The Pillars of Islam

The Five Pillars (shahada, salat, zakat, sawm and hajj): how each is performed, its meaning, who is exempted and why it matters to individuals and to the community.

The Five Pillars

The Prophet (pbuh) said that Islam is built on **five** things. They are the **acts of worship** every Muslim must carry out.

Pillar	Arabic	In short
1. Declaration of faith	*Shahadah*	Bearing witness to one God and to Muhammad as his Messenger
2. Prayer	*Salat*	Five daily prayers
3. Alms-giving	*Zakat*	Giving a share of wealth to the needy
4. Fasting	*Sawm*	Fasting in the month of Ramadan
5. Pilgrimage	*Hajj*	Pilgrimage to Makka

1. Shahadah (declaration of faith)

- **The words:** "**La ilaha illa Allah, Muhammadun rasulu Allah**": "There is no god but God, and Muhammad is the Messenger of God."
- **Meaning.** The first part declares **Tawhid** (belief in one God alone and the rejection of all false gods); the second accepts the **prophethood of Muhammad (pbuh)** as God's last messenger, whose teaching and example should be followed.
- **Use.** It is the **entry into Islam** (said sincerely, it makes one a Muslim); it is spoken in the **call to prayer** and in each prayer; and a Muslim hopes to say it at **death**.
- **Significance.** It is the **basis of all belief and action**, sums up the faith in a sentence, and unites Muslims.

The shahadah in more detail

- The **first part** means that God alone is the Lord, creator and sustainer, and alone deserves worship, help and obedience, with names and attributes like nothing else (42:11).
- The **second part** accepts Muhammad as God's servant and messenger: his authority, his teaching and his example (33:21). To reject it would cut the link with the first part.

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- **Meaning in practice:** a Muslim must **know** what he is testifying, **accept** all of the Qur'an and Sunnah, **submit** by action, be **sincere**, and keep to it until death.
- **Importance:** it is the way to enter Islam, it is repeated in every adhan and prayer, and it joins Muslims of every race in one community.

2. Salat (prayer)

Why it matters. It is a direct link with God, a **daily reminder** of faith and a source of **discipline, humility and equality**. The five daily prayers were given to the Prophet (pbuh) on the **Night Journey**.

The times of prayer

Prayer	Time	Obligatory units (*rak'ahs*)
Fajr	Dawn, before sunrise	2
Zuhr	Midday	4
Asr	Afternoon	4
Maghrib	Just after sunset	3
Isha	Night	4

Preparations

- **Cleanliness: wudu'** (ablution): washing the hands, mouth, nose, face, arms to the elbows, wiping the head and washing the feet (and **ghusl**, the full bath, after certain states); **clean clothes and place**.
- **Intention (*niyyah*)**, **facing the qibla** (the direction of the Ka'bah in Makka), **modest dress**.
- **The call to prayer (*adhan*)** and the **iqamah** (the call to begin).

Purification and conditions of prayer

Wudu (ablution) is required before prayer (5:6):

1. Make the **intention** and say "In the name of God".
2. Wash the **hands** up to the wrists, three times.
3. Rinse the **mouth** three times.
4. Sniff water into the **nose** and blow it out, three times.
5. Wash the **face** three times (forehead to chin, ear to ear).
6. Wash the **arms**, right then left, up to the elbows, three times.
7. **Wipe the head** and ears with wet hands.
8. Wash the **feet**, right then left, up to the ankles.

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It should be done in order and without a break, so that no part stays dry. It is important because **purity is half of faith**, it removes sins according to the Prophet, and it prepares the mind for prayer.

Tayammum (dry ablution) replaces wudu when there is **no water**, or washing would harm a sick person (5:6). The worshipper says God's name, strikes both hands on clean earth, wipes the face, strikes again and wipes the hands and arms up to the elbows. It becomes void when the excuse ends.

Ghusl (the full bath) is required after certain states (such as menstruation and childbirth). Its three required acts are rinsing the mouth, rinsing the nose and **pouring water over the whole body**.

