

History of Islam

An encyclopedia of Islamic history

The Conquest of Spain

Contributed by Prof. Dr. Nazeer Ahmed, PhD

The conquest of Spain was the beginning of a new era in world history. It was the first interaction of Islamic civilization with the Latin West. For centuries, Muslim Spain was a beacon of knowledge to a European continent that was shrouded in the stupor of the Dark Ages. It was Spain, along with southern Italy, that was destined to act as a conduit for learning to the West. It played a central role in the reawakening of Europe.

The very name Andalus conjures up images of a bygone golden age of a brilliant civilization. Spain, as Andalus is known today, is situated in the northwestern corner of the Mediterranean. It is a peninsula, bound to the west by the Atlantic Ocean and to the east by the Mediterranean Sea. To the north the Pyrenees Mountains separate it from France and the rest of Europe. To the south the narrow Straits of Gibraltar connect the waters of the Atlantic with the Mediterranean. Geographically, it is a part of the Mediterranean world, although topographically, the rugged mountains of the Peninsula make it more a part of North Africa than southern Europe.

The Atlantic Ocean had arrested the westward advance of Muslim armies. But the narrow straits separating Morocco from Spain were not wide enough to stop their inexorable march northward into Europe. They were propelled by the vision of a world order wherein tyranny was abolished and freedom of religion guaranteed. The early Muslims considered *Tawhid* (meaning, a God-centered civilization) to be a Divine trust and the establishment of Divine patterns on earth, a mission. Neither the ocean nor the desert was an insurmountable barrier in their drive to establish a just order on the globe.

Faith was the driver for centralization of power during the first centuries of Islamic rule, just as today economics is the driver for centralization of power in the world. Faith cements civilization, advances knowledge and brings prosperity. Absence of faith destroys civilization, fosters ignorance and invites poverty. When the human soul is motivated by faith, nothing in this world—not greed, nor passion nor even glory—can detract it from the single-minded pursuit of a higher goal. People with faith work together and create civilizations. It is only when faith is weak that greed and passion win, co-operative struggle becomes impossible and civilization crumbles.

In the 5th century, the Visigoths conquered Spain and established a kingdom there with Toledo as their capital. Not noted for their skills in administration and statecraft, the Visigoth monarchs invited the Latin Church in 565 to manage the affairs of state. In return, the church obtained official sanction to propagate its faith. The economic condition of the Spanish peasant improved little under this

arrangement because he was now subject to double taxation, one from the despotic monarchs and the other from the local monasteries. The rich lived in opulence while the farmers suffered abject poverty. The condition of the Jews was even worse. They were precluded from owning land and prohibited from openly practicing their religion. When they protested, the Church came down hard on them. In 707, when the Visigoth king Vietza slackened in the persecution of the Jews, the clergy promptly deposed him and installed a playboy army officer, Rodriguez, as the new king. The Jews were forced into slave labor and their women condemned to servitude.

The contrast between Spain and North Africa at the beginning of the 8th century was as marked as it can be between two geographically adjacent areas. The Muslims had arrived on the scene with a new creed and a new mission, preaching the freedom of man and justice before the law. The openness of the Muslims was not unknown in Spain and many of the serfs and the Jews had escaped and found a new home in Maghrib al Aqsa (Morocco).

North Africa was seething with vibrant energy. The Berber revolts had been overcome. The Berbers were enlisting in the Muslim armies with the newfound zeal of faith. In Damascus, Waleed I had ascended the Omayyad throne. A skillful administrator and shrewd statesman, he had successfully crushed a rebellion in far-away Khorasan and had even outmaneuvered the Chinese emperor into a stalemate in Sinkiang. Waleed is known in history as the Emir who gathered around himself the most capable generals of any Omayyad. Noteworthy among these generals were Muhammed bin Qasim (the conqueror of Sindh and Multan), Qutaiba bin Muslim (the conqueror of Sinkiang), Musa bin Nusair and Tariq bin Ziyad (conquerors of Spain). The Omayyad governor of the Maghrib, Musa bin Nusair, waged a constant struggle with the Visigoths for the control of Maghrib al Aqsa (The western frontier, today's Morocco). One by one, the Visigoth strongholds on the Mediterranean had been captured. Only Ceuta remained under Visigoth control and Count Julian, a Visigoth deputy, governed it.

It was customary among the Visigoth nobles to send their daughters to the royal palace so they could learn the etiquette of the court. In accordance with this custom, Count Julian sent his daughter Florinda to the court in Toledo. There, the profligate Rodriguez raped her. Julian was outraged and sought to take revenge on Rodriguez for this act of dishonor. Besides, Julian's wife was the daughter of Vietza, whose throne Rodriguez had usurped. At this time, the area around Ceuta was governed by Tariq bin Ziyad, a deputy of Musa bin Nusair. Julian traveled to Kairouan to confer with Musa and ask him to invade Spain and humble Rodriguez. The timing was right. Musa ordered Tariq to cross the straits with a contingent of troops.

