

Jews in the Islamic World

Students weigh the evidence on Jewish life under medieval Muslim rule: protection and restriction, flourishing and persecution

GRADE AND COURSE

Grades 7 to 12: World History or
Ethnic Studies

TIME

Two class periods of 45 to 50
minutes

APPENDICES

A: Background Reading and
Glossary
B: Pact of Umar Analysis
C: Evidence Chart

Overview

For much of the Middle Ages, most of the world's Jews lived under Muslim rule, from Spain and Morocco to Egypt, Iraq, and Iran. As "People of the Book," Jews and Christians were granted the status of *dhimmi*: protected, free to practice their religion and run their own communities, but legally unequal and bound by restrictions. Jewish life in these lands produced great centers of learning, trade, poetry, and philosophy, and also saw periods of discrimination and violence. In this lesson, students watch a short clip from the PBS series *The Story of the Jews*, analyze the Pact of Umar, and use an evidence chart to answer a question historians still debate: How free were Jews in the medieval Islamic world?

Essential Questions

1. What did it mean to be a "protected" but unequal minority under medieval Muslim rule?
2. Why did conditions for Jews vary so much from place to place and century to century?
3. How do historians' points of view shape the way this history is told?

Learning Objectives

Students will be able to:

1. Explain *dhimmi* status, including the rights it protected and the restrictions it imposed.
2. Analyze provisions of the Pact of Umar and infer their purposes.
3. Use evidence from several times and places to identify both flourishing and persecution in Jewish life under Muslim rule.
4. Compare how different sources describe *dhimmi* status and explain how point of view shapes each account.
5. Write an evidence based argument answering the question: How free were Jews in the medieval Islamic world?

Standards Alignment

California History-Social Science

- Grade 7, Standard 7.2: the civilizations of Islam in the Middle Ages, including 7.2.4 (the expansion of Muslim rule and cultural blending within Muslim civilization) and 7.2.6 (intellectual exchanges among scholars).
- Analysis Skills: Research, Evidence, and Point of View 4 and 5 (assess the credibility of sources; detect points of view); Historical Interpretation 1 and 3 (place events in time and place; explain continuity and change).

C3 Framework for Social Studies

- D2.His.4: Analyze factors that influenced the perspectives of people during different historical eras.
- D2.His.10: Detect limitations in the historical record based on evidence from different kinds of sources.
- D2.His.14: Explain multiple causes and effects of events and developments in the past.
- D3.4: Develop claims and counterclaims using evidence.

Common Core Literacy in History/Social Studies

- RH.6-8.1 and RH.9-10.1: Cite evidence from primary and secondary sources.
- RH.6-8.6 and RH.9-10.6: Identify and compare points of view.
- WHST.6-8.1 and WHST.9-10.1: Write arguments focused on discipline specific content.

Also supports the California Ethnic Studies Model Curriculum's emphasis on the histories of Middle Eastern and North African communities.

Key Vocabulary

- **People of the Book (ahl al-kitab):** in Islamic tradition, Jews and Christians, who received earlier scriptures.
- **Dhimmi:** a protected non-Muslim subject of a Muslim state; free to practice their religion but legally unequal.
- **Jizya:** a special tax paid by dhimmis.
- **Pact of Umar:** a list of conditions for dhimmis, attributed to the Caliph Umar (7th century) but probably written down later; it became the model for dhimmi law.
- **Caliph:** a ruler of the Muslim community, seen as successor to the Prophet Muhammad.
- **Al-Andalus:** the Arabic name for the parts of Spain and Portugal under Muslim rule.
- **Geonim:** the heads of the great Jewish academies in Iraq, leaders of Jewish law for much of the Jewish world.
- **Judeo-Arabic:** Arabic written in Hebrew letters, used by Jews across the Islamic world.
- **Cairo Genizah:** a storeroom in a Cairo synagogue that preserved hundreds of thousands of medieval Jewish documents.