Conditions of valid prayer:

- a **clean body, clothes and place** (2:222);
- the **private parts covered** (a man from navel to knee; a woman everything except face and hands, and feet);
- the **right time** (4:103). Prayer is not offered at the moment of sunrise, noon or sunset;
- facing the **qiblah** (2:150);
- the **intention** (niyyah) for the particular prayer.

The performance of each rak'ah (in outline): standing (*qiyam*) with "**Allahu akbar**" and reciting the **Fatiha** and another passage from the Qur'an; **bowing (*ruku'*)**; standing; **prostrating (*sujud*)**, with the forehead, nose, hands, knees and toes touching the ground; sitting; a second prostration. At the end, the **tashahhud** is recited, and the worshipper gives the **salam** ("Peace be upon you and God's mercy") to the right and left.

The prayer in more detail

1. Stand facing the Ka'bah, make the intention and raise the hands saying **"Allahu akbar"** (*takbir tahrimah*).
2. Standing (**qiyam**): recite the opening supplication, "I seek refuge in God from Satan", "In the name of God...", **al-Fatiha**, and another passage of at least three verses.
3. **Ruku'** (bowing, hands on the knees): say "Glory to my Lord the Great", three times. Stand up again briefly (*qawmah*).
4. **Sajdah** (prostration), twice, saying "Glory to my Lord the Most High". The second rak'ah is the same, without the opening supplication.
5. After the second rak'ah, sit (*qa'dah*) and recite the **tahiyyah**, the **tashahhud** and a blessing on the Prophet. End with the **taslim**, turning the face right and left.

Times: **Fajr** from dawn until just before sunrise; **Zuhr** from just after midday until the shadow of an object is twice its length; **Asr** until sunset; **Maghrib** from sunset until the twilight fades; **Isha** from then until dawn, though it should be done before midnight.

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Why pray five times a day? It keeps God in mind, teaches discipline, punctuality and cleanliness, keeps a person from wrongdoing (29:45), makes him humble before God and strengthens the community. The Prophet compared it to bathing five times a day in a river outside one's door: no dirt remains. It is the first thing a person will be asked about on the Day of Judgement.

Congregational and special prayers

- **Jumu'ah (the Friday midday prayer):** it replaces Zuhr, is prayed **in congregation** in the mosque and includes a **sermon (*khutbah*)**. Attendance is **required of men** (women may attend).
- **Eid prayers:** two prayers a year, **Eid al-Fitr** (the end of Ramadan) and **Eid al-Adha** (at the time of Hajj), prayed in a large congregation.
- **Congregational prayer** carries more reward than prayer alone (reported as **27 times**), promotes **unity and equality**: all stand **shoulder to shoulder** whatever their wealth or race.

Congregational, Friday and Eid prayers in more detail

- **Congregational prayer.** One person with the imam is already a congregation. The imam is best the one who knows the Qur'an and Hadiths best; the worshippers stand in straight rows, **shoulder to shoulder**. Women may attend, though prayer at home is better for them. Men may be excused for rain, severe weather or illness. It unites the community and shows equality: a king may stand beside a poor man. The Qur'an says "bow down with those who bow down" (2:43).
- **Friday prayer.** It is a duty for adult men and replaces **Zuhr** with **two rak'ahs**. People bathe and wear clean clothes, and come at the first call. The **imam gives two sermons** that must be heard in silence, praising God, sending blessings on the Prophet, reciting verses, giving advice on duties to God and neighbours, warning against evil and praying for the community. Travellers, the sick, women and children are excused.
- **Eid prayers.** Eid al-Fitr is on 1 Shawwal and Eid al-Adha on 10 Dhu'l-Hijjah. The prayer is in the open air, shortly after sunrise, with **two rak'ahs and extra takbirs** (six in the Hanafi way). There is **no adhan**. The sermon follows. It is customary to bathe, wear one's best clothes, eat dates before Eid al-Fitr, give *sadaqat al-fitr* before the prayer, and to say "May God accept it from us and from you". After Eid al-Adha, the sacrifice is made and the meat shared in three parts: family, friends and the poor.

The place of prayer. Any **clean place** will do (the earth has been made a mosque), but the **mosque** is the centre of community life. A **prayer mat** is used for cleanliness.

