

The Population of Muslims

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Islam today is a global religion. It is no longer confined to Muslim majority countries such as Egypt, Saudi Arabia or Indonesia. Small but significant communities exist across Europe, the Americas and Australasia. For some time Muslims have been an invisible presence in the western world but one decade into the 21st century Muslims are no longer curiosities. They are as much at home in London Paris or Chicago as they are in Istanbul, Damascus and Jakarta.

In 2011 Muslims in the West also no longer exist in immigrant communities but are second, third and fourth generation citizens participating in professional and civic life. Islam is said to be the fastest growing religion in the United States. It is estimated that more than 1 million Americans have converted to Islam. In recent years due to an Islamic revival, believing and practicing Muslims have established a visible presence not only in Islamic societies but also in the West.

What do the latest data and statistics tell us about the number of Muslims in the world. Where do they live? How many are born into the Muslim faith and how many choose to convert to Islam?

The majority of the following statistics and data come from the Pew Research Centre.

According to the Pew¹ Islam is growing about 2.9% per year. This is faster than the total world population which increases about 2.3% annually. The world's Muslim population is expected to increase by about 35% in the next 20 years. In mid 2010 the Pew forum estimated that there were 1.57 billion Muslims in the world. This represents 22% of the world's population. Islam is the second largest religion in the world, beaten only by Christianity which represents 33% of the world's population with a little over 2 billion adherents.

The Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life stated that Islam is the fastest-growing religion in Europe. Driven by immigration and high birth rates, the number of Muslims on the continent has tripled in the last 30 years. Most demographers forecast a similar or even higher rate of growth in the coming decades.

If current trends continue 79 countries will have a million or more Muslim inhabitants in 2030, up from 72 countries in 2011. The seven new countries are expected to be Belgium, Canada, Congo, Djibouti, Guinea Bissau, Netherlands and Togo. About 60% of the world's Muslims will continue to live in the Asia-Pacific region, while about 20% will live in the Middle East and North Africa, as is the case in 2010. One of the biggest changes expected is that Pakistan will almost certainly surpass Indonesia as the country with the single largest Muslim population.²

In 2011 statistics tell us that 74.1% of the world's Muslims live in the 49 countries in which Muslims make up a majority of the

1 The Pew Research Centre is an American think tank organization based in Washington, D.C. that provides information on issues, attitudes and trends shaping the United States and the world.

2 <http://pewresearch.org/pubs/1872/muslim-population-projections-worldwide-fast-growth>

population. More than a fifth of all Muslims (23.3%) live in non-Muslim-majority countries in the developing world. These minority Muslim populations are often quite large. India, for example, has the third-largest population of Muslims worldwide. China has more Muslims than Syria, while Russia is home to more Muslims than Jordan and Libya combined.³ About 3% of the world's Muslims live in more-developed regions, such as Europe, North America, Australia, New Zealand and Japan.⁴

In the United States, the population projections show the number of Muslims more than doubling over the next two decades, rising from 2.6 million in 2010 to 6.2 million in 2030. The number of Muslims in Canada is expected to nearly triple in the next 20 years, from about 940,000 in 2010 to nearly 2.7 million in 2030. Muslims are expected to make up 6.6% of Canada's total population in 2030, up from 2.8% today. Argentina is expected to have the third-largest Muslim population in the Americas, after the U.S. and Canada. Argentina, with about 1 million Muslims in 2010, is now in second place, behind the U.S.

In Europe as a whole, the Muslim share of the population is expected to grow by nearly one-third over the next 20 years, rising from 6% of the region's inhabitants in 2010 to 8% in 2030. In absolute numbers, Europe's Muslim population is projected to grow from 44.1 million in 2010 to 58.2 million in 2030. Nearly three-in-ten people living in the Asia-Pacific region in 2030 (27.3%) will be Muslim, up from about a quarter in 2010 (24.8%) and roughly a fifth in 1990 (21.6%). Muslims make up only about 2% of the population in China, but because the country is so populous, its Muslim population is expected to be the 19th largest in the world in 2030.

3 according to Pew reports in 2009

4 <http://pewresearch.org/pubs/1872/muslim-population-projections-worldwide-fast-growth>.

The growth rates of religions are usually due to conversions, higher birth and fertility rates and in many countries religions grow because of immigration. While the global Muslim population is expected to grow at a faster rate than the non-Muslim population, the Muslim population nevertheless is expected to grow at a slower pace in the next two decades than it did in the previous two decades.

Finding statistics and data about the number of people converting to Islam from other religions or atheism can be difficult. This is usually not a question asked by government authorities or research centers. In the next article we will discuss Muslim growth rates across the globe due to conversion and immigration.



Islam is a global religion, and as we learned in the previous article it is no longer confined to those countries we think of as Arabic or Asian. Close to 1.6 billion people across the globe identify as Muslim. Growth projections paint a picture of

unprecedented growth, faster than the world population growth. 2011 statistics tell us that 74.1% of the world's Muslims live in the 49 countries in which Muslims make up a majority of the population. More than a fifth of all Muslims (23.3%) live in non-Muslim-majority countries in the developing world, and about 3% of the world's Muslims live in more-developed regions, such as Europe, North America, and Australia. Where in fact do these 3% of Muslims come from?

