

History of Islam

An encyclopedia of Islamic history

Omar Ibn al Khattab (r)

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Summary: Summary: History bends to the will of man when it is exercised with faith and steadfastness. Omar (r) was one such man. He bent history to his will, leaving a legacy that successor generations have looked upon as a model to copy. He was one of the greatest of conquerors, a wise administrator, a just ruler, a monumental builder and a man of piety who loved God with the same intensity that other conquerors of his caliber have loved gold and wealth. The Prophet planted the seed of Tawhid. At its most elemental level, Tawhid means belief in one God. In its historical sense, it connotes a God-focused civilization, where all human effort is directed towards seeking Divine pleasure. Abu Bakr (r), with his wise intercession at an historic moment, ensured that the seed did not perish with the death of the Prophet. It was during the Caliphate of Omar (r) that the seed grew into a full-blown tree and bore fruit. Omar (r) shaped the historical edifice of Islam and whatever Islam became or did not become in subsequent centuries is due primarily to the work of this historical figure. Indeed, Omar (r) was the architect of Islamic civilization.

The achievements of Omar ibn al Khattab (r) are all the more remarkable considering that he lacked the advantage of birth, nobility or wealth that some of the other Companions enjoyed. He was born into the tribe of Bani 'Adi, a poorer cousin amongst the Quraish. In his own words, before he accepted Islam, he was at various times a petty merchant and a shepherd who would often lose his sheep. From such humble beginnings, he rose to weld together an empire greater in extent than either that of Rome or Persia and governed it with the wisdom of a Solomon and administered it with the sagacity of a Joseph.

Upon his election to the Caliphate, Omar (r) was faced with the immediate geopolitical situation in West Asia. The Arabian Peninsula is a vast desert, except for its southwestern tip near Najran and Yemen, where the monsoons bring in rain from the Indian Ocean and make the area fertile. To the north, the extent of the desert is marked by the Jordan River, which separates it from the hills of Palestine and Lebanon. To the east, its boundaries are marked by the Euphrates. The area between the Rivers Euphrates and Tigris is called the Jazira (island). This area, known in ancient times as Mesopotamia, was called *Iraq e Arab* in the early Islamic period. The waters of the two rivers irrigate this area and have made it the cradle of civilizations. East of the River Tigris, the land gradually rises into the Persian Plateau leading into the heartland of ancient Fars. The Arabs called this area *Iraq e Ajam* and it included the Farsi (Persian) speaking areas of Khuzistan, Hamadan, Fars, Persepolis, Isfahan, Azerbaijan, Khorasan, Makran and Baluchistan.

The Persian and Byzantine empires held the balance of power in the region with the Euphrates River as the historical divide between their respective areas of influence. Persia also controlled Yemen and the territories along the Red Sea north to Mecca and Madina. The emergence of Islam and the unification of the Arabs altered this balance of power. It was a situation that neither the Byzantines nor the Persians could ignore. Khosroe, the emperor of Persia, was on record as having ordered an assault on Madina. The Byzantines had attacked on the northern frontier and had killed the Muslim general Zaid bin Haris (632). Border clashes had begun during the Caliphate of Abu Bakr (r) between the newborn Islamic state and the two superpowers. The triumph of Omar (r) over the mighty empires of Persia and Byzantium within a brief span of ten years is one of the most remarkable stories in military history.

The Muslim eruption was impelled by a sense of mission inculcated by Islam. It was a matter of faith. This faith dictated that humankind is born into freedom and is beholden only to the transcendence of God. Islamic civilization is God-centered and its mission is to establish Divine patterns upon this earth. From this perspective, any social or political system that imposed subservience to a despotic ruler or an oppressive empire detracted from this transcendence and deserved to be challenged.

When Omar (r) became the Caliph, the campaigns in Syria were ongoing. The Battle of Yarmuk (636) had broken Byzantine resistance but Palestine was not yet subdued. Omar (r) commanded Amr bin al As to proceed from Yarmuk to Jerusalem. Since resistance was hopeless, the Patriarch of Jerusalem offered the keys to the city provided the Caliph himself came up to accept them. When the Caliph heard of this, he appointed Ali ibn Abu Talib (r) as the acting Caliph and set out north from Madina. Omar ibn al Khattab (r) was now the Caliph of all of Arabia and of surrounding territories. He could have traveled as a conqueror in pomp and luxury. But he, like the other Companions, had received his training from the Prophet Muhammed (p). Theirs was the kingdom of heaven and not of this earth. They held the key to the treasures of the earth but only as a Divine Trust as servants of the Lord. Omar (r) traveled north on one camel with a single attendant, taking turns with him for the ride. As he approached Jerusalem, it so happened, the attendant was on the camel and the Caliph was walking alongside. The potentates of Jerusalem thought that the rider was the Caliph and the man on foot, in his patched clothes, was the servant. They offered abeyance to the rider. When the Muslim commanders greeted the real Caliph, the potentates of Jerusalem were astonished and bowed down in awe.

