

# History of Islam

An encyclopedia of Islamic history

## Omar bin Abdul Aziz

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

Islam, meaning surrender to the Will of God, is an eternal idea. Muslims assert that it is the pristine faith of mankind, subscribed to by the first created humans, Adam and Eve and confirmed by the Messengers of God, including among others, Noah, Abraham, Moses, Jesus and Muhammed. Islam throws a challenge to the community of believers to create a society “enjoining what is right, forbidding what is wrong and believing in God”. Islamic history is a perpetual struggle to meet this challenge in the matrix of human affairs. This struggle is continuous and relentless. Muslims through the centuries have struggled to rediscover the fountain from which the Prophet drank. The corruption that surfaces with time is challenged time and again and a corporal attempt is made at a renewal of faith. Hence, revivalist movements in Islam provide benchmarks from which subsequent historical events can be measured and understood.

Omar bin Abdul Aziz, also known in history as Omar II, was the first revivalist Emir in Islamic history. After Muawiya, the character of the Caliphate changed and dynastic rule was established. The corruption of the Omayyads reached its crescendo with Karbala. The Omayyads built lavish palaces, surrounded themselves with servants and maids, accumulated enormous estates, treated the public treasury as their privy purse and lived like princes and kings. There was no accountability for their wealth or for their actions. The populace had no say in the affairs of the state. The Caliph was not nominated nor could he be questioned. The people were there merely to obey the strongman, pay taxes and serve in the armed forces.

Omar bin Abdul Aziz became the Emir by a coincidence of history. When the Omayyad Emir Sulaiman (714-717) lay on his deathbed, he was advised that he could earn the pleasure of God by following the example of the early Caliphs and nominating someone besides one of his own sons as the next Emir. He therefore dictated in his will that Omar bin Abdul Aziz, a distant cousin, was to succeed him and Omar bin Abdul Aziz was to be followed by Yazid bin Abdul Malik. Omar bin Abdul Aziz was a man of polish and experience, having served as the governor of Egypt and Madina for more than twenty-two years. He had been educated and trained by a well-known scholar of the age, Saleh bin Kaisan. Before his accession to the Caliphate, Omar bin Abdul Aziz was a dashing young man, fond of fashion and fragrance. But when he accepted the responsibilities of Caliphate, he proved to be the most pious, able, far-sighted and responsible of all the Omayyad Emirs.

Indeed, Omar bin Abdul Aziz set out to reform the entire political, social and cultural edifice of the community and to bring back the transcendental values that had governed the Islamic state in its infancy. He started by setting a good example in his own person. When news reached him of his nomination to the Caliphate, he addressed the people, "O people! The responsibilities of the Caliphate have been thrust upon me without my desire or your consent. If you choose to select someone else as the Caliph, I will immediately step aside and will support your decision". Such talk was a breath of fresh air to the public. They unanimously elected him.

Omar bin Abdul Aziz discarded his lavish life style and adopted an extremely ascetic life after the example of Abu Dhar Ghifari, a well-known companion of the Prophet. Abu Dhar is known in history as one of the earliest mystics and Sufis in Islam who retired from public life in Madina during the period of Uthman (r) and lived in a hermitage some distance away from the capital. Omar bin Abdul Aziz discarded all the pompous appendages of a princely life—servants, slaves, maids, horses, palaces, golden robes and landed estates—and returned them to the public treasury. His family and relatives were given the same orders. The garden of Fidak provides a good example. This was a grove of palms owned by the Prophet. The Prophet's daughter Fatima (r) had asked for this garden as an inheritance but the Prophet had declined saying that what a Prophet owned belonged to the whole community. Fatima(r) had pressed her claim before Abu Bakr (r) but Abu Bakr (r) had denied the request saying that he could not agree to something that the Prophet had not agreed to. After the Caliphate of Ali (r), Fidak had been made a personal estate of the Omayyads. Omar restored Fidak to the public treasury, as a trust for the whole community.

The Omayyads had no accountability to the treasury. To support their lavish life styles, they collected enormous taxes from Persia and Egypt. They compelled traders to sell them their merchandise at discount prices. The Emir's appointees received gifts of gold and silver in return for favors. Omar reversed the process. Omar abolished such practices, punished corrupt officials and established strict accountability.

