

# History of Islam

An encyclopedia of Islamic history

## Abdur Rahman III of Spain

**Contributed by Prof. Dr. Nazeer Ahmed, PhD**

Three men of giant stature dominated Islamic history in the 10<sup>th</sup> century. These were Abdur Rahman III of Spain, Muiz of Egypt and Mahmud of Ghazna. The first two determined the flow of historical events in the Mediterranean region, whereas Mahmud of Ghazna had a decisive impact on Central Asia and the Indo-Pakistan subcontinent.

Abdur Rahman III was the ablest and most accomplished of the Omayyad rulers of Spain. As a young man he received an excellent education under the *ulema* of Cordoba. His intellect made him a prince among the scholars and a favorite among the literary circles of the day. His character and exemplary conduct won him the allegiance of the court and the common man alike. His first act after becoming the ruler of Spain was to abrogate all taxes that were not in accordance with the *Shariah*. These taxes had been imposed to support the lavish expenditures of the royal household. The move won for him the support of the peasant and the merchant alike. His second act was to offer a general amnesty to all rebels who accepted him as their sovereign.

In the year 912, when Abdur Rahman ascended the throne as a young man of 23, Spain was adrift without central authority. It had been more than two hundred years since Tariq and Musa had landed at Jabl al Tariq and marched forth to conquer Spain in the name of *Tawhid*. By the 10<sup>th</sup> century, chiefs and noblemen were more animated by the love of money than the love of God. Tribal affiliation and wealth moved them far more than any transcendental idea. Upon ascending the throne, the young ruler faced two major challenges. The first was from the Arab aristocracy based in the old Visigoth capital city of Toledo. The second was the military-ideological challenge from the Fatimids who had made no secret of their desire to conquer Spain.

The challenge from the Arab aristocracy was inherent in the pattern of invasions from North Africa. As successive waves of Muslim armies landed in Spain, they settled in the various provinces according to the desires of their tribal chiefs. Thus the Bani Hud controlled Saragossa, the Zul Nun settled in Toledo, the Banu Abbad were powerful in Seville, the Berbers controlled Granada and the newly arrived Slavs from eastern Europe settled in Valencia and the Mediterranean coast. The court of Cordoba was sustained by the allegiance of these tribes. Gradually, the tribal chieftains accumulated privileges, which they were reluctant to give up. The spartan simplicity of the desert warrior gave way to the luxurious life style of the emirs. The court in Cordoba gradually became a prisoner of this privileged class. So, when Abdur Rahman abandoned the excessive taxes and took away the privileges of this class, there was an immediate uproar. Particularly upset were the noblemen of Toledo. They had harbored a long-standing

grudge against Cordoba for moving the capital out of Toledo. Abdur Rahman put down each of the rebellions with firmness. When he was victorious, he treated the vanquished with dignity and won over their allegiance. The principalities of Bobastro, Badejuz, Zamorra, Simancas, Osma and Toledo were subdued one by one. He then turned his attention to the Christian territories to the north. The Christian chieftains had conducted numerous raids on the Emir's territories and had devastated border areas. In a series of brilliant campaigns, Abdur Rahman forced Leon, Castile, Navarre, Galicia and Alva into paying him tribute.

The challenge from the Fatimids was far more serious. The Fatimids considered the progeny of Imam Ismail to be the only legitimate heir to the leadership of the Islamic community and were bitter enemies both of the Abbasids in Baghdad and the Omayyads in Cordoba. By 923, they had captured all of North Africa, had displaced the Idrisi kingdom from Morocco and Algeria and had their eyes on Spain. A renegade Spanish chieftain, Omar bin Hafsun, who had become a Christian, openly challenged the rule of Cordoba and sought the help not only of the Fatimids but also of the Christian principalities to the north. Abdur Rahman was busy at the time rendering military assistance to his Idrisi allies against the Fatimids. He was forced to withdraw from North Africa to face the rebel.

The Fatimids sent a fleet across the Mediterranean to assist Omar bin Hafsun, but this sea-borne force was intercepted by Abdur Rahman's navy and was destroyed. Cornered in the mountains of eastern Spain, Omar bin Hafsun sued for peace. Abdur Rahman pardoned him and let him keep a small principality under his own authority.