Omar (r) treated the conquered people with unsurpassed magnanimity. The capitulation document signed with the Christians upon the fall of Jerusalem provides an example:

“This is the safety given by a servant of God, the leader of the faithful, Omar ibn al Khattab (r) to the people of Ilia. This safety is for their life, property, church and cross, for the healthy and the sick and for all their co-religionists. Their churches shall neither be used as residence nor shall they be demolished. No harm shall be done to their churches or their boundaries. There shall be no decrease in their crosses or riches. There shall neither be any compulsion in religion nor shall they be harmed.”

The document speaks for itself. The Muslim armies were fighting for the freedom of worship, not for religious conversion. They considered it their mission on earth to free humankind from the yoke of exploitation and abuse. The conquered people were regarded as *dhimmi*s (from the word *dhimana*, meaning trust or responsibility). They were considered a trust not to be violated as has happened time and again in history. Omar (r) stayed for a few days in Jerusalem and after inspecting the army positions in Syria, returned to Madina.

The Byzantines tried to regroup in Egypt and use it as a base to recover Syria. In 641, Omar (r) sent an expedition under Amr bin al As to Alexandria. The Copts were neutral in this test of strength between the Byzantines and the Muslims. Alexandria fell and the Muslim armies continued their advance as far

as Tripoli in Libya.

Meanwhile, the eastern front with Persia was active. The Persians did not take lightly their losses in the border areas west of the Euphrates River. They reorganized, put their western defenses under the famous Khorasani General Rustam and reinforced him with the services of two able officers, Narsi and Jaban. The withdrawal of Khalid bin Walid from the Iraqi front to Syria had weakened Muslim defenses. So, Al Muthannah went to Madina and sought additional troops. Caliph Omar (r) permitted him to raise a new army, allowing for the first time the recruitment of men from the Arab tribes that had at one time become apostates. Abu Obaid Saqafi was selected to lead this new army. Skirmishes started immediately between the opposing forces. Abu Obaid met the Persian officer Jaban at the Battle of Namaraq and defeated him. He followed it up with a victory over Narsi at the Battle of Maqatia. Undaunted, the Persian commander Rustam sent a new army under Mardan Shah and reinforced it with a hundred war elephants. The Arabs had no experience fighting elephant-mounted troops. In the ensuing battle, Abu Obaid was trampled under one of the elephants and the Arab forces were sent reeling back across the Euphrates.

It was now obvious that what had started as a border war had become a test of strength between the Muslims and the Persian Empire. Omar (r) called a meeting of all the Arab nobles for consultation and offered to personally lead a campaign to Persia. However, upon the advice of Ali ibn Abu Talib (r), the Caliph chose Sa'ad ibn Waqqas to lead an army of 20,000 towards Persia. Sa'ad ibn Waqqas was a Companion of the Prophet and a veteran of the Battle of Badr. Among those embarking on the mission were seventy Companions of the Prophet who had fought at the Battle of Badr. The inclusion of *Badri* Companions increased the fervor of Muslims to a feverish pitch. Even some of the Christian tribes in the border areas offered to support the Muslim army. On the opposing side, the Persian General Rustam was at the head of 50,000 seasoned soldiers.

As directed by the Caliph, Sa'ad ibn Waqqas sent a peace mission to Rustam headed by Muthannah ibn Harith. Rustam, cognizant of the motivation of the Arab soldiers, directed the Arab delegation to Emperor Yazdgard. The Persian Emperor received the Muslims with great pomp and offered to pay them a rich bounty provided they returned to their homeland. In reply, Muthannah ibn Harith offered the Emperor three choices. One, accept submission to God, become a Muslim and a brother in faith. Two, accept protection of the Muslim state and pay *jizya*. Three, if the first two were unacceptable, face war. The Emperor was upset at these suggestions, told them he would have them killed were they not on a peace mission and sent them back with a handful of dust from the Persian soil, admonishing that the Arabs would get no more than that pitiful amount of dust from Persia.

