

## The Arab Conquests and the Spread of Islam

The conquests of the peninsular Arabs in the seventh century were unprecedented in their time and only surpassed by the thirteenth-century Mongolian conquests in their scope and celerity. Once ‘Umar ibn al-Khattab, the second *Rashidun* (“rightly-guided”) caliph completed the conquest of Arabia, he was able to send his more intrepid commanders out into the hinterlands of Persia and the Levant. Arguably his most famous, Khalid ibn al-Walid, advanced his forces across the Syrian desert and surprised the Romans. From 636-638, Khalid conquered everything from Armenia to Gaza. He earned a reputation so grand that ‘Umar removed him from command, claiming only that he did so in order to emphasize that it was God, not Khalid, who brought victory. Although the conquests of Iraq and Khurasan took far longer, and the latter was never a solidly held province, the expansion of the empire across the Zagros mountains took little more than a generation. By 711, the Umayyad dynasty stretched from the Iberian Peninsula to the Hindu Kush and bore a surprising unity across the newly formed empire.

This astounding series of victories bears no single explanation, nor was it an absolute and uncontested hold on the Middle East. After Muhammad’s death, the expanding Islamic Community (*Umma*) had first to deal with dissention within. The *Ridda*, or the Wars of Apostacy, were the first Islamic civil war. The first two *Rashidun* Caliphs, Abu Bakr and ‘Umar, were tasked with reforming the community Muhammad had worked so hard to piece together. Further conquests would not be possible until the disturbance was settled. The division in the community would be permanent, although the dissenters would be an extant minority even into the modern era. The *Sunni* are generally considered “orthodox,” and comprise the overwhelming majority of the Islamic world. The *Shi’ia*, a powerful minority, broke off from the general body of the community when Abu Bakr succeeded Muhammad. They believed that the succession to

the Caliphate was supposed to fall along a sort of dynastic line, leading from the prophet himself through his son-in-law, 'Ali ibn abi Talib. The Kharijites, another minority group, appeared at the same time. They declared that the only legitimate heir to the caliphate was chosen by the community and was shown clearly to be a strictly pious Muslim. Political control would be relegated to Sunni hands for most of Islamic history. Shi'ite powers would not rise until the tenth century and the *de facto* fall of the Islamic empire (c. 950). The dispute among the disparate groups certainly saw some theological issues but it mostly fell on the question of the succession to the Caliphate.

In the initial stages of the conquest, Islam spread relatively slowly. Despite the rhetoric of the invaders -that they were conquering for Islam- they did not encourage conversions. A significant factor in this decision was the income from the *jizyah*: a special poll tax given to Jews, Christians, or Zoroastrians allowing them to remain in their communities and practice their ancestral faith. This was a common pattern until the rise of the Abbasid caliphate, although it was by no means a codified policy. Some caliphs favored non-Arabs and converts in their leadership positions, only to have that habit reversed by their successor. In times where converts were favored, conversions tended to increase as the people attempted to better their social positions and increase their prestige. The assertion by the caliph Abd al-Malik (644-705) that Arabic would be the official language of administration within the empire was in part connected to the spread of Islam. By the beginning of the eighth century, especially around the governmental center of Damascus, Arabic was the most common language in use. However, there was a cultural attachment to Arabic as a language because the Qur'an is prized as God's word delivered in Arabic. As Arabic was the language through which God had chosen to reveal his message, there was a pride of place for the peninsular tongue.

The most difficult aspect of the conquests proved to be the frontier of Khurasan. It was a wild land comprising modern Afghanistan, Turkmenistan, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, and parts of north-eastern Iran. Not only was it a vast area, but the topography of the zone was extremely difficult to traverse. It was mountainous, with deep valleys and oppressive weather shifts. The numerous peoples also proved difficult to control: all were quite far off from the government center and some, such as the Dalamites, proved to be noteworthy warriors. The unpredictability of the frontier led to many seeking fortune and adventure on the edges of the empire. Eventually, the Abbasid caliphate would rise mostly because of their control of the soldiers in the region. The decision to move the capital from Damascus to Baghdad was precisely because it was the rough center of the empire when Khurasan was considered among the provinces.

Khurasan would be the basis of Abbasid power as well as the primary cause of its downfall. The institution of the *Mamluk* soldier-slaves gave the Abbasids a professional core of soldiery, which in turn allowed them to over-power the Umayyads. However, because the soldiers eventually became the official body guards to the caliph, given special treatment (extra pay, large rewards, etc) over the common soldiery, and because they were given important charges by the caliph himself, they obtained a degree of power which increasingly few could properly manage. Eventually, the Mamluks were able to seize power from the caliph, although they kept him in his religious position as a figurehead of their own real authority. From c. 950, the Abbasid caliphate had lost any real control of the provinces and the empire shattered into hundreds of kingdoms and principalities. These kingdoms would have widely varying degrees of success throughout the middle ages; the most famous and powerful being the Fatimids, Ayyubids, Seljuks, and Ottomans. The Seljuk and Ottoman Turks would pride themselves on

their Mamluk ancestry, and the Mamluk dynasty of Egypt would derive their authority from that same heritage.

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