

About Cairo and the Adhan

Each day in Cairo, muezzins cry out the adhan, calling believers to the five daily prayers from the city's 4,000-plus officially recognized mosques as well as 30,000-plus other mosques. Begun in the time of Muhammad, the tradition of the adhan dates back to the seventh century.

One muezzin begins the call, another joins several seconds later from a neighboring mosque, and then another, until the echoing of their diverse voices envelops the entire 83 square mile city. This a cappella harmony creates an overwhelming wave of sound which hushes and transforms the cacophony of the streets of Cairo, beginning with the first rays of dawn and ending as night enfolds the city.

Until On Look Films began documenting the adhan through the *Voices and Faces of the Adhan: Cairo* project, the muezzins and their distinctive calls had never been documented on film nor recorded for historical, cultural, informational or documentary purposes. In 2010, the Egyptian government began implementing the Tawheed Al Adhan, or Adhan Unification Project. This state-sponsored plan systemizes the adhan by broadcasting the voice of a single muezzin from a state radio station five times a day to all of the capital's 4,000-plus officially recognized mosques (and banning individual recitation at the others) via wireless receivers. By removing muezzins from their mosques, the Tawheed Al Adhan effectively erases 1,400 years of oral tradition. *Voices and Faces of the Adhan: Cairo* is working to document this ancient tradition before it disappears.

Timing and Translation

The *adhan*, or call to prayer, is a collection of phrases sung or recited harmoniously by a muezzin, calling the Muslim faithful to the five daily prayers (*salāt*) the times of which are determined by the sun, and therefore change daily and vary depending on location.

The five daily calls to prayer are called: Fajr (dawn), Dhurh (mid-day), 'Asr (afternoon), Maghrib (sunset), 'Isha (night).

There are several different schools of thought, and therefore several different formulas used to determine when the adhan is actually called (the angle of the sun at specific times). The most common systems (taqweem) used are: Hanafi, Islamic World Organization, Taqweem Um Al-Qura, Altaqweem Almasri, Islamic Society of North America, Fixed time. For further detailed information, please begin your search by visiting <http://www.islamicgoodsdirect.co.uk/al-fajr-islamic-adhan-watch-06s-electronic.html>.

Below is a translation of the *Fajr* (dawn) prayer. Note that it is a summation of the principal tenets of the Muslim faith. For the four other daily calls, all lines are recited except "Prayer is better than sleep."

Recital	Arabic Transliteration	Translation
4x	الله أكبر Allahu Akbar	God is Greatest
2x	أشهد لا إله إلا الله Ash-had al-la ilaha illa Allah	I bear witness that there is no God except the One God
2x	أشهد أن محمدا رسول الله Ash-hadu anna Muḥammadan rasulullah	I bear witness that Muhammad is God's Messenger
2x	حي على الصلاة Hayya 'ala-salahn	Come to salat (prayer, worship)
2x	حي على الفلاح Hayya 'ala 'l-falah	Come to success
2x	الصلاة خير من النوم As-salatu khayru min an-nawm	Salat (prayer, worship) is better than sleep
2x	الله أكبر Allāhu akbar	God is Greatest
1x	لا إله إلا الله La ilaha illallah	There is no god except the One God

The *adhan* begins with an affirmation of the supremacy of Allah (God). Then comes the *shahadah* (profession of faith), which consists of the profession of the Unity of Allah (God), the negation of *shirk* (polytheism), and the confirmation that Muhammad (peace and blessings be on him) is the Messenger of Allah (God). And after that, comes the call to the Prayer and to success — implying Paradise and returning to Creator. Each line is repeated for emphasis.

It is recommended that while the *adhan* is being called, one should listen attentively and repeat it silently after the muezzin [*muadhhdhin*], but when he says “**Hayya ‘ala-s-Salah**” and “**Hayya ‘ala-l-falah**” one should say:

La hawla wa la quwwata illa billah.

There is no might or power except with Allah.

Origins

The origin of the ritual of the *adhan* is traced back to the foundations of Islam in the seventh century.

The story of its creation continues to be a schismatic force between Sunni and Shi’a Muslims to this day. The widely held Sunni version holds that the *adhan* was revealed to one of Muhammad’s companions (*sahabah*), Abdullah Ibn Zaid Ibn Abd Rabbihi, in a dream after it had been decided that Islam should find its own method to announce the time of prayer rather than using those of other religions, such as bells (Christianity) or horns (Judaism). Upon the Prophet hearing the recollection of Abdullah’s vision, Prophet Muhammad chose Bilal ibn Ribah to call people to prayer, a freed Ethiopian slave and one of the early converts to Islam, because of his marvelous voice. When Bilal first called the *adhan*, ‘Umar bin Al-Khattab, who later became the second caliph, heard him in his house and came to Prophet Muhammad saying that he had seen precisely the same vision in his dreams. Conversely, Shi’a Muslims believe that the *adhan* was the sole creation of Muhammad who then asked Bilal to be the first muezzin. Of course, there are further variations from both of these perspectives.

That Bilal’s purity of heart was considered of high measure by Prophet Muhammad is evidenced by a story in which several of the prophet’s followers advised Muhammad to give the distinction of muezzin to someone else. Due to the fact that Bilal’s Arabic pronunciation carried a heavy Ethiopian accent, he apparently was unable to effectively say the consonant “sh.” Muhammad is reported to have responded: “The ‘siin’ of bilal is ‘shiin’ in the hearing of Allah,” meaning that Allah cares not for the physical manifestation, but rather the purity of heart and intention. Bilal would not have performed the *adhan* atop what is known today as the distinctively Islamic minaret, but rather in the market place, or at the house of Prophet Muhammad, which was also used as a prayer space.

The *adhan* is recited as a greeting, a reminder, and a moment of reflection and shares a similarity with the Jewish siddur, the Christian liturgy and the Hindu mantra. Up until the mid-1950s, the *adhan* was called from each mosque’s minaret. The earliest mosques were built without minarets, and the action of the *adhan* could be performed from a variety of other locations, such as a roof or a high window.

Although it is believed that the first minarets were inspired by Christian religious architecture, the size, shape and purpose of the minaret was heavily influenced by the act of *adhan*. These “lighthouses,” as the Arabic word alludes, were ideal locations for muezzins to vocalize the *adhan* in an audible fashion to reach the largest number of people. Very few muezzins call the *adhan* from these minarets today, reciting the *adhan* into microphones in the musallah, or prayer hall, facing the Qiblah direction that orients Muslims toward Mecca. Loudspeakers hang in the place the muezzin used to occupy - at the top of the tower - broadcasting their *adhan* to the community. Regardless of the method of delivery, the call is declamatory in nature, rather than introspective. The peak of a muezzin’s performance occurs when he delivers the longer phrases in one breath, pushing the range to its upper limits while exhibiting impressive control of vocal ornamentation.