War became inevitable and the trumpet was blown. At this juncture, Rustam made a tactical blunder. The Persian soldiers wore heavy armor, unsuitable for warfare in the desert. The Arabs, on the other hand, had no armor and were used to mobile desert warfare. Against his own better judgment, Rustam chose for the upcoming confrontation the plain of Qadasia in the desert, about forty miles from the Euphrates. The desert heat sapped the strength of the Persian soldiers in their heavy armor. In the initial combat, the elephants in the Persian army created enormous difficulty for the Muslim warriors. For two days, the battle went on and was indecisive. On the third day the wheels of fortune turned as the Arab soldiers, seeking to neutralize the elephants, shot sharp arrows at their eyes. The injured elephants turned around and dispersed, trampling their own troops. Rustam fought bravely, but was slain in battle.

The Battle of Qadasia (637) was one of the turning points in world history. It marked the end of the Persian Empire and the beginning of the Islamic Empire. Persia became a part of the Islamic world and for fourteen hundred years has been a pivotal region in Muslim affairs.

From Qadasia, Sa'ad ibn Waqqas advanced to the old Biblical city of Babylon, which offered only feeble resistance. The cities of Kosi and Babrasheer followed suit. Madayen, the capital of the Persian Empire, was now within striking distance. The bulk of the Persian army had been lost in the Battle of Qadasia. Yazdgard tried to slow down the advance of Arab troops by destroying the bridge that linked the western shores of the Tigris River to Madayen. These tactics, however, proved futile. The Arabs put their horses into the river, waded across to the other shore and Madayen fell in 637. The treasures of the Persian capital were now in Muslim hands. Untold amounts of gold, silver, jewels, carpets and artifacts were captured and transported to Madina. Included in the war booty was an elephant that aroused a great deal of curiosity among the ladies in Madina.

Yazdgard fled Madayen towards Merv, in northeastern Persia. Realizing that the war with the Muslims was not just a skirmish but a full-scale invasion, he called on all Persians and their allies to defend Persia. A huge army of 150,000 was assembled and put under the command of Mardan Shah who had already seen action against the Arabs at the Battle of the Euphrates. To inspire the Persians, Mardan Shah was vested with the *durafsh*, the national emblem of Persia. The governor of Kufa, Ammar ibn Yassir sent this information to the Caliph and asked for additional troops. Omar (r) sent a corps of 30,000 under the command of Numan ibn Muquran. Peace talks proved futile and the two armies met at the Battle of Nahawand. In the initial engagements, Numan ibn Muquran was seriously wounded but the Muslim commanders kept this fact secret from friend and foe alike. Towards the end of the first day, the enemy lines broke and the Muslims were victorious. Numan did not survive his wounds and died that evening.

Persian resistance continued from its eastern provinces. Yazdgard set himself up in Merv and took personal command of his forces. Realizing that an injured enemy is a dangerous enemy, Caliph Omar (r) resolved to put an end to all Persian resistance. From Nahawand, the Arab armies split up, and mounted a multi-pronged drive against Persian strongholds. Abi al Aas captured Persepolis. Aasim ibn Amr took Sistan. Hakam ibn Umair conquered Makran and Baluchistan. Azerbaijan fell to Othba ibn Farqad. Buqair ibn Abdulla subdued Armenia. A contingent under Ahnaf ibn Qais marched on Khorasan. By the year 650, the Persian Empire was completely under the control of Arab armies. Yazdgard fled Persia and died in exile.

Within a decade after the election of Omar ibn al Khattab (r) as the Caliph, the map of West Asia and North Africa had changed. Madina was now the capital of the largest empire in the world, extending from Tripoli in North Africa to Samarqand in Central Asia. This empire was ruled not by a king or a general but by a revolutionary creed: "There is no deity but God and Muhammed is His Messenger". The Caliph was no more than a servant of God, and the keeper of Divine Laws.

When Caliph Omar (r) was informed of the victories over Persia, he went to the mosque in Madina and addressed the people:

" O believers! The Persians have lost their kingdom. They cannot harm us any more. God has made you inherit their country, their properties and their riches, so that He may test you. Therefore, you should not change your ways. Otherwise, God will bring forth another nation in place of you. I feel anxiety for our community from our own people".

These were prophetic words. As we shall see in other articles, the riches of Persia did change the ways of some in Madina and led to the civil wars that tore the Islamic community apart.

Omar (r) was a superb administrator. He established a *Shura* (consultative) council and sought advice on matters of state. He divided the far-flung empire into the provinces of Mecca, Madina, Syria, Jazira (the fertile region between the Rivers Tigris and Euphrates in Iraq), Basra, Khorasan, Azerbaijan, Persia and

Egypt. A governor, answerable to the Caliph, was appointed for each province. The responsibilities and the limits of each governor's authority were clearly defined. Governors who used their office to get rich were severely punished. The executive and the judiciary were separated and kadis were appointed to administer justice.