Immigration and conversion account for a large percentage of Muslims living in predominantly western countries. Governments tend to keep strict immigration records however religious affiliation is not always recorded. Conversion statistics are notoriously unreliable but do reveal that the number of people converting to Islam is also experiencing a high growth rate. From across the globe and from various sources, both Muslim and non Muslim, government and nongovernmental, we have collected and collated statistical data in an effort to present a clear picture of how Muslim growth rates are proceeding into the second decade of the 21st century.

Let us begin in Australia. According to the 2006 census, 1.7% of the Australian population identified with Islam, this represents a population growth of 20.9% on the 2001 count – only Hinduism (55.1%) and “no religion” (27.5%) had bigger percentage jumps in the same five-year period. Where did this 20% growth rate come from? Apparently 36% were born in Australia, the majority claiming Lebanese, Turkish or broadly defined Arab ancestry.⁵ Other immigration source countries include the predominantly Muslim Iraq, Afghanistan, Pakistan, Indonesia and Bangladesh. However, approximately two-fifths of Australia's Muslims live in Melbourne, and originate from over 70 countries.⁶ There are no

5 Statistical snapshot on Muslim Australians from a Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission (HREOC) fact sheet.

6<http://museumvictoria.com.au/immigrationmuseum/discoverycentre/your-questions/muslim-australians/>

reliable statistics for conversions to Islam but mosques across Australia report that conversions take place frequently.

A report published in January 2011 by the Washington-based Pew Research centre⁷ suggests Muslim numbers in Australia will increase by 80 percent, compared with 18 per cent for the population overall, growing from 399,000 at present to 714,000. This is due first to higher reproduction rates - Muslim families typically have four or more children, while other Australians have one or two - and, second, to migration from Muslim majority countries such as mentioned above.

The estimates of how many Muslims live in Europe vary wildly, depending on where the statistics are from. It is made even more difficult by the fact that they are the largest religious minority in Europe, and Islam is the fastest growing religion. As would be expected Europe's Muslim population are ethnically and linguistically diverse and Muslim immigrants in Europe hail from a variety of Middle Eastern, African, and Asian countries. Converts are a tiny subset of the Muslim population, but their numbers are growing. Studies in Germany and France have each estimated around 4,000 conversions a year in Europe or their respective countries.

In Germany, the estimated 4,000 converts each year⁸, can be compared with an annual average of 300 in the late 1990s, still, less than 1 percent of Germany's 3.3 million Muslims are converts. A report by France's domestic intelligence agency, published by Le Figaro, estimated last year⁹ that there were

7 Pew Research Centre's Forum on Religion and Public Life, The Future of the Global Muslim Population: Projections for 2010-2030. Using figures from the Australian Bureau of Statistics.

8 A study financed by the Interior Ministry and carried out by the Soest-based Muslim institute Islam Archive Germany. (2004-5)

9 <http://www.religionnewsblog.com/7916/europe-fears-threat-from-its-converts-to-islam>

30,000 to 50,000 converts in France. The bulk of French Muslims are French citizens, and Islam is France's second highest ranked religion.

Muslims are a minority in the United Kingdom, making up 2.7 per cent of the country's total population of some 60 million people. The number of converts to Islam is, as expected very difficult to either predict or find hard data about. One British newspaper however, the Independent, reports that the number of Britons converting to Islam has nearly doubled in the past decade, despite the fact that the UK has witnessed a rise in Islamophobia. This is according to a comprehensive study by inter-faith think tank Faith Matters.

Previous estimates have placed the number of Muslim converts in the UK at between 14,000 and 25,000, but this study suggests that the real figure could be as high as 100,000, with as many as 5,000 new conversions each year. By using data from the Scottish 2001 census - the only survey to ask respondents what their religion was at birth as well as at the time of the survey - researchers broke down what proportion of Muslim converts there were and then extrapolated the figures for Britain as a whole.¹⁰

In the United states of America, according to the Pew Research Centre, roughly two-thirds (65%) of adult Muslims living in the United States were born elsewhere, and 39% have come to the U.S. since 1990. A relatively large proportion of Muslim immigrants are from Arab countries, but many also come from Pakistan and other South Asian countries. Among native-born Muslims, slightly more than half are African American (20% of U.S. Muslims overall), many of whom are converts to Islam.¹¹

10 <http://faith-matters.org/resources/publicationsreports/218-report-on-converts-to-islam-in-the-uk-a-minority-within-a-minority>

11 <http://pewresearch.org/assets/pdf/muslim-americans.pdf>

As is the case in Europe and Australia, researchers say getting accurate estimates of converts to Islam is the most difficult challenge of all. Data on conversion from another religion to Islam is virtually non-existent, and what estimates exist are based on conversion rates to other faiths that may not apply to the Muslim experience.

Statistics about converts to Islam are much easier to find in Arabian Gulf countries where Islamic Cultural Centres keep meticulous records. For instance in Dubai, Huda Khalfan Al Kaabi, head of the New Muslims Section in the Islamic Affairs and Charitable Activities Department (IACAD) said, 1,365 people converted to Islam from January to June 2009 as compared to 878 over the same period in 2008. Observing that 3,763 expatriates from 72 countries had converted to Islam in an 18 month period, Al Kaabi said most of them were from the Philippines, Russia, China and India.

Globalisation has contributed to the spread of Islam around the world, either by immigration or conversion. Borders are more fluid than ever before and many people are able to make clear decisions about where they want to live and what religion they want to follow. With or without hard statistical data it is possible to see clearly that across the globe people are converting to Islam in large numbers. Islam is a global religion, no longer based on ethnicity or nationality.