Private prayer, delayed prayer

- **Private prayer (*du'a'*)**: a Muslim may speak to God **at any time** in his or her own words.
- **Voluntary (*nafl*) prayers**, including the night prayer (*tahajjud*).
- **Delayed or missed prayers (*qada'*)**: a prayer missed through sleep or forgetfulness should be said **as soon as remembered**. A **traveller** may **shorten** the four-unit prayers and combine some prayers; a **sick person** may pray sitting or lying down.

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Private prayer and missed prayers in more detail

- **Du'a** is calling on God, "the essence of worship". It can be said in **any language**, at any time, and about any matter, and God says he is near and answers (2:186). It is best in a state of wudu, facing the qiblah, and especially in prostration.
- Times when it is most likely to be accepted include **the last third of the night, between adhan and iqamah, while travelling, while sick or wronged, on the Day of Arafah** and during Ramadan.
- **Differences from salat.** Salat is **obligatory**, has fixed times, set words (in Arabic), needs purification and faces the Ka'bah; du'a is **voluntary** and free.
- **Missed prayers (*qada'*).** Anyone who misses an obligatory prayer through sleep or forgetfulness should pray it as soon as possible, in order, and say that it is *qada'*. Exceptions are a woman in menstruation or childbirth and a person who is insane or unconscious. A traveller who has missed a four-rak'ah prayer on a journey prays two when he returns home.
- **The mosque** is a centre of prayer, learning, community meetings, retreat (i'tikaf) and funerals, and a sign of unity.

3. Zakat (alms-giving)

- **Meaning.** *Zakat* means "**purification and growth**": giving purifies wealth and the giver's heart.
- **How it is performed.** Muslims who have wealth above the minimum level (*nisab*) for a **full year** pay **2.5%** of their **savings, gold, silver and trade goods** (different rates apply to crops, livestock and minerals). It is paid to the **poor and needy**, **those who collect it**, **new Muslims and those whose hearts are to be won**, **freeing slaves**, **people in debt**, **in God's cause** and **travellers** (Sura 9:60). It differs from **sadaqah**, which is voluntary giving.
- **Significance.** It **reduces poverty and inequality**, frees the giver from **greed**, makes the rich and poor **responsible for each other**, and builds **community feeling**. In many Muslim countries it is collected by the state (for example, in Pakistan the Zakat and Ushr Ordinance, 1980).

Zakat in more detail

- *Zakat* means **purification and increase**. It became obligatory in the second year of the Hijrah and is mentioned in the Qur'an about 30 times.
- It is due from an adult, free Muslim whose wealth is over the **nisab** (about **87.5 g of gold** or **612 g of silver**) for a full year.
- **Rates.** Savings, gold, silver and trade goods: **2.5%** (one-fortieth). Crops: **one-tenth** if watered by rain and **one-twentieth** if irrigated by effort (*ushr*). Mineral wealth: **one-fifth** (*khums*). There are separate rules for sheep, goats, cattle and camels. *Sadaqat al-fitr* is due at the end of Ramadan.
- **Recipients (9:60):** the **poor** (who have some means but not enough), the **needy** (who have nothing), **collectors** of zakat, **new Muslims** whose hearts are to be won, **those in bondage**, **those in debt**, **those in God's cause**, and **travellers** in need.

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- It cannot be given to **non-Muslims** (as zakat), to one's **spouse, parents, children or grandchildren**, or to the Prophet's descendants, or used for burial costs. It must come from **lawful** earnings.
- **Benefits.** To the **giver**: purifies the heart of greed, expiates sins, earns God's pleasure and increases the wealth (2:261); to the **receiver**: meets needs, brings dignity and goodwill instead of envy; to **society**: reduces the gap between rich and poor, keeps wealth in circulation (the Prophet told guardians to invest orphans' property so that zakat does not eat it away), and creates closeness between people.

