

The Arab expansion

After the death of the prophet Muhammad in 632 CE, the various families, clans and tribes which made up the population of the Arabian peninsula seemed prepared to return to their previous ways of life, which included perpetual rivalries and occasional cases of outright warfare. Yet a small but influential group of the prophet's followers, the *sahabah*, sought to preserve the teachings which he had left them and to keep the Arabs united. This, the *sahabah* believed, could best be achieved if their energies were directed towards external, non-Arab, targets. It was through expansion and conquest that the Arabs would become united amongst themselves. The new leader of the community must consequently, many felt, combine the very qualities which had characterized Muhammad himself – to be a religious leader but also a politician and military commander. In 632, it was the prophet's father-in-law, Abu Bakr, who best exemplified these qualities and he was elected the first caliph of what later came to be known as the *rashidun*, or “rightly guided,” caliphate. During his short rule, 632-634 CE, Abu Bakr consolidated Muslim control over the Arabian peninsula, but he also attacked the Sasanian empire in Persia to the east and the Byzantine empire to the west. Or rather, he attacked the southern parts of Iraq, occupied by the Persians, and the southern parts of Syria, occupied by the Greeks.

The term *jihad*, “holy war,” is often used to describe this military expansion, yet political control, not religious conversion, was always its main objective. The expansion is best explained not by a religious but by a military logic. Since the troops of the caliphate were paid by the spoils of war – by what they could lay their hands on in the lands they occupied – the army could only be maintained as long as it continued to be successful. “Raids” is consequently a better term for many of these engagements than “battles,” even if the

raids, such as the ones conducted in Spain, eventually turned into permanent occupations. Thus when the advance of the Muslim forces throughout Europe eventually was stopped by Charles Martel at the Battle of Tours in 732 CE, this was regarded as a major triumph by European observers, but merely as a temporary setback by the Arabs themselves who retreated in order to fight another day. Moreover, since the occupations in many cases were quite superficial, it was often easy enough for the local population to reassert their independence. As a result, in several cases the Arabs had to reconquer same territory over and over again.

The secret behind this astounding military success was a lightly armed and highly mobile fighting force. Although Muhammad and his immediate followers were merchants and city-dwellers, most of the population of the Arabian peninsula were Bedouins. The Bedouins were nomads who followed their animals, predominantly goats and sheep, in search of pasture. Mobility was key to survival in the harsh environment of the desert, and thanks to horses and camels, they could cover large distances with great speed. Once the Bedouins were formed into an army, their horses were used for swift attacks and their camels for transporting supplies. The neighboring empires – Byzantium to the west and the Sasanian empire to the east – were both stationary by comparison, bent on protecting their cities, their trade routes and their agricultural lands. Yet as soon as the Arabs had mastered the basics of siege warfare, these sedentary societies were quite easily defeated. Moreover, the Arabs were able to benefit from the fact that Byzantines and Sasanians already for centuries had been each other's worst enemies. After decades of relative peace, the wars between the two super-powers flared up again in the beginning of the seventh-century, with devastating effects on both parties. Thus when the Arab forces began their incursions from the south, both Byzantines and Sasanians were already considerably weakened. Not surprisingly, the expansion was far more difficult for the Arabs wherever they encountered people

who resembled themselves. This was for example the case in northern Africa where the Berbers, after some costly engagements, were not defeated as much as bought off and incorporated into the ruling elite.

During the second caliph, Umar, who succeeded Abu Bakr in 634 and ruled for ten years, these military campaigns were dramatically extended and the caliphate suddenly became an imperial power. The Arabs occupied the eastern parts of the Byzantine empire, including Syria, Anatolia and Egypt, in the 630s, and then all of the Sasanian empire in the 640s, including present-day Afghanistan, Azerbaijan, Armenia and Georgia. Umar's greatest achievement, however, was to give an administrative structure to the new state. Clearly, the institutions once appropriate for the cities of Mecca and Medina on the Arabian peninsula were not appropriate for the vast empire which the caliphate now had become. Umar's answer was the *diwan*, a state bureaucracy with a treasury and separate departments responsible for tax collection, public safety, and the exercise of *sharia* law. Coins were minted by the state and welfare institutions were established which looked after the poor and needy – including the stockpiling of grain to be distributed to the people at times of famine. The caliphate engaged in several large-scale projects – constructing new cities, building canals and irrigation systems. Roads and bridges were constructed too and guests houses were set up for the benefit of merchants or for pilgrims going to Mecca for the *hajj*. Umar, the second “rightly guided” caliph, has always been highly respected by Muslims for these achievements and for his personal modesty and sense of justice. [Read more: Omar, the TV series]