Some Omayyad officials, drunk with power, mistreated the conquered peoples. Oftentimes, their property was confiscated without due process of law. Contrary to the injunctions of the *Shariah*, even though people in the new territories accepted Islam, they continued to be subject to *Jizya*. Those who refused to pay the taxes were subject to harsh punishment. Omar abolished these practices and ensured fairness in the collection of taxes. Gone was the oppression of Hajjaj in Iraq and Qurrah bin Shareek in Egypt. The populace responded with enthusiastic support of the new Caliph. Production increased. Ibn Kathir records that thanks to the reforms undertaken by Omar, the annual revenue from Persia alone increased from 28 million dirhams to 124 million dirhams.

Following the example of the Prophet, Omar bin Abdul Aziz sent out emissaries to China and Tibet, inviting their rulers to accept Islam. It was during the time of Omar bin Abdul Aziz that Islam took roots and was accepted by a large segment of the population of Persia and Egypt. When the officials complained that because of conversions, the *jizya* revenues of the state had experienced a steep decline, Omar wrote back saying that he had accepted the Caliphate to invite people to Islam and not to become a tax collector. The infusion of non-Arabs in large number into the fold of Islam shifted the center of gravity of the empire from Madina and Damascus to Persia and Egypt. As we shall elaborate in later chapters, this development had far reaching consequences during the Abbasid revolution (750) and the evolution of the schools of *Fiqh* (760-860).

Omar bin Abdul Aziz was a scholar of the first rank and surrounded himself with great scholars like Muhammed bin Kaab and Maimun bin Mehran. He offered stipends to teachers and encouraged education. Through his personal example, he inculcated piety, steadfastness, business ethics and moral

rectitude in the general population. His reforms included strict abolition of drinking, forbidding public nudity, elimination of mixed bathrooms for men and women and fair dispensation of *Zakat*. He undertook extensive public works in Persia, Khorasan and North Africa, including the construction of canals, roads, rest houses for travelers and medical dispensaries.

Omar bin Abdel Aziz was the first Caliph to commission a translation of the Qur'an from Arabic into another language. Upon the request of the Raja (king) of Sindh (in modern day Pakistan), Omar bin Abdel Aziz had the Qur'an translated into the ancient Sindhi language and had it sent to the Raja (718 CE). To put this event into historical context, this was within ten years of the conquest of Sindh and Multan by Muhammed bin Qasim and the conquest of Spain by Tariq and Musa.

Omar bin Abdul Aziz was also the first Emir to attempt a serious reconciliation of political and religious differences among Muslims. Since the time of Muawiya, it had become customary for khatibs to insult the name of Ali ibn Abu Talib (r) in Friday sermons. Omar bin Abdul Aziz abolished this obnoxious practice and decreed instead that the following passage from the Qur'an be read instead: "God commands you to practice justice, enjoins you to help and assist your kin and He forbids obscenity, evil or oppression, so that you may remember Him" (Qur'an, 16:90). It is this passage that is still recited in Friday sermons the world over. He treated Bani Hashim and the Shi'as with fairness and dignity. He even extended his hand to the Kharijites. According to Ibn Kathir, he wrote to the Kharijite leader Bostam, inviting him to an open discussion about the Caliphate of Uthman (r) and Ali (r). He went so far as to stipulate that should Bostam convince him, Omar would willingly repent and change his ways. Bostam sent two of his emissaries to the Caliph. During the discussions, one of the emissaries accepted that Omar was right and gave up Kharijite extremism. The other went back unconvinced. Even so, the Caliph did not persecute the man.

Omar bin Abdul Aziz was the first Muslim ruler who moved his horizons from external conquests to internal revival. He recalled his armies from the borders of France, India and the outskirts of Constantinople. There were few internal uprisings and disturbances during his Caliphate. Islam had momentarily turned its horizons on its own soul, to reflect upon its historical condition and replenish its moral reservoir. Faith flourished, as it had during the period of Omar ibn al Khattab (r). It is for these reasons that historians refer to Omar bin Abdul Aziz as Omar II and classify him as the fifth of the rightly guided Caliphs, after Abu Bakr (r), Omar (r), Uthman (r) and Ali (r).

But greed does not surrender its turf to faith without a battle. The reforms of Omar II were too much for the disgruntled Omayyads and the rich merchants. Omar II was poisoned and he died in the year 719, after a rule that lasted only two and a half years. He was thirty-nine years old at the time of his death. And with him died the last chance for Omayyad rule.

Comments are closed.

[Blog at WordPress.com.](http://Blog.atWordPress.com)