Caliph Omar (r) had the open mindedness to accept and adopt what was good in other civilizations. Where applicable, he learned from and adopted the technologies and administrative practices of the conquered people. Windmills were in extensive use in Persia at the time and Omar (r) ordered the construction of windmills in several of the Arab cities, including Madina. When Abu Huraira returned with a large booty from Bahrain, there were differences among the Madinites as to how to divide it up. Khalid bin Walid, observing the divisions, suggested to the Caliph that a department of documentation be set up in Madina similar to the ones he had seen in Persia. Caliph Omar (r) inquired about the Persian practices and after satisfying himself that they were indeed applicable to the Caliphate, ordered that a department of documentation be set up. As most Arabs were illiterate, he hired Persian scribes to man this new department. The scribes documented each item of booty and the claims on each, so that the Caliph could equitably divide it up among the claimants. Later, the department was expanded to document all transactions of the treasury and of the army. Following the example of Omar ibn al Khattab (r), the preparation and maintenance of documentation became an honored profession among Muslims, and Caliphs and sultans alike, down to the Ottomans in modern times, kept this tradition alive.

It was during the Caliphate of Omar (r) that Islamic jurisprudence and its methodologies based on the Qur'an, *Sunnah*, *ijma* and *qiyas* were fully established. The edicts of Omar (r), reflecting the consensus of the Companions, provided the foundation for the Maliki School of *Fiqh* that emerged a hundred years later.

The military was organized professionally. Soldiers were paid and defensive cantonments were established at Madina, Kufa, Basra, Mosul, Fustat (Cairo), Damascus, Edesa and Jordan. Finance, accounting, taxation and treasury departments were organized with full accountability. Police, prisons and postal units were established.

The land was surveyed and agriculture was encouraged. Old canals were excavated and new ones built. Large areas of land were brought under cultivation. Roads were laid out and were regularly patrolled. A traveler could move with safety all the way from Egypt to Khorasan in Central Asia.

The vast territories of West Asia and North Africa were welded into a free trade zone. Trade fostered prosperity. Education was encouraged and teachers paid. The study of Qur'an, *Hadith*, language, literature, writing and calligraphy received patronage. Omar (r) was himself a poet of repute and a noted orator. Over 4,000 mosques were built during the Caliphate of Omar (r).

Technology such as the construction of windmills was encouraged. Old bridges and roads were repaired and new ones built. A population census was taken after the example of the Chinese in the Tang dynasty. And it was Omar (r) who started the Islamic calendar based on the Hijra of the Prophet.

It is reported that Omar (r) wept when the following verse in the Qur'an was revealed to the Prophet: "We offered the trust to the mountains, heavens and the earth, but they declined, being afraid thereof, but humankind accepted it, indeed humankind was unjust and foolish"(Qur'an, 33:72-73). Omar (r) understood that the trust referred to here is human free will. Humankind, drunk with the love of God, accepted this trust, while all other creation declined it. When the will of man is exercised in a manner that befits human nobility, it elevates him to a position higher than that of the angels. Humankind has a

tryst with destiny, to realize its own sublime nature, in the matrix of human affairs. When free will is abused, it reduces humans to the most wretched of creatures. No man understood this better than Omar (r) and few since the Prophet carried this trust with as much wisdom, humility, determination, sensitivity, persistence and courage. Measured by any yardstick, Omar (r) was one of the greatest figures in human history.

Omar ibn al Khattab (r) laid the foundation of Islamic civilization. He was the historical figure who institutionalized Islam and determined the manner in which Muslims would relate to each other and to non-Muslims and would strive to fulfill the mission of *Tawhid* on earth.

Ironically, this man of justice was assassinated for a verdict he had given in a civil case brought before him. One of the Companions, Mugheera bin Sho'ba, rented a house to a Persian carpenter named Abu Lulu Feroze. The rent was two dirhams a day, a sum Abu Lulu felt was too high. He complained to the Caliph Omar (r) who gathered all the facts, listened to both sides and gave the judgment that the rent was fair. This seemingly minor incident caused one of the biggest upheavals in Islamic history. Abu Lulu was so distraught at the verdict that he resolved to take the life of the Caliph. The next morning, as Omar (r) appeared at the mosque to lead the prayer, Abu Lulu hid in a corner, his double-edged sword concealed under his long robes. As the Caliph stood at the head of the congregation reciting the Qur'an, Abu Lulu jumped at him and thrust his double-edged sword into the Caliph's stomach. The internal bleeding could not be stopped and Omar (r), the citadel of the community of believers, passed away the following day. The year was 645.

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