Although the occupation of lands outside of the Arabian peninsula happened exceedingly quickly, conversion to the new faith took centuries to accomplish, and in many cases it never happened at all. As a result of its military victories, Islam became a minority religion everywhere the Arabs went except in

the Arabian peninsula itself, and forced conversions were for that reason alone unlikely to prove successful. Moreover, conversions were financially disadvantageous to the authorities of the caliphate. Since non-Muslims were required to pay a tax, known as the *jizya*, which was higher than the tax for Muslims, a change of religion meant a loss of tax revenue. Instead the *dhimmi*, the various non-Muslim communities, were allowed to practice their religion much as before. As Muslims would have it, monotheistic religions such as Christianity, Judaism and Zoroastrianism should be regarded as precursors of Islam which the teachings of the prophet had made redundant. [Read more: Zarathustra and Zoroastrianism] The military success of his followers, in their own eyes, had proven the viability of the new faith. Other religions were thus best understood the colorful remnants of an older order, but not as threats to Islam. Indulging them, the Arab rulers allowed them to govern their respective communities in accordance with their own customs, which included rules for marriage and inheritance but also the right to maintain customs such as the drinking alcohol and the eating of pork. Although the *dhimmi* lacked certain political rights which came with membership in the *ummah*, the community of Muslim believers, they were not expected to become soldiers in the caliphate's armies and they were regarded equal with Muslims before the law. The caliphate, in other words, was a classical empire, ruled by a small, isolated, elite which imposed peace and taxes on its multi-ethnic population but which did little to interfere in their daily lives.

In 644 Umar was assassinated by a Persian slave during a *hajj* to Mecca, apparently as a revenge for the wars which the Arabs had made on the Sasanian empire. This time the problem of who should succeed him as caliph became acute. There were still very few converts to the new religion, and the question of succession concerned how power should be distributed among the small elite of the prophet's Arabian followers. The most obvious choice for a successor was Ali, Muhammad's son-in-law,

who had married Fatimah, the only one of the prophet's children who survived him. Yet it was instead Uthman ibn Affan who became the third caliph. Uthman too was an early convert to Islam and one of the prophet's closest companions but, and probably more importantly as far as the question of succession was concerned, he was a member of the Umayyads, one of Mecca's oldest and best established families. Once elected, Uthman dispatched military expeditions to recapture regions in the Caucasus, Central Asia and Persia which had rebelled against Arab rule. He also made war on the Byzantine empire, occupying most of present-day Turkey and coming close to besieging Constantinople itself. Rather more surprisingly for a military force made up of Bedouins, Uthman constructed an impressive navy which occupied the Mediterranean islands of Crete, Rhodes and Cyprus, and made raids on Sicily. At the end of the 640s, when the Byzantine attempt to recapture Egypt failed, all of North Africa came under the caliphate's control.

Despite these military successes, it was difficult to maintain peace between the various factions of the caliphate's elite. Indeed, the rich spoils which the Arab armies encountered in countries such as Egypt, Syria and Iraq constituted a new source of conflict. During Umar the soldiers had been paid a stipend, been quartered in garrisons well away from traditional urban areas, and been banned from taking, or investing in, agricultural land. But during Uthman these policies were reversed, and while the creation of a market in land served as a spur to economic growth, it led to new resentment as a new land-owning, Arab, elite came to develop and replace the traditional leaders. Uthman was also accused of favoring members of his own family when it came to appointing governors to the new provinces, and of allowing them to enrich themselves at the expense of the locals. Another source of conflict was that Uthman standardized the text of the Quran, taking away the right of people to interpret the text in their own fashion, thus strengthening the power of the religious authorities at the center.

Resentment against these policies was channeled into support for Ali, Muhammad's son-in-law, and before long an uprising against Uthman was under way. In 656, three separate armies marched on Medina where Uthman's house was besieged and the caliph assassinated. Now it was finally time for Ali to become the new leader, and although he remained in power for five years, 656-661 CE, his rule was undermined by continuous conflicts. Despite the fact that Ali had not been directly incriminated in Uthman's murder, his followers wanted revenge, and Uthman's relatives and associates in the provinces wanted to protect their assets. The result was the First Fitna, the first civil war between Muslims, which broke out in 657. As a result, the caliphate fell apart, and in 661 Ali himself was assassinated – ironically, by one of his former allies who had become disillusioned by his rule. [*Read more: Sunni and Shia split*]