4. Sawm (fasting)

- **How it is observed.** In **Ramadan** (the ninth month of the lunar calendar), adults **do not eat, drink or have marital relations** from **dawn (*fajr*) until sunset**. A meal before dawn (*suhur*) and a meal at sunset (*iftar*, often breaking the fast with dates and water) are eaten. People pray the extra **tarawih** prayers at night and read the Qur'an. The fast is also a fast from **bad behaviour**, such as lying and anger.
- **Laylat al-Qadr** (the Night of Power), in the last ten nights, is when the Qur'an began to be revealed.
- **Significance.** It teaches **self-control, patience and gratitude**, makes the **rich feel the hunger of the poor**, strengthens the **community**, and is a time of **forgiveness and closeness to God**. It ends with **Eid al-Fitr** and the **zakat al-fitr** (charity for the poor).
- **Those exempted. Children** (not yet adult), the **sick**, the **elderly** and those too weak to fast, **travellers**, **pregnant or breast-feeding women** if fasting would harm them, and **women during menstruation or after childbirth**. The sick and travellers **make up the days later**; those who permanently cannot fast give **food to the poor** instead.

Fasting in more detail

- Fasting is a duty on every adult Muslim (2:183), from the first light of dawn until sunset. The fast needs the **intention** (niyyah). A **pre-dawn meal (*suhur*)** is recommended, and the fast is broken at **iftar** with dates and a supplication.
- The fasting person avoids **eating, drinking, smoking and sexual relations** and also **lying, gossip, anger and fighting**. The Prophet said that God has no need of the fast of one who does not give up false words.
- Muslims read the Qur'an, attend the **tarawih** prayers, give charity and settle quarrels. The last ten days include **Laylat al-Qadr**, "better than a thousand months" (97:3), often sought on the 27th night. Some spend the last ten days in the mosque (*i'tikaf*). The month ends with **Eid al-Fitr** and *sadaqat al-fitr*.
- **Exemptions:** children and the mentally ill (nothing to make up); the very old or weak (feed a poor person for each day, *fidyah*); the sick, travellers, pregnant or nursing women if the fast would harm them, and women in menstruation or childbirth (make up the days later, *qada'*). Breaking the fast deliberately without excuse needs *qada'* and an expiation (*kaffarah*), such as fasting sixty days.

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- **Benefits.** *Moral:* self-control, patience, honesty; *spiritual:* closeness to God ("fasting is a shield"; the fasting person has two joys, one when he breaks his fast and one when he meets his Lord), forgiveness of sins; *social:* sympathy with the poor, generosity and unity; *health:* rest for the body.
- **Why is Laylat al-Qadr important?** The Qur'an began to be revealed that night; worship in it is better than a thousand months; angels and the Spirit descend with peace until dawn (97:4–5); and sins are forgiven for those who stand in prayer in faith.

5. Hajj (pilgrimage)

- **Duty.** Once in a lifetime for every Muslim who is **physically and financially able**, in **Dhu'l-Hijjah** (the twelfth month). A visit at another time is **Umrah** (the lesser pilgrimage).
- **Main observances**

Rite	Meaning
Ihram	Entering a state of purity at the **miqat**: men wear two **plain white cloths**, women modest dress; the pilgrim says the **talbiyah** ("Here I am, O God, here I am"). All are equal before God
Tawaf	Walking **seven times anticlockwise** round the **Ka'bah**, built by Ibrahim and Isma'il, kissing or pointing to the **Black Stone**
Sa'i	Walking or hurrying **seven times between Safa and Marwa**, remembering **Hajar** searching for water for Isma'il; **Zamzam** water is drunk
Mina	Spending the night of the 8th at **Mina**
Arafat	The **"standing"** on the plain of **Arafat** on the **9th**, praying and asking forgiveness until sunset. This is the **most important rite**: "Hajj is Arafat"
Muzdalifah	Spending the night in the open, collecting **pebbles**
Stoning the pillars (*jamarat*) at Mina	Throwing pebbles at the three pillars, rejecting **Satan** as Ibrahim did
Sacrifice	Sacrificing an animal (**Eid al-Adha**), remembering **Ibrahim's** willingness to sacrifice his son, and giving the meat to the poor
Shaving or cutting hair, final tawaf	Leaving ihram; the **farewell tawaf**

Hajj in more detail

- **Who must go?** Every adult, sane, free Muslim who is **healthy and has the means** (the journey, the stay and support for dependants while away), when the way is safe (3:97, 2:197). A woman needs a **male relative (mahram)** as companion.

