

Unit 5: Holidays and Observances

Objectives

At the end of this unit, you will

Be aware of the following

- Impact of holidays on tactical operations
- Solar/lunar calendar differences
- Common Era abbreviations
- Muslim calendar distinctions
- Jewish calendar distinctions
- Two high holy days of Judaism
- Passover's importance for Jewish personnel
- Middle East Orthodox Christian calendar distinctions
 - Four important holidays for Muslims

Identify

- Solar/lunar calendars
- Julian/Gregorian calendars
- Christmas, Easter, Epiphany
- C.E., B.C.E., A.H., Ramadan
- Rosh Hashanah, Yom Kippur, Pesah
- Hijra, Ashura
- Shia
 - Mawlid al-Nabiy, 'Id al-Fitr, Id al-Adha

Realize

- Impact of holidays on Arab/Israeli Conflict--1973
- Julian calendar influence in Orthodox Eastern Christianity
- Reasons for variation of Easter date each year
- Importance of Ashura for Shia Muslims

Unit 5: Holidays/Observances

I. Necessity



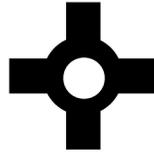
Knowledge of key holidays and observances contributes to sensitivity and awareness of Middle East culture. In addition, tactical operations also may be directly affected as a result of religious holidays and events.

The book entitled The Ramadan War, 1973, by Hasan Badri, Taha Magdoub and Muhammad Dia El Din Zohdy treats the Arab/Israeli Conflict of 1973 from an Egyptian/Syrian perspective. In chapter 4, entitled "Surprise!," the authors demonstrated the importance of holidays/ observances in tactical operations.

In determining the Egyptian/Syrian deception plan, the aim was to conduct an attack with deceit, secrecy and concealed timing. October 1973 was a month presenting Israeli national and religious holidays.



The choice of 6 October to begin the war was deliberate. Surprise would be paramount as that date was Yom Kippur, the Jewish Sabbath and also the tenth of Ramadan.



II. Jewish/Christian/Muslim Observances

The following information, adapted from The Multifaith Calendar, David Spence ed., identifies important holidays related to the major Middle East religions—Judaism, Christianity, and Islam.

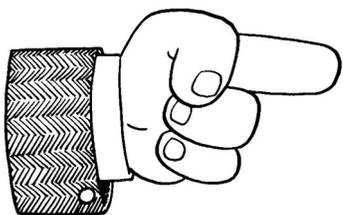
1. Solar and Lunar Calendars

Beliefs about the world and human interaction within that world determine, in part, how different cultures measure time. Some indicate time according to the sun (solar calendars). Others follow after the moon (lunar calendars). The lunisolar calendar combines aspects of both.

2. Christian Calendars

a. Julian The Julian calendar, used by Eastern Christianity, was the forerunner to the calendar most Americans currently use (the Gregorian). Instituted by Julius Caesar in 46 B.C., the Julian calendar bases its calculations on the length of time it takes the earth to revolve around the sun. Though accurate for its day, the Julian calendar was off calculation just over eleven minutes each year. By the mid-1500s, this Julian calendar was 10 days behind the solar year.

b. Gregorian In 1582, Pope Gregory XIII introduced reforms, which by the 1700s became known as the Gregorian calendar.



Christian churches in the West adopted this calendar exclusively. It is now used internationally in business, education, and the military. Most Eastern churches still use the Julian calendar for religious purposes--especially in determining the date of Easter.

Christmas and Pentecost may follow the Gregorian outline. Today, the Julian and Gregorian calendars are approximately 13 days out of phase.

c. The Church Year Five incidents in the life of Jesus, plus one marking the beginning of the church, form the foundation for the Christian year. These events include Jesus' birth, **Christmas**; baptism and/or the adoration of the Magi or Wise Men, **Epiphany**; crucifixion, **Holy Friday** or **Good Friday**; resurrection, **Pascha** or **Easter**; **Ascension**; and the descent of the Holy Spirit onto the early disciples, **Pentecost**.

d. Easter Why does the Easter date vary from year to year?



Fixed holidays of the Christian year (Christmas, Epiphany), determined by solar calculations, occur on standard dates. Easter, however, (and the sacred days associated with it--Holy Friday, Pentecost, and Ascension), varies from year to year. These spring dates are set in relation to the moon and March equinox when the sun passes the equator, making night and day of equal length in all parts of the earth. Eastern churches calculate Easter slightly differently, making it one to five weeks later than in Western churches.

e. B.C., A.D., C.E., B.C.E.

Unit 5: Holidays and Observances

Marked by the birth of Jesus, the Christian era (Anno Domini, Latin for "the year of our Lord") is

abbreviated A.D. Dates before the birth of Christ are designated as B.C.