The breakup of tribal influence enabled Abdur Rahman to establish a standing professional army of more than 150,000, perhaps the finest in the world at that time. But it also destroyed the tribal cohesion that had sustained Umayyad power in Spain for more than 200 years. In the view of Ibn Khaldun, this act sowed the seeds for the ultimate disintegration of the Spanish Caliphate of Cordoba.

In North Africa the Fatimid threat was persistent. In 910, the Fatimid Ubaidullah had declared himself the Mahdi and the Caliph of all Muslims. At this time, the Caliphate in Baghdad was in disarray and the Abbasid Caliphs had become mere pawns in the hands of their Turkish generals. The Buyids from Persia had become rulers of the Abbasid domains in all but name. These were clear signals that the Abbasids had lost their political and military power. In 929, Abdur Rahman declared himself to be the Caliph and took the title of Emir-ul-Momineen. In effect, this was a response to the political and military challenge from the Fatimids in North Africa. Thus there emerged three claimants to the Caliphate in the 10<sup>th</sup> century. With the ascent of Muiz in 953 and his capture of Egypt in 969, the balance of power tilted decidedly in favor of the Fatimids. One by one, Fatimid armies overran Spanish strongholds in North Africa. Except for a small stretch of land around Ceuta, Muiz subdued all of North Africa. The Fatimids had not given up their dream of capturing Andalus and continued to provide assistance to any insurrection that challenged Omayyad rule in the peninsula. In 955, Abdur Rahman's navy intercepted and sank some of Muiz's ships ferrying supplies to Andalusian insurgents. In retaliation, Muiz ordered his viceroy in Sicily, Hassan bin Ali, to raid and lay waste the Spanish coast of Almeria.

The mutual rivalry between the Omayyads in Spain and the Fatimids in Egypt destroyed the last chance for Muslims to conquer southern Europe. After the disintegration of the Carolingian Empire in France in the 9<sup>th</sup> century, Europe was in political disarray. The devastating raids from the Nordic Vikings had crippled northern and central Europe. Faced with this onslaught from the north, Europe was vulnerable in the south. However, the Sunni Omayyads and the Shi'a Fatimids spent more energy fighting each other than projecting their power into Europe. Indeed, the emergence of two centers of political power in the Mediterranean, one based in Cairo and the other in Cordoba, gave an opportunity to the Christian

monarchs to play off one against the other. Sensing this historic rivalry, the Greek monarch of Constantinople, involved as he was in a military confrontation with the Fatimids for control of Crete and Sicily, sent an ambassador to Abdur Rahman III. The monarchs of Germany, France and the principalities of the Italian peninsula made similar representations. Spain, under Abdur Rahman had become a major player in the geopolitics of North Africa, southern Europe and West Asia.

Abdur Rahman was a consummate soldier, an accomplished scholar, a great builder and a just ruler. He forged Spain into a single military-political entity shorn of the petty rivalries of regional chiefs and Arab tribes. Scholars flocked to his court from Kairouan, Cairo, Baghdad and Bukhara. His personal collection of books exceeded 400,000. The court nobility, copying the ways of their sovereign, had their own collections of books. No writer, no scribe, no teacher was without work. Under Abdur Rahman, Cordoba grew to be the largest and most cosmopolitan urban center in the world with a population exceeding one million. The city had more than 100,000 homes, 80,000 shops, 700 mosques and 900 public baths. The streets were paved and were patrolled. The shops were filled with goods from all over the world and Andalusian merchants were known in distant parts of Eurasia. Agriculture received particular attention and Spain became an agricultural paradise. Abdur Rahman enlarged and embellished the great mosque of Cordoba. His principal architectural achievement was the construction of his capital Madinat az Zahra, a marble city constructed three miles from Cordoba. So beautiful was this city that visitors came from far and wide to see and marvel at its beauty.

Abdur Rahman ruled over his kingdom with justice towards people of all religions. Christians and Jews received equal protection under the law. Spain became the most cosmopolitan kingdom on earth. The Caliph made no distinction between his own household and the common man in matters of justice. When one of his sons was tried by the courts and convicted of treason, Abdur Rahman sentenced him to death against the entreaties of his own household. After the sentence was carried out, Abdur Rahman was so struck with sorrow that he was never seen to smile again.

Abdur Rahman III passed away in the year 961 and was buried at Madinat-az-Zahra. His reign marked the zenith of Islamic civilization in Spain and the pinnacle of its golden age.

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