

Introduction

After the death of the prophet Muhammad in Medina in 632 CE, his followers on the Arabian peninsula expanded quickly in all directions, creating an empire which only one hundred years later came to include not only all of the Middle East and much of Central Asia, but also North Africa and the Iberian peninsula. This was known as the “caliphate,” from *khalifa*, meaning “succession.” Yet it was difficult to keep such a large political entity together and there were conflicts regarding who should be regarded as the rightful heir to the prophet. Thus the first caliphate was soon replaced by a second, a third and a fourth, each one controlled by rivaling factions. The first caliphate, the Rashidun Caliphate, 632-661 CE, was led by the *sahabah*, the “companions” who were the family and friends of the prophet and who all were drawn from Muhammad’s own, Quraysh, tribe. The second caliphate, the Umayyads, 661-750 CE, moved the capital to Damascus in Syria, and while it did not last long, one of its offshoots established itself in today’s Spain and Portugal, known as al-Andalus, and made Cordoba into a thriving, multicultural, center of arts and learning.

Yet it was during the third caliphate, the Abbasids, 750-1258 CE, that cultural and intellectual power was exercised to the greatest effect. Although this caliphate too began to fall into pieces almost as soon as it was established, it too was famous for its cultural achievements. The Abbasids presided over what is often referred to as the “Islamic Golden Age,” during which science, technology, philosophy and the arts made great advances, and their capital, Baghdad, became a center in which Islamic learning combined with influences from East Asia, China, Persia and the Middle East. These achievements came to an abrupt halt when the Mongols invaded Baghdad in 1258 and sacked the city. From now on it was instead Cairo that constituted the center of the Muslim world. Indeed, the

fourth caliphate, the Fatimid Caliphate, 909–1171 CE, were the ones who in 969 built the city of Cairo to serve as its capital. Yet the Fatimids too were quickly undermined, in this case by their own soldiers, an elite corps of warriors known as the Mamluks. The next Muslim empire to call itself a “caliphate” was instead the Ottoman empire, 1453-1923 CE. Although the Ottomans were Muslims, they were not Arabs but Turks, and they had their origin in Central Asia, not on the Arabian peninsula. The Ottoman empire was abolished in 1922 and the caliphate discontinued two years later.

Despite the continuing story of political infighting and fragmentation, the idea of the caliphate continues to exercise a strong rhetorical force in the Muslim world to this day. During the caliphates the Arab world experienced an unprecedented economic prosperity and a cultural and intellectual flourishing which made them powerful and admired throughout the then known world. The caliphate represented the best hopes of mankind. The capitals of the caliphates were great centers of civilization. Not surprisingly perhaps the idea of restoring the caliphate is still alive today among radical Islamic groups who want to unite the Muslim world, restore Muslim self-confidence, and take a stand against European and North American imperialism.

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