Presently, the initials B.C.E. (Before the Common Era) indicate B.C. (Before Christ.) C.E. (Common Era) denotes A.D. (Anno Domini--in the year of our Lord.)



3. The Muslim Calendar

a. A.H. The lunar calendar determines festive dates in the Islamic calendar. Months alternate between 29 and 30 days. This results in a year 354 days long ($29.5 \times 12 = 354$), roughly 11 days short of the solar year. Thus, Muslim festival dates, compared to the Gregorian calendar, vary from year to year.

The migration (Hijra, HIJ-rah) of the prophet Muhammad from Mecca to Medina (A.D. 622) begins the Islamic calendar. The Islamic year A.H. 1417 (Anno Hegirae, 'the year of the Hijra'), begins on Gregorian calendar 18 May 1996.

b. Ramadan (RAH-mah-dahn)



In the ninth month, Muslims fast from first appearance of light to sunset. Depending on the hourly length of days (whether Ramadan falls in summer, winter, spring or fall), fasting may require either very long or short days, depending on the season.

c. Muharram (muh-HAR-rahm) and **Dhul-Hijja** (thul-HIJ-yuh) Two other months are special--Muharram, which begins the year, and Dhul-Hijja, the last month which is time of pilgrimage.

Though the moon determines the dating of festivals, prayer times follow the rising and setting sun. During Ramadan, Muslims observe the fast from the first appearance of light to sunset.

4. The Jewish Calendar

The Jewish calendar incorporates both lunar and solar elements. Essentially a lunar calendar, it is periodically adjusted to the solar year. Each month begins with the appearance of the new moon and has either 29 or 30 days. The annual cycle of festivals begins with the month of Nisan (March or April of the Gregorian calendar). Pesah (Passover) is the first festival of the year.

Orthodox and Conservative Jewish people living outside Israel celebrate Pesah (Passover), Shavuot (Weeks), and Sukkot (Feast of Booths) up to two days longer than Reform practitioners.

The Jewish religious day runs from sunset to sunset rather than midnight to midnight.

Festivals thus normally begin on evenings prior to dates expressed on a calendar.

5. Jewish Festivals

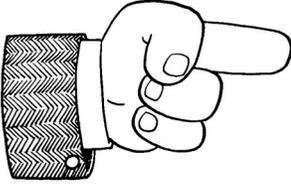
a. Rosh Hashanah (rohsh ha-shah-NAH), New Year's Day



The beginning of the Jewish calendar. Celebrated for two days, it marks the anniversary of the creation of the world. The day serves as a day of examination for all people, the examiner being the righteous and merciful creator.

b. Yom Kippur (YOHM kee-poor), Day of Atonement

Stresses repentance and forgiveness needed to reestablish oneness with God. One first seeks forgiveness from others and forgives those who have caused pain. Then comes confession of sin and seeking forgiveness from God. Yom Kippur is the most important and most personal holy day.



Both Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur are the "High Holidays"--the two most important Jewish festivals of the year. Of these, Yom Kippur is the holiest day of the year.

c. Pesah (PAY-sah), (Passover), commemorates the departure of the Israelites from Egypt. The eight day observance consists of reciting special prayers and eating symbolic foods. The first and last two days of Pesah are ones of special observance. This remembrance is a high point of Jewish life.

d. Shavuot (shah-voo-OHT) [Weeks--plural of the Hebrew word for seven] marks the conclusion of the seven week period following Passover. The day commemorates the giving of the Torah to the Israelites.

e. Sukkot (soo-KOHT) [Feast of Booths or Tabernacles] lasts for eight days. Its meaning comes from the practice of building booths (Sukkot) in fields during harvest. It also commemorates the temporary structures in which the Israelites lived following their departure from Egypt. Sukkot is a time of thanksgiving, celebrating God's presence in creation and among the Jewish people. The Eighth Day (Shmini Atzeret) is a distinct festival, marking the end of Sukkot.

f. **Simhat Torah** (SIM-khahs TOOR-ah, Rejoicing of the Law) indicates the completion and new beginning of the annual cycle of Torah reading in the synagogue.



g. **Hanukkah** (HAH-nah-kah, Feast of Lights/Feast of Dedication) celebrates the victory of Judas the Maccabee for religious freedom and rededication of the Temple in 165 B.C. This eight day remembrance also honors the power of God and His faithfulness to Israel.

6. Christian Festivals and Observances

Most of the Middle Eastern Christian groups are Orthodox in their affiliation. They follow the Julian calendar, thus differing from dates with which many Americans are familiar.