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- **Ihram.** Pilgrims enter ihram at the *miqat*: men wear two **unstitched white cloths** (*izar* and *rida'*) and women ordinary modest clothes covering all but face and hands. They say the **talbiyah** ("Here I am, O God, here I am; you have no partner; praise and blessing are yours..."). While in ihram they may not **use perfume, cut hair or nails, hunt, uproot plants, cover the head (men), quarrel, or have sexual relations**.
- **Three kinds of Hajj:** *Ifrad* (Hajj alone), *Tamattu'* (Umrah, a break, and then Hajj) and *Qiran* (Umrah and Hajj together). All are allowed.
- **Usual order of days.** Pilgrims arrive in Makka and perform **tawaf**; on **8 Dhu'l-Hijjah** they go to Mina; on the **9th** they stand at **Arafat** until sunset (Zuhr and Asr are said together there and the sermon is given), then spend the night at **Muzdalifah** (Maghrib and Isha together) and collect pebbles. On the **10th** they stone the **Jamrat al-Aqabah**, sacrifice an animal, **shave or shorten their hair**, and perform **tawaf al-ifadah** (and sa'i if not done before), ending ihram. On the **11th and 12th** they stone all three pillars. The farewell tawaf ends the Hajj.
- **Kinds of tawaf:** *tawaf al-qudum* (arrival), *tawaf al-ifadah* (a required part of Hajj), *tawaf al-wida'* (farewell), and *tawaf an-nafl* (voluntary). Each is **seven circuits** with intention and purity. Men walk briskly (*ramal*) in the first three, and pray two rak'ahs behind the **Maqam Ibrahim**. The Black Stone at the corner is kissed or pointed to.
- **Sa'i** recalls Hajar searching for water for Isma'il; **Zamzam** is the well that appeared.
- **The three Jamarat** (Aqabah, Wusta and Sughra) are stoned with seven pebbles each, recalling Ibrahim who threw stones at Satan, and showing that a Muslim rejects evil.
- **The sacrifice** recalls Ibrahim and Isma'il's obedience (37:102). A camel, cow or sheep or goat in good health is sacrificed and its meat shared with the poor.
- **How does Umrah differ from Hajj?** Umrah is **not obligatory**, can be done at **any time**, has **no standing at Arafat, no stay at Muzdalifah or Mina, no stoning and no sacrifice**; it consists of ihram, tawaf, sa'i and shaving or cutting the hair.
- **What does Hajj give?** It shows the **equality and unity** of Muslims in the same white clothes; it is a time of **forgiveness**: "he who performs Hajj without sin returns like the day his mother bore him"; it strengthens faith; it allows contacts and trade (2:198); and it shows the Muslim world's unity.
- **How are Ibrahim and his family important to Hajj?** Ibrahim and Isma'il rebuilt the Ka'bah; Hajar ran between Safa and Marwa; Isma'il found Zamzam; Ibrahim rejected Satan three times and was ready to sacrifice his son.
- Pilgrims often also **visit Madina** and the Prophet's Mosque, though this is not part of the Hajj itself.
- **Significance.** The Hajj is an act of **obedience and sacrifice**, shows the **equality and unity of Muslims** from every country, recalls **Ibrahim, Isma'il, Hajar and the Prophet**, and offers the hope of **forgiveness**: a pilgrim whose Hajj is accepted returns "like a newborn".

When describing a pillar, give (1) how it is done, (2) its meaning, and (3) why it matters to

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individuals and to the Muslim community.

TRY IT

Describe how the Muslim fast in Ramadan is observed and explain why it is important to Muslims.

Outline. *Observance:* dawn to sunset, no food, drink or marital relations; suhur and iftar; extra prayers and Qur'an recitation; exempt: the sick, travellers, children, the elderly, pregnant or nursing women and menstruating women (made up later). *Importance:* self-control and gratitude, sympathy with the poor, community unity, God-consciousness, the Qur'an was revealed in Ramadan, and it ends with Eid and zakat al-fitr.

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