Teacher Background

After the Islamic conquests of the 7th and 8th centuries, most of the world's Jews lived under Muslim rule. Islamic law classified Jews and Christians as *dhimmis*, protected peoples. In return for paying the *jizya* and accepting a lower legal status, they could practice their religion, keep their houses of worship, and govern many of their own affairs through their own courts and leaders. The conditions are summarized in the Pact of Umar, which is attributed to the second caliph but was likely put into its standard form later. Its provisions limited new houses of worship, public displays of religion, and dress and behavior that might suggest equality with Muslims. In practice, these rules were enforced unevenly: strictly under some rulers, loosely or not at all under others.

Jewish life flourished in many places. The academies of Iraq, led by the Geonim, guided Jewish law across the Jewish world. In al-Andalus, figures such as Hasdai ibn Shaprut and Samuel ibn Naghrela rose to high office, and Hebrew poetry and philosophy blossomed. The Cairo Genizah preserves letters showing Jewish merchants trading from Spain to India. Maimonides, born in Córdoba around 1135, fled the Almohads, who forced Jews and Christians to convert or leave, and settled in Fustat (old Cairo), where he became a court physician and wrote his major works. Persecution also occurred: the Fatimid caliph al-Hakim imposed harsh decrees on Jews and Christians in the early 11th century; a mob killed much of the Jewish community of Granada in 1066; and the Almohad persecutions of the 12th century were remembered as among the worst.

Historians continue to debate how to characterize this history. Nineteenth century writers often described a "Golden Age" of harmony, while some later writers emphasized persecution. Historian Mark R. Cohen argues that both pictures distort the past: Jews under Islam held a fixed, if inferior, place in society and generally faced far less violence than Jews in medieval Christian Europe, but life was neither an interfaith utopia nor equal by modern standards. Students should leave the lesson able to hold both parts of this history at once.

Sources: Mark R. Cohen, *Under Crescent and Cross: The Jews in the Middle Ages* (Princeton, 1994) and "Jews, Muslims and the Myth of the Interfaith Utopia" (2003); Norman Stillman, *The Jews of Arab Lands: A History and Source Book* (1979); National Library of Israel, "Maimonides"; Cambridge University Library, Taylor-Schechter Genizah Research Unit; United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, "Jewish Badge: Origins."

Materials

- Projector and speakers; the free PBS clip [The Story of the Jews: Jews Under Islam](#) (about 3 minutes), in which historian Simon Schama visits Cairo
- Handouts:
- [Appendix A: Background Reading and Glossary](#) (one per student)
- [Appendix B: Pact of Umar Analysis](#) (one per student)
- [Appendix C: Evidence Chart](#) (one per student)

Note to teacher: This history is sometimes used to make claims about Jewish and Muslim relations today. Keep the focus on the evidence from the medieval period, present both flourishing and persecution, and remind students that conditions varied widely by ruler, place, and century. Students of Jewish and Muslim backgrounds may have strong family connections to this history; set discussion norms before you begin.

Procedures

Day 1: Protected but Unequal (45 to 50 minutes)

- 1 **Warm up (5 min).** Ask: Can a person be protected and unequal at the same time? Give an example from history or today.
- 2 **Context (10 min).** Review the shared roots of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam in the figure of Abraham, and the rapid expansion of Muslim rule after the 7th century. Show a map of the Islamic world around 900, from Spain to Iran.
- 3 **Background reading (10 min).** Students read Appendix A and underline one right and one restriction that came with dhimmi status.
- 4 **Watch the clip (5 min).** Show the PBS clip. Students note two things Schama shows or says about Jewish life in Cairo.

- 5 **Pact of Umar (15 min).** In pairs, students complete Appendix B: sort the provisions by category and infer the purpose of each. Discuss: Which rules were about religion? Which were about status? What did the pact *not* restrict, such as where Jews could live or what work they could do?

