In the early thirteenth century Mongol warriors under the legendary conqueror Genghis Khan descended on Southwest Asia. After overrunning Persia, defeating the Seljuk Turks in 1243 in Asia Minor, and obliterating the enfeebled Abbasid Empire in 1258, the Mongols incorporated much of the region into their vast empire that stretched from Hungary to Korea. As Mongol political authority declined in the fourteenth century, Southwest Asia became a battleground for local dynasties, religious sects, nomad armies, and military adventurers, the most notable of whom was Timur the Lame, the Turko-Mongol conqueror whose large but short-lived empire collapsed after his death in 1405. Although India was spared the Mongol onslaught, its political history, especially in the north, was as chaotic and turbulent as Southwest Asia's.

In the fourteenth century it was nominally ruled by the sultanate of Delhi, but the regime had already been undermined by revolt and warfare by the time Timur the Lame's devastating raid into northern India dealt it a death blow in 1398. Following the sultanate's demise India fractured into hundreds of states of varying sizes and degrees of effectiveness. Following these years of conquest and upheaval, three dominant empires emerged in South and Southwest Asia between the mid fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries. The first empire to take shape was that of the Ottoman Turks, a seminomadic people who migrated to Anatolia in the 1200s and almost immediately embarked on conquests that expanded their state in Anatolia and extended it into southeastern Europe. In 1453 they conquered the last remnant of the Byzantine Empire when they captured the imperial city, Constantinople, and, as Istanbul, made it the seat of their sultan's expanding state. During the 1500s the Ottomans ruled an empire that included Egypt, Anatolia, Syria, and lands in North Africa, and the western coast of the Arabian Peninsula, and southeastern Europe. Meanwhile, on the Ottoman Empire's eastern flank in the early sixteenth century, Ismail I created the Safavid Empire in Persia, distinguished by its rulers' fervent devotion to Shi'ite Islam. Finally, during the 1500s, the Mughal Empire emerged in India as a result of the conquests of Babur (1483-1530), a military adventurer from central Asia who won control of northwest India, and his grandson, Akbar (1542-1605), who extended Mughal authority to the east and south.

In addition to their leaders' common allegiance to Islam, these three empires resembled one another in several respects. Each was established through military conquest, each was ruled by an all-powerful emperor, and each was a formidable military power. In each, the arts and literature flourished. Each at first rested on a strong economic foundation, and each experienced the weakening of that foundation by inflation, high taxation, bureaucratic corruption, and broad changes in the world economy.

Differences among the three empires were most pronounced in the sphere of religion. The intense devotion of the Safavids to Shi'ism antagonized the Sunni Ottomans, and led to frequent Ottoman-Safavid wars. Furthermore, Safavid Persia was unique in that it lacked a substantial non-Muslim population. In contrast, the

Ottomans' subjects in Europe were overwhelmingly Christian, and a smaller number of Christians and Jews was scattered throughout the rest of their empire. Most of the Mughals' subjects were Hindus. The three empires also had different experiences with Europeans during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. The Ottomans and Europeans were archrivals, each representing to the other a despised religion, and, moreover, a threat to their territory and commerce. European and Ottoman fleets clashed over supremacy in the Mediterranean, and their
armies fought for control of southeastern Europe. Nonetheless, European merchants continued to trade and even reside in Ottoman cities, and European powers such as France forged military alliances with Christendom's enemy when it suited their purposes.

Relations between Europeans and Safavid Persia, on the' , other hand, were more cordial. Shah Abbas I (r. 1587-1629) relied on European military advisers and sent two missions to Europe in 1599 and 1608 to explore the possibility of joint action against the Ottoman Turks. in India the Portuguese quickly capitalized on the success of Vasco da Gama's voyage around Africa to Calicut in 1498. They undercut the monopoly of Arab merchants in the spice trade on the west Indian coast and established a base of operations on the island of Goa, which they forcibly annexed from the local Muslim ruler. The Dutch, English, and French became seriously involved in India only after 1600. They, too, established commercial operations on the coast, but only after having gained the permission of a local ruler or a Mughal official. Emperors Akbar and Jahangir were interested in European art and religion, but overall the Mughals viewed Europe neither as a threat nor a potential trading partner or ally of any significance.

By the mid seventeenth century all three Islamic empires were beginning to decline. The Mughal and Safavid empires disappeared in the eighteenth century, and the Ottoman Empire, although it survived until after World War I, gradually became a symbol of decrepitude and decay. Yet in the 1500s and 1600s, few other societies, if any, could rival these three empires' wealth, cultural sophistication, and military strength.