According to Ibn Khaldun, there were three hundred Arab and 10,000 Berber troops in the army of Tariq bin Ziyad. The towering rock near which Tariq landed is called Jabl al Tariq, the mountain of Tariq (in English Gibraltar), and the straits separating North Africa from Spain are called the Straits of Gibraltar. Tariq was an outstanding soldier, a brilliant general, a man of faith and determination. He burned the boats that had brought his forces across the straits and extolled his men to march forward in the name of Tawhid or perish in the struggle. A skirmish ensued with the local Visigoth lord, Theodore Meier, in which the latter was soundly defeated. The year was 711.

Rodriguez heard of the invasion and collecting a force of 80,000, advanced to meet the Muslim force. Tariq called for reinforcements and received an additional contingent of 7,000 cavalymen under the command of Tarif bin Malik Naqi (after whom Tarifa in Spain is named). The two armies met at the battlefield of Guadalupe. The Muslims were fighting to establish a just political order whereas the Visigoths were fighting to protect and preserve an oppressive scheme. The Arabs were superior in the art of mobile warfare. They were superb horsemen and had mastered the art of rapid enveloping

movements in their advance from the desert across Asia and . The Visigoths were accustomed to fighting in static, fixed positions. There was no contest. Even though the Muslims were outnumbered, the Visigoths were cut to pieces. Rodriguez was slain in battle.

The defeated Visigoths retreated towards Toledo, the ancient capital of Spain. Tariq divided his troops into four regiments. One regiment advanced towards Cordoba and subdued it. A second regiment captured Murcia. A third advanced north towards Saragossa. Tariq himself moved swiftly towards Toledo. The city surrendered without a fight. Visigoth rule in Spain came to an end.

Meanwhile, Musa bin Nusair landed in Spain with a fresh contingent of Berber troops. His first advance was towards Seville. The defenders closed the city gates and a long siege ensued. The offensive capability of the Arabs, backed by military engineering and technology, was superior to the defensive capabilities of the Visigoths. Musa had brought his Minjaniques (machines) with him, which threw heavy projectiles at the city ramparts demolishing them. After a month, the city surrendered. The Umayyad armies now fanned out across the Spanish peninsula. In rapid succession, Saragossa, Barcelona and Portugal fell one after another. The Pyrenees was crossed and Lyons France was occupied. The year was 712.

Musa was ready to continue his drive into France and Italy. But in the meantime, Caliph Waleed I fell ill in Damascus. In the power struggle that ensued, Musa was called back to take his oath to the next Caliph Sulaiman. Musa appointed his son Abdel Aziz as the Emir of Spain, left another son Abdallah in charge of North Africa and hastened to the Umayyad Capital. During their conquest of Spain, the Muslims had captured an enormous amount of booty. Musa was eager to hurry up and bring the conquered booty to Walid I so that the dying Emir would appreciate the services rendered by Musa. Meanwhile, Sulaiman, the heir-apparent, wrote to Musa to slow down his return so that by the time the war booty arrived in Damascus, Walid I would be dead and the booty would belong to Sulaiman. However, Musa, out of courtesy to the dying Emir, did not oblige Sulaiman. He arrived before Walid died. Sulaiman was very upset at losing his chance to claim the war booty. So, when he ascended the throne, he stripped Musa of all rank, accused him of misappropriating war funds and reduced him to stark poverty. Musa lived the rest of his life as a beggar, half blind and at the mercy of public charity.

The Jews and the peasants in Spain received the Muslim armies with open arms. The serfdoms were abolished and fair wages were instituted. Taxes were reduced to a fifth of the produce. Anyone who accepted Islam was relieved of his servitude. A large number of Spaniards became Muslim to escape the oppression of their former masters. The religious minorities, the Jews and the Christians, received the protection of the state and were allowed participation at the highest levels of the government.

Spain, under Muslim rule, became a beacon of art, science and culture for Europe. Mosques, palaces, gardens, hospitals and libraries were built. Canals were repaired and new ones were dug. New crops were introduced from other parts of the Muslim empire and agricultural production increased. Andalus became the granary of the Maghrib. Manufacturing was encouraged and the silk and brocade work of the peninsula became well known in the trading centers of the world. Andalus was divided into four provinces and efficient administration was established. Cities increased in size and prosperity. Cordoba, the capital, became the premier city of Europe and by the 10th century had over one million inhabitants.

Reader's comments

Dr. Qanita Sedick, Consultant Hematopathologist, Prince Sultan Military Medical City, Riyadh, Kingdom of Saudi Arabia wrote on July 17, 2017:

THE ISLAMIC CALIPHATE OF SPAIN-A BRIEF OVERVIEW

A century after the death of the Prophet (SAW), Islam had spread from the Arabian Peninsula to the Indus and Amu Darya rivers to the Pyrenees Mountains. Baghdad and Cordoba in Spain had become the economic super power of the world. Arabic was the universal language of culture and knowledge as the English language is today.

The Islamic Caliphate of Spain was established and led by early Muslims who were strong in Tawheed.

Al Andalusia, as it was known will forever remain a privileged place in the history of Islam, a dream that was a reality, tattooed in the hearts and minds of all that beholds the remnants of its Islamic splendor.

This magnificent empire began with invasion of Arabs and Berbers from the North, Morocco. In 711 (AH 92), these Arab and Berber forces crossed the strait of Gibraltar (or Jabal Tariq) and established an Islamic Caliphate on the Iberian peninsula. Between 711 and 1084 (AH 477), Islamic Spain, Al Andalusia became a magnