

Transcript: Expressions, Early expansion of the Islamic Empire

The influence of the Muslim community spread steadily during the latter years of Muhammad's life. Some clans became Muslims. Arab Christians and Jews signed treaties with Muhammad so they could live in peace alongside the Muslims. Jews and Christians were allowed freedom to practise their religion. The Qur'an makes it clear that they should be accepted by Muslims as the 'People of the Book' or *Ahl al-Kitab* – people, that is, who have received an earlier revelation [Q. 3:3-4, 3:113-115, 3:199].¹

Muhammad's charisma, leadership and wisdom were able to unite people that traditionally had been enemies. However, soon after his death, some of the Bedouin clans began to break loose and go their own way. Under Abu Bakr and Umar, the first two Caliphs, the Muslim army brought them back under control and expanded the Empire into the present Gulf States and Yemen.

The rules of engagement for when Muslims are required to fight are based on Qur'anic verses and the example of Muhammad [Q. 4:90, 2:205, 60:8].² Under these rules, the behaviour of the Muslim army was strictly controlled.

Force was only to be used as a last resort where negotiation had failed.

Women, children, the sick and elderly were not to be harmed.

It was specifically prohibited to attack or intimidate soldiers who had surrendered [Q. 2:190-193].

It was forbidden to deprive the enemy of basic human needs.

Water should not be poisoned; crops and food stores must not be destroyed.

Christian and Jewish religious buildings, and those who lived in them, were to be protected as long as they didn't foment rebellion against the Islamic authorities.

By 637, Palestine and Iraq had come under Islamic rule, followed by Egypt and Syria by 641. Many Arabs, who had lived under the power of the Byzantine Empire, welcomed the Muslim armies as they were fellow Arabs rather than foreign oppressors. The coming of Islamic rule marked a decisive shift away from the Caesar-like rule of the Byzantine religious-political rulers. Any idea of the "divine

¹ Q. 3:3-4 He has sent down upon you the Book, in truth, confirming what preceded it, and he sent down the *Taurat* [Torah] [to Moses] and the *Injil* [Gospel] [to Jesus] before this, as guidance to humankind, and he sent down the criterion [of judgment between right and wrong]. Then those who reject the signs of God will have a severe punishment, and God is All-powerful and Vengeful.

² Q. 4:90 [Take not from among those who reject faith any ally or helper] except those who join a people between whom and you there is a treaty, or those who come to you with hearts reluctant to fight you, or to fight their own people. Had God wished, he would have given them power over you, and then they would have surely fought you. So if they keep out of your way and do not fight you, and offer you peace, then God does not allow you any course [of action] against them.

right of the Emperor” was removed. Thus Islamic rule was a liberation towards a more egalitarian society, in which everyone, including rulers, was subject to the divine guidance of the Qur'an.

Iran was the first non-Arab country to come under the Islamic Empire in 650.

Parts of north India came under Islamic rule from 712, with the city of Multan in the Punjab (now Pakistan) falling in 773.

The Islamic Empire spread up into Central Asia, through modern Turkistan, Uzbekistan and Afghanistan by around 750.

To the West, the Muslim armies had passed right along the coast of North Africa, through Libya, Tunisia, Algeria and into Morocco by 714.

The Islamic Empire expanded by force of arms but that is not the same as conversion to the faith of Islam. The vast majority of those coming under Islamic rule at this time were Jews and Christians and so they enjoyed the freedom to continue to practise their existing faith. It was to take many generations and centuries before a majority of the inhabitants of the Arab lands would become Muslims.

In the Empire, the People of the Book could freely practise their religion. But their status was not equal with that of the Muslims. They were not allowed to have a say in the government. They could keep and repair their existing places of worship, but they could not build new ones. They could pass on their faith to their children, but not try to convert people. They had to show respect for all Muslims and were sometimes made to wear special clothing identifying their religion. They were not required to serve in the army, but had to pay an additional military tax. The Muslim army was obliged to protect them like anyone else. In fact they were called the protected people or *dhimmis*.

When the Muslim armies reached the city of Jerusalem, in 637, in recognition of its importance, the Caliph Umar himself negotiated the hand-over to the Empire. The Christian Patriarch took him on a tour of the historic city, which included a visit to the Church of the Holy Sepulchre. Umar declined to offer his formal prayers there. This was not out of disrespect – quite the opposite. He was guarding against someone in the future claiming it as a mosque, because the Caliph had prayed there, and seizing it from the Christians.

Umar went to pray on the nearby Temple Mount, which under Christian rule had become a desolate area. Later the Al-Aqsa mosque, which marks the spot where Umar prayed, and the nearby Dome on the Rock were built. The Dome on the Rock was actually decorated by Christians – the most skilful craftsmen of the time.

As the Muslim armies spread out from the Arabian Peninsula, not having the necessary experience to administer a vast and growing Empire, they kept on the

existing Christian administrators and set new guidelines for the way that the administration was to be conducted.

Damascus

The Sunni ruling dynasty, the Umayyads, made Damascus their capital from 661. Here they found a more developed city life than in Madina which was too remote. Damascus had been an administrative centre of the Byzantine Empire. The administrators there were Christians who knew Greek, Syriac and Arabic.