

The Rise of European Colonialism

Summary: European colonization from the 17th through the 20th century often replaced the religious foundation of Islam and Islamic educational, legal and cultural institutions. The late 19th century saw movements for independence in different Muslim cultures. Current post-colonial states reflect a growing diversity, some declaring themselves secular states (Turkey), with others adhering to a strict codification of Shari'ah law in the national legal system (Pakistan).

During the period of European colonial expansion from the 17th through 20th centuries, non-Muslim merchants and missionaries, soldiers and colonial administrators came to dominate much of the Muslim world. The Portuguese, Spanish, Dutch, British, and French all developed colonial empires, and the Chinese and Russians also expanded their territories into Muslim-majority regions.

By the 20th century, only frail Ottoman and Persian dynasties maintained power, and only a few areas such as Afghanistan and Central Arabia avoided colonial domination. The French ruled much of North Africa and parts of West and Central Africa. The British controlled Muslim areas of Africa, including Egypt, and of Asia, including India, with its large Muslim minority, and parts of Southeast Asia. The Dutch ruled most of present-day Indonesia, while the Spanish controlled parts of North Africa and the Philippines. After World War I, the Ottoman Empire was dismembered and parceled out to Britain (the Persian Gulf region, Palestine, Jordan, Iraq) and France (Syria, Lebanon).

Such foreign domination was not only a blow to the pride of Muslims, but threatened the very foundations of Islam, as European rulers replaced traditional Muslim educational, legal, and governmental institutions with Western ones. Europeans undermined the religious ethos of their colonies, foisting secular and materialistic culture upon them, and encouraging ethnic and national divisions in the *ummah*. In the late 19th century, independence movements arose in many Muslim countries, inspired to varying degrees by both the revival of Islamic principles and institutions and by Western-style nationalism.

Muslims have adopted many different models for their post-colonial states. The early leaders of modern Turkey declared a secular state in 1923, abolishing the caliphate, replacing *shari'ah* with a European-style law code, and outlawing Sufi orders. In contrast, after World War II, Pakistan separated from India

as an Islamic republic, later codifying, and thereby transforming, a single school of *shari'ah* into the foundation of its legal code. By the 1970s most of the Muslim world was divided into independent nation-states, joined in the 1990s by the former Soviet republics in Central Asia. While many Muslims hope for pan-Islamic unity, the variety of ideological and cultural differences is daunting.