Day 2: Weighing the Evidence (45 to 50 minutes)

- 6 **Evidence chart (20 min).** In small groups, students read the eight evidence cards on Appendix C, from the academies of Baghdad to the Almohad persecutions, and mark each as evidence of flourishing, restriction, or persecution. Some cards may fit more than one.
- 7 **Compare perspectives (10 min).** In *The Story of the Jews*, Schama translates dhimmi as “tolerated inferior,” while many sources translate it as “protected.” Ask: What does each word emphasize? Which fits the evidence better? Introduce historian Mark Cohen’s view that the period was neither a utopia nor a time of constant persecution.
- 8 **Why did conditions vary? (5 min).** Using the chart, students list causes: the ruler, wars and invasions, economic prosperity or crisis, and local politics.
- 9 **Write (10 min).** Students answer the essential question in a claim, evidence, and reasoning paragraph: How free were Jews in the medieval Islamic world? They must cite at least three pieces of evidence, including one that complicates their claim.

Assessment

- **Formative:** Day 1 notes, Appendix B, the evidence chart, and discussion.
- **Summative:** the claim, evidence, and reasoning paragraph. A strong paragraph (1) makes a clear, qualified claim; (2) cites at least three accurate pieces of evidence from different times or places; (3) addresses evidence that complicates the claim; (4) explains how a source’s point of view affects its description. Score each criterion from 1 to 4.

Differentiation

- **Middle school students and English learners:** preteach the vocabulary; read Appendix A aloud; assign four evidence cards instead of eight; provide sentence frames (“Jews were free to ___, but they could not ___.”).
- **Students with IEPs or 504 plans:** provide a partially completed Appendix B; allow the argument as an oral response or a labeled diagram.
- **Advanced learners:** read the full Pact of Umar and an excerpt of Mark Cohen’s essay, and compare Jewish life under Islam and in medieval Christian Europe.

Extension Activities

- **The Cairo Genizah.** Explore digitized documents from the [Cambridge University Library Genizah Research Unit](#) and describe what one letter or record reveals about daily life.
- **Maimonides’ journey.** Map Maimonides’ life from Córdoba to Fustat using the [National Library of Israel](#) and explain how politics shaped where he could live.
- **Into the modern era.** Connect this lesson to JIMENA’s [Authors of Jewish History](#) or [Around the Middle Eastern Jewish World](#) lessons to explore what happened to these communities in the 20th century.

Resources and External Links

- [The Story of the Jews: Jews Under Islam \(PBS video clip\)](#)

www.pbs.org/video/story-jews-program-jews-under-islam/

- [The Pact of Umar, full text \(Jewish Virtual Library\)](http://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/the-pact-of-umar-regulating-the-status-of-non-muslims-under-muslim-rule)
www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/the-pact-of-umar-regulating-the-status-of-non-muslims-under-muslim-rule
- [Jews, Muslims and the Myth of the Interfaith Utopia, by Mark R. Cohen \(Qantara\)](http://qantara.de/node/296)
qantara.de/node/296
- [Taylor-Schechter Genizah Research Unit \(Cambridge University Library\)](http://www.lib.cam.ac.uk/collections/departments/taylor-schechter-genizah-research-unit)
www.lib.cam.ac.uk/collections/departments/taylor-schechter-genizah-research-unit
- [Maimonides \(National Library of Israel\)](http://nli.org.il/en/discover/judaism/figures/maimonides)
nli.org.il/en/discover/judaism/figures/maimonides
- [Ancient Jewish History: Jews of the Middle East \(Jewish Virtual Library\)](http://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jews-of-the-middle-east)
www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jews-of-the-middle-east
- [JIMENA: Cultural Heritage, country by country](http://qua.jimena.org/cultural-heritage)
qua.jimena.org/cultural-heritage
- [Diarna: Geo-Museum of North African and Middle Eastern Jewish Life](http://diarna.org/)
diarna.org/