

Understanding Islam

Series Four: Bearers of the Final Message

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Part One: The initial expansion of Muslim rule

The expansion of Muslim rule in the first hundred-and-twenty years after the death of Muhammad (632-750) is one of the most remarkable that we know of in human history. From Madina, the Empire spread throughout the Arabia Peninsula, westwards to Morocco and the Pyrenees, north as far as Azerbaijan, and east to the River Indus. How did this happen? What motivated them? How much was this a united empire and was it religious or political?

From the time of the Prophet

It is clear from the words of the Qur'an and the actions of Muhammad that he saw himself as having a wider field of influence than the area around Makka and Madina, where he lived all his life. He saw himself standing in the line of the Hebrew Prophets and presented himself as such to the Jewish clans of Madina. Initially, in both Makka and Madina, he orientated his community at prayer in the direction of Jerusalem, which the Qur'an calls the Holy City (*al-Quds*), and to which he was taken on his Night Journey and Ascent into Heaven. The direction of prayer (*qibla*) was only fixed on Makka some sixteen months after the migration to Madina [Q. 2:142-150]. Muhammad knew of the close relationship between his community and the Christians when he sent nearly half of the Muslims of Makka to the Christian King of Abyssinia to seek refuge in 615. By 629, he dictated letters to be sent to the neighbouring rulers (Byzantium, Persia and Abyssinia) announcing his presence and mission, and inviting them to embrace Islam.

One of the remarkable achievements of Muhammad during his prophetic life was to unite the tribes and clans of Arabia under the banner of Islam. Historically, they valued and guarded their individuality and inter-clan raiding was a habitual way of life. There was a charismatic appeal to the Prophet that exceeded the mere achievements of being the "latest political force" and attracted people to pledge their lives to Islam and thus to his cause. The establishment, survival and expansion of Muslim rule was seen as an action inspired and blessed by God. There was a company of angels that fought on the side of the outnumbered Muslims at the Battle of Badr (624) to ensure their survival and strengthen their faith by victory [Q. 8:9,12,17,42]. The Qur'an declares that God gives the earth to whomsoever God wills and that such blessing is a sign of God's reward to the people who are God-conscious (*taqwa*) [Q. 7:128].

After Makka became a Muslim city, Muhammad consolidated his position by making mutual defence treaties with the clans of the southern and eastern parts of Arabia, which brought them under the banner of Islam and meant that they contributed to the

central treasury. In 631, he sent raiding parties to Tabuk and other desert settlements in the direction of Damascus to bring them under Muslim rule. The territory that today comprises Greater Syria (Syria, Palestine, Jordan and Lebanon) was clearly in his mind and some accounts have it that he despatched an army in the direction of Palestine that set out shortly before his death. Just as Islam is not, in a narrow sense, a religion but rather a complete way of life, we cannot distinguish between “bearing the Final Message to lead people to Paradise” and “bringing territory under Muslim rule and law to train the people in the ways of God and establish the way of Islam on the earth.” The motivation for Muslim expansion is both “spiritual” and “political,” and God will bless those who undertake this work both in this world (economically, militarily, politically) and in the next (Paradise).

The aftermath of Muhammad’s death

Not surprisingly, after the death of Muhammad, some of the clans of Arabia felt that their treaties with the Muslim state were thus cancelled and so they decided to ignore their agreements and go back to their former ways of living. This was a political act, treason, we might say, but in order to perform it, they committed a religious act, apostasy. The military actions that followed under the first Caliph of Islam, Abu Bakr (r.632-634), were thus called the *Ridda*, which literally means “breaking out” but is usually translated as the Wars of Apostasy. In order to bring these clans back to their political treaties, a religious act was needed, “reconversion” to Islam. This link between apostasy and treason (or “going over to the enemy”) was later reinforced in Islamic law when it was codified.

The Qur'an speaks about apostasy in various ways. At times, it seems that this is a personal act of faith for which the person will be accountable to God on the Day of Judgement [Q. 3:106; 4:137], at other times, it is spoken of as a more political act that attracts punishment on this earth at the hands of the community [Q. 5:33; 9:11-12; 16:106; 22:11]. When the *shari'a* was codified, this was at a time in Muslim history when the Muslim Empire was a political reality and leaving it through apostasy was “going over to the enemy.” The *shari'a* thus details temporal punishments, including the death penalty, for apostasy. Some modern Muslim scholars living in Muslim minority contexts have re-examined the question and drawn a distinction between what they call “simple apostasy,” in which someone makes a personal decision no longer to follow the way of Islam, for which they are accountable to God, and “compound apostasy,” in which the act of faith is compounded by treason, open attack on the Muslim community, vilification of the Qur'an or the Prophet, or encouraging others to do likewise, which is accountable to human courts and can ultimately carry the death penalty. At the present time, it is important to remember that many cases of attacks on people held to be apostates are conducted by mob violence or lynch mobs, often inspired by lesser motives, rather than through due process of law in a properly constituted and conducted court.

The way in which Caliph Abu Bakr dealt with the *Ridda* was to send in the army to bring them back under the rule and profession of Islam or face the consequences.

After the initial rebellion was put down, the other clans of the Arabian Peninsula were brought under Muslim rule.

The time of Caliph Umar (r.634-644)

Damascus at this time was the seat of administration for the Byzantine Empire in the southern seaboard of the Mediterranean. The Byzantines had been weakened in the area after decades of battling with the Sasanian Empire, based in Persia. Greek was the language of administration and of the elite in society, who treated their subjects with some disdain (the Greek word “barbarian” means those who do not speak Greek). After three battles with the Byzantines, taking desert towns, Damascus fell to the Muslim forces in 636 and their rule spread throughout Syria by 637. Muslim forces were to invade the Mediterranean islands of Cyprus, Rhodes and Crete in the 650s. The mainland frontier with the Byzantine Empire through Anatolia was really defined by geography and economics rather than politics or military might.

Palestine, then a district of Syria, fell to the Muslims in 637, with Caliph Umar himself coming forward to accept the surrender of Jerusalem. He respected the Christian religious sites (the Jews had been kept out of Jerusalem during Christian rule) and declined to offer his prayers in the Church of the Holy Sepulchre but instead went onto a nearby piece of waste ground that was used as the city’s rubbish dump and offered his prayers there. This turned out to be the Temple Mount, on which the Jewish Temple had stood until it was destroyed by the Romans in 70^{CE}. Later, the al-Aqsa Mosque was built on the place where tradition has it that Umar offered his prayers.

The Muslim forces moved westwards into Egypt under the leadership of Amr al-As and conquered the port city of Alexandria in 642. They established their Egyptian garrison and centre of administration in Fustat, just south of modern Cairo (which was established by the Fatimid Dynasty in the 10th century).

To the east, the Muslim forces were led by Sa'd ibn Abi Waqqas and entered Iraq from the south in 636, capturing the Sasanian capital, al-Mada'in, in 637 and bringing all Iraq until Muslim rule by 641. The great garrison cities of Basra and Kufa were established in the late 630s. Persia fell to the Muslim armies in 650 and this marked the end of the Sasanian Empire.

The Muslim forces were generally small, numbered in hundreds or at most a few thousands, but they were fast, agile, well-motivated and co-ordinated. As a result of their own earlier battles, both Byzantines and Sasanians were in a fairly fragile state. The Muslims used “hit and run” tactics and generally only light casualties were involved. The “Great Battle of al-Qadisiyya,” for example, lasted only three days. Deals were normally done between opposing forces to avoid large-scale fighting. Both historical testimony, such as exists, and archaeological evidence suggest that these Muslim conquests did not cause major disruption to the way of life of the local people.

Damascus was the cultural, economic and administrative centre of the area and its capture brought considerable wealth into the hands of the Muslims, although some of the Byzantine elite took their precious possessions with them when they retreated. Caliph Umar set up an office to measure and distribute the booty from captured lands. Many Muslim families became rich and established themselves through a share in the booty. Umar distributed 80% of the lands formerly owned by the Byzantine government between the soldiers and retained 20% in the treasury for the common good. Land that had been abandoned by those fleeing the territory or land that was confiscated from those who fought against the Muslims was claimed by Muslims on a "first come" basis. Peasants were generally left in place to work the land.

From the Muslim perspective, the sentiment was that God had conquered through the hands of the Muslims and the booty was a sign of God's blessing and favour on them. The conquered Christians tended to see their defeat as a sign of God's wrath for their sinful ways. The Muslim rulers were unused to administering an empire, so they retained the services of the Byzantine administrators, Christians and Jews, with the executive decisions being taken by Muslims and various Muslim colouration to the economic system, e.g., the introduction of the military tax that was to be paid by Christians and Jews in lieu of military service (*jizya*). Greek remained the language of administration for some decades, with Persian serving the same function in the former Sasanian lands.

Umayyad Rule

The Umayyads were part of the old Makkan aristocracy and ironically, the first three Umayyad Caliphs (Mu'awiya I r.661-680, Yazid I r.680-683 and Mu'awiya II r.683-684) were all direct descendants from Abu Safyan, an arch-opponent of Muhammad and a late convert to Islam. An Umayyad saying is reported to the effect that now that we have power, we should be like boys with a ball and pass it from one to another. The family tree of Umayyad caliphs from 661-750 is full of brothers and cousins passing around the honour and a good deal of the history is taken up with disputes about succession. Mu'awiya I was Governor of Syria in the time of the fourth Rightly-Guided Caliph, Ali (d.661), the son-in-law and cousin of the Prophet. Mu'awiya proclaimed himself Caliph, with the help of his Syrian stronghold, and thus began the Umayyad dynasty that ruled the Muslim community until 750.

The Umayyad caliphs, with the exception of Caliph Umar II (Umar ibn Abd al-Aziz r.717-720), who was regarded as pious and observant, were corrupt (to say the least). Amongst them, Yazid I, who was responsible for the events leading up to the massacre at Karbala in 680, may be regarded as the low point. His successor, Mu'awiya II, was weak and ineffective and ruled only for a few months. He was followed by Marwan I, who only ruled for one year (684). The real consolidator was Abd al-Malik (r.685-705), he saw off other candidates for the post, put down a revolt in Makka and united the Caliphate on a strong basis from 692.

Three elements are important in the coherence of the Empire at this time. First, Abd al-Malik established a professional Syrian army to replace the old tribesmen under a command structure that was more reliable than their old chieftains. There is a real sense in which the Syrian army was the engine of expansion of the Umayyad Caliphate and its means of maintaining stability. Not only did they effectively conquer new territory but they were on hand to be sent to outposts where disruption or rebellion occurred. Abd al-Malik sent the army northwards to open a new front with Armenia and southwards to bring Iraq back under control and deal with the factions there. Second, significant changes in administration occurred at this time. Arabic replaced Greek and Persian as the administrative language and Arab families began a speedy ascent amongst the ranks of Jewish and Christian administrators. Third, central authority was reinforced by the introduction of standard weights and measures for commerce and coins were minted under the Caliph's authority from 696. The Empire at this time developed the ideology of a state and all the instruments needed to control and exploit the territory and population.

It was Caliph Abd al-Malik who had the Dome of the Rock built on the Temple Mount in Jerusalem, which was completed in 691 and internally decorated by Byzantine Christian craftsmen, who were the masters of such arts, using verses of the Qur'an written in calligraphy on the walls, many of which were chosen to correct the excesses of Christian doctrine. The Umayyad caliphs continued within the family with al-Walid I (r.705-715), Sulayman (r.715-717), Umar II (r.717-720), Yazid II (r.720-724) and Hisham (r.724-743).

Expansion to the west

The western capital of the Empire was established in al-Qayrawan in modern Tunisia in 705 and from this base it moved out to conquer the whole of the North African coastal region as far as Morocco by 710. Critical to this expansion were the Berber tribes, many of whom converted to Islam and joined the Muslim army, which brought with it a share in the spoils of war. This territory had been occupied by the Visigoths, who had come down from northern Europe through Spain and whose dominant religious tradition was the Arian form of Christianity. The Arians did not accept the divinity of Jesus and thus their conversion to Islam was a shorter step than for Byzantine Christians, which probably accounted for the more rapid conversion rates in North Africa. Some Berbers resisted conquest and conversion and headed towards the mountains or moved further inland. The great Berber general, Tariq ibn Ziyad (dates uncertain) ruled the western Maghreb from his base in Tangier, from which he surveyed Spain, which was divided between feuding Visigoth princes.

In 711, Tariq led an invasion force to Spain and they swept up through the Iberian Peninsula reaching Toledo in the same year and the Pyrenees by 714. The Umayyad rulers in Syria were alarmed at this rapid expansion and feared too great an autonomy in the west, so Tariq was recalled to Syria, bringing with him much plunder from the rich pickings of Spain. The Berber armies continued raiding to the north and ruled an area of southern France, the Languedoc, with their capital in Narbonne, for fifty years

before retreating back across the mountains to Spain. During this time, there were Muslim raiding parties that sallied into France, attacking Toulouse in 721, until they were turned back at the Battle of Poitiers by Charles Martel in 732.

The Berbers revolted in 740-741 in opposition to what they saw to be their treatment as inferiors by the Arabs. The Syrian army was sent to Spain to crush this revolt, which was defeated at Toledo in 742. The inevitability of the western division of the Empire being too far distant to be controlled from Syria was realised thereafter and the way was paved for the separate Umayyad Caliphate of al-Andalus (Muslim Spain) from 750 onwards. This Caliphate flourished for nearly three hundred years with its capital at Cordoba, which became a great centre of learning with Jewish and Christian elites working alongside Muslims. Eventually, the Christian kingdoms of north-west Spain, Castile and Aragon, began to defeat the Muslims and Cordoba fell in 1031. There followed some centuries of fluctuating Muslim-Christian frontiers until the Muslims were confined to the Kingdom of Granada from 1238, until its final fall in 1492.

The northern expansion

The Umayyads expanded northwards into Byzantine territory in the early eighth century until the failure of the siege of Constantinople in 718. Thereafter there were only periodic raids into Byzantine territory in the subsequent decades. They expanded into the Caucasus capturing Armenia in 711 and, after some sets-back, captured Azerbaijan in 732. The borders were stabilised from 737 onwards.

Expansion to the east

To the north-east, the Umayyad army crossed the River Oxus and expanded into Transoxania from their forward capital in Khurasan, bringing Bukhara under Muslim rule in 709 and Samarqand from 712. To the south-east, the Muslim army, under their general Muhammad ibn Qasim, moved into Sind in 711 and began to take control of the lands to the west of the River Indus, moving up into West Punjab to establish a base in the city of Multan in 773. In 724, they crossed the Indus into Rajasthan and Gujarat for some time but were driven back eventually to form a fixed frontier at the Indus from 740 onwards.

A decentralised Empire

The Umayyad Empire reached its greatest extent by around 740. Muslim rule now extended from Spain and Morocco in the west, along the coast of North Africa, through Egypt and the Arabian Peninsula, through Greater Syria and up to Azerbaijan in the north, then down to Samarqand and Sind in the east. Such a massive empire could not possibly be controlled as a single unit from Damascus and so, in effect, it consisted of decentralised administrations with a good deal of local autonomy under the banner of the Umayyads and the Syrian army. Local chiefs were key to keeping the territory under control and they in turn exercised patronage to smaller chiefs. The

Umayyads adopted the pattern of appointing members of their own clan to act as governors, especially in the Arab lands, but there was rumbling discontent between the perceived Arab superiority over the non-Arab Muslim converts (*mawali*): Indians, Persians, Central Asians and Berbers. Unfair tax revenues were generated from these non-Arab Muslims as well as from non-Muslims in the Empire, which contributed to a general decline in cohesion.

By the time of the last Umayyad Caliph, Marwan II (r.744-750), the tribalism of local rulers, plus a general distaste for the unislamic lifestyles of many of the Umayyad rulers and families and the desire for a more authentic Islamic way of life led by the Kharijites and the Shi'a, combined to form a general revolt, usually called the "third *fitna*." A strong challenge emerged from Iraq through a combination of Hashemites, those who traced their ancestry back to the clan of Muhammad and now, in this context, to be referred to as the Abbasids, and the Alids, those who traced their ancestry through Ali, the son-in-law of the Prophet, more often called the Shi'a, who upheld the privileged position of the Ahl ul-Bayt as the divinely-appointed locus of leadership amongst Muslims. The Abbasids took the upper hand and Abu al-Abbas (r.749-754) was proclaimed as the first Abbasid Caliph in the mosque of Kufa in 749. He led an army north and defeated Caliph Marwan II in 750. Abu al-Abbas was given the nickname *al-Saffah* (the Blood-letter) on account of his bloody despatch of many of the leading Umayyads, which sealed their defeat. One branch of the Umayyads escaped to Spain and there established the only remaining element of Umayyad rule from 750 onwards. Abu al-Abbas was succeeded by his brother, Abu Ja'far al-Mansur (r.754-775), who moved the capital of the Abbasid Caliphate to Baghdad.