be a struggle between, you know, Islam and an atheist superpower in the Soviet Union. You recall that the Soviets had defined their politics as being about the construction of socialism in the Soviet Union, and they believed that atheism was a crucial kind of cornerstone of that vision of constructing a progressive society.

So the symbolism of an invading force that was atheistic and socialist provided a rallying cry for Muslims who imagined this as a holy obligation to engage in violence against these enemies, to engage in what they called jihad.

Now by 1989 this project has proved a success. The Afghan rebels, or mujahideen, had driven out the Red Army by 1989. In reality, Arab and foreign fighters had not played an enormous role; this was mostly the work of Afghans. But the facts didn't matter as much as the symbolism. And the symbolism was that the forces of jihad had defeated one of the two great superpowers, the Soviet Union, and had pushed that army back to Moscow.

So this moment of a victory for the jihadists was a moment of celebration and a kind of simultaneous pivoting to taking that agenda onto a broader stage: to take that agenda back to their home countries, and then very quickly to pivot to challenging the authority of the United States.

The Soviet Union collapsed in 1991, leaving the United States as a kind of unipower, a global hyperpower that exercised authority across the planet, that within a few years had troops stationed in Saudi Arabia in defense of the royal family there. And so all these developments made veterans of the Afghan war more and more keen on challenging the United States, and by doing that via jihad.

And for our purposes this is significant because this was a highly globalized project; it brought together people from all over the planet. Some of the key leaders, though, were Saudi. And this is where we see the birth of an organization which called itself al-Qaeda, or the base, who are thought to have been responsible for the attacks on the United States on September 11, 2001.

So al-Qaeda is an example of our story of a globalized vision of Islam which emerges out of the context that we've been exploring. Of course, it's not the only one, it's a very small minority. Al-Qaeda was never a very large organization. It's not clear that it numbered more than a few dozen or a few hundred fighters at any given moment. But al-Qaeda became a symbol of what could be in terms of defying a superpower in the United States. Al-Qaeda appeared to be this global force that put the United States in a kind of existential danger.

So when George W. Bush launched the global war on terror in 2001, al-Qaeda was the target. And this meant a truly global war. So these are two features of this moment, when Muslims are imagining—or certain radicalized militant Muslims are imagining—a global struggle that will take place in multiple countries to confound the United States and its allies in Europe.

And on the other side, Washington is imagining this as an open-ended struggle that would take place in dozens of countries. And that, of course, is what Washington pursued. And arguably that is still playing out in 2025, when there are still American counterinsurgency operations

against groups that are either directly or very loosely affiliated with or somehow resembling al-Qaeda.

The most recent example of one of these groups that has brought together a utopian militant vision is ISIS, which is an entity that grew out of al-Qaeda. It grew out of an American military prison and which, like al-Qaeda, had the vision of bringing together Muslims from across the planet to build a kind of utopia. One in which their understanding of Islam would be lived, where they would create a state that would have law, it would have justice. It would have a total vision for a society that would fully live according to those principles. And of course that involved a great deal of violence, and it violated the sovereignty of Iraq and Syria.

And eventually that project faltered, but I think the idea is still alive in some quarters. The idea that such a state can be built and that it would rest upon global foundations, that it would be a kind of homeland for militants from across the planet.

But these are, again, to emphasize, in the case of al-Qaeda and ISIS and other militant groups—say, for example, in the Sahel in West Africa—these were all very small militant organizations which attracted a great deal of attention because of their resort to violence and, of course, because they entered the radar of the United States and NATO, which responded in military fashion and which, in key ways, amplified the reputation of these militant groups and arguably increased their appeal for critics of the United States and the West.

However, for the great overwhelming majority of Muslims across the world—that is, for the 95% plus—the story of their engagement with globalization really comes down to their adaptation of the infrastructure of globalization. That is, about some of the themes that we've already touched on already, that is their embrace of the Hajj.

And if one takes one index of its expansion, both beginning in the 19th century but expanding in our own lifetimes, if we go back to 1950 or so, only about 100,000 Muslims were able to go on Hajj every year because of limited infrastructure, the difficulty of travel, the expense.

But in our lifetimes, some two and a half million Muslims are able to go annually on pilgrimage to Hajj, on pilgrimage. That's an increase from, again, roughly 100,000 in 1950 to nearly two and a half million, a peak that was just reached before the COVID pandemic.

Similarly, other technological developments have had enormous impact on enabling Muslims to engage with debate among themselves, and to work out new ways of thinking about Islam. Radio played a role in the 20th century; television began to play a role in the second half of the 20th century. And now, of course, the Internet is really a crucial forum for the working out of new ideas about Islam. Of course, this is all playing out as we speak in 2025, so it's very hard to make kind of authoritative judgments about what is coming out of this process.

But one can argue that—and scholars have tried to show—that one effect of this ready-made, almost instant engagement with all kinds of religious texts, with authorities with different ways of being Muslim, has affected a kind of democratization of Islamic interpretation across the planet. When a 14-year-old in, say, Birmingham can go online and write an email to a sheikh to ask advice; whereas a woman in Lagos can write to some authority figure in India to ask what she should do about a certain ritual practice; when an American family can go online and engage with a sheikh in Egypt: When geography matters much, much less, when the possibility of receiving knowledge about the tradition becomes so much easier and becomes arguably more democratic and open and fluid, this is having an important effect on a tradition of authority within the Islamic tradition.

So some of the figures who were once authoritative because they were your local expert there at your local mosque are now potentially being marginalized to a degree by this new kind of market of the Internet, where people can kind of shop around, where they can look for answers to their religious questions across the planet and in different ways, and do so with almost nearly simultaneous response.

Another major feature that we see develop in our own age is the birth and the expansion of a halal industry built around, you know, providing Muslims with consumer goods that are consistent with their legal understandings of what is licit in terms of dietary restrictions and other kinds of aspects of law.

So the halal industry is now a growing sphere of the economy, you know, across the planet, having to do with fashion. For example, in Turkey there's a massive multi-billion-dollar industry aimed mostly at women creating fashionable designs that allow women to maintain hijab. In places like Russia and even Mexico, more and more producers are creating products for a halal market. And so this is a massive expansion of a kind of Islamic legal principle which is now also, you know, a way to create profit, of course, across the planet.

But it's a way in which the halal production is intersecting with other kinds of politics and making life consistent with certain Islamic norms more and more possible for, you know, people living outside of Muslim-majority countries.

Migration is another force that is changing the face of global Islam because we are finding more and more Muslims in different countries, the establishment of more and more mosques.

At the same time, there's an ongoing process of conversion, to cite one example in places like Mexico, which is often happening via the Internet, where people are raising questions about, you know, what it means to lead a good life and finding those answers from teachers online, from texts online, sometimes after having studied Arabic. And it is through these channels of kind of self-exploration and self-education that people are coming to Islam because it appears to have the answers that they are seeking.

A final thought is this, I think to me the most interesting and important question, which is to think about the future and where Islamic interpretation is headed.

If more and more Muslims are getting answers to their questions outside of mosque contexts, outside of the family, outside of the locales in which they live, and if they're seeking these answers in kind of virtual spaces and online and among authorities who are often kind of celebrity figures, you know, what will that mean for the tradition going forward? Will it mean more of a democratization of interpretation, or will it mean a kind of reduction of the kinds of authorities who are available to people to answer their questions?

In other words, will the rise of a limited number of celebrity teachers or preachers limit the kinds of interpretation that will be available to people because they respond to an age in which we are so connected to Internet narratives and so connected to a certain kind of being which is more and more defined by life in the Internet age?

So, thank you very much.