The following are important holidays/holy days for many Christians.

a. **Epiphany** (manifestation) In the Western church, this event marks the presentation of Christ to the gentiles (non-Jewish peoples), being associated primarily with the journey of the **Magi** (MAY-ji), Wise Men, to the infant Jesus. In some Eastern Churches, Epiphany remembers the baptism of Jesus by John the Baptist, and the miracle at Cana when Jesus turned the water into wine.



b. Lent This forty day period prior to Easter (excluding Sundays) is a time of prayer, repentance and self-denial. Ash Wednesday begins Lent.

c. Palm Sunday celebrates the entry of Jesus into Jerusalem. It marks the beginning of Holy Week which ends with Easter.

d. Holy Thursday (Maundy Thursday) remembers the institution of the Lord's Supper by Jesus prior to his arrest. Maundy comes from the Latin text of John 13:34, wherein Jesus gives a "new commandment."

e. Good (Holy) Friday commemorates the Passion of Jesus--his submission to death by crucifixion. Western churches focus on Jesus' crucifixion while Eastern churches concentrate upon Christ's burial.

f. Easter (Pascha) celebrates the resurrection of Christ. Easter is the oldest and most important festival in the Christian year.

Most Orthodox churches see Easter as the beginning of the church year rather than Advent/Christmas as in the Western churches.



g. Ascension Day, coming forty days after Easter, is the anniversary of Jesus' ascension into heaven.

h. Pentecost (Whitsunday) commemorates the coming of the Holy Spirit upon the disciples of Jesus

following his ascension. It comes fifty days after Easter.

i. **Transfiguration Day** celebrates the appearance of Jesus to three of his disciples in a greatly changed, glorified state.

j. **Advent** marks an approximately four week period coming before Christmas. During Advent, Christians prepare for and anticipate the Christmas celebration--the anniversary of the birth of Jesus.

7. Muslim Festivals and Observances

Within Islam, Friday is the day of communal weekly gathering. Based upon the Lunar calendar, Muslims observe the following annual festivals and holidays.

The first of **Muharram** (muh-HAR-rahm, New Year's Day--first month of the Islamic year) celebrates the Hijra of Muhammad and his followers from Mecca to Medina in 622 C.E. (A.D.).

a. **Ashura** (ah-shoo-RA) commemorates the martyrdom of Husayn (hoo-SAYN, grandson of the prophet Muhammad) on the 10th of Muharram, A.H. 61 (680 C.E. [A.D.]).

Among Shi'a Muslims, this festival is traditionally celebrated for 10 days, beginning from the first of Muharram. Ashura can also commemorate the safe landing of Noah's Ark.

b. **Mawlid al-Nabiy** (MOW lid oon-NA-bee, birthday of the Prophet) is the anniversary of the birth of the Prophet Muhammad. For many Muslims, this day ranks third in importance, after 'Id al-Fitr and Id al-Adha.



c. Mi'Raj al-Nabiy (mehr-raj al-NEB-bee)

commemorates the ascension (al-Mi'Raj) of the Prophet to heaven following his night journey (al-Isra') from Mecca to Jerusalem. Interpreted either symbolically or literally, the Qur'an records the event in Sura 17:1.



d. Nisf-Sha'ban (nush-if sha-ah-

BAHN, Night of Repentance) comes on the 14th day of the eighth month (Sha'ban)...in the middle (Nisf) of the month. It is a night of repentance in preparation for Ramadan.

e. Ramadan (RAH-mah-dahn) is a holy month of

fasting wherein Muslims, who are physically able to refrain, do not eat or drink from the first sign of dawn until sunset.

f. Jum'at al-Wada' (juhm-at al-wah-DAH, Farewell

Friday) is the last Friday of the month of Ramadan. Though not a strict festival, many Muslims consider it a special day.

g. Laylat al-Qadr (LAHAY-let al-KAHD-ehr, Night of

Power) commemorates the first revelation of the Qur'an. This event came to the Prophet Muhammad in 610 C.E. (A.D.), when he was forty years old.

h. 'Id al-Fitr (i-EED al FAHT-ehr, Festival of the

Breaking of the Fast).



Along with 'Id al-Fitr, Id al-Adha (Festival of Sacrifice) comprise the two main Islamic festivals. 'Id al-Fitr celebrates the end of Ramadan. It comes on the first day of the month Shawwal which follows Ramadan.

i. **Day of Hajj** (al-HAHJ, Day of Arafat) comes on the ninth day of Dhul'Hihha (the month of pilgrimage). It commemorates the concluding revelation to the Prophet at Mt. Arafat, a mountain 18 kilometers east of Mecca. All Muslims on Hajj attend a service on the plains in front of Mt. Arafat (Waqfatu Arafat).

j. **Id al-Adha** (*i*-EED ahl-OOHD-hah, Festival of Sacrifice)

The concluding act of pilgrimage. Muslims offer sheep, goats, and camels in a pattern after Abraham's offering of his son Ismail to God. The poor and needy receive the meat. Muslims observe these two festivals (Day of Hajj and Id al-Adha) whether on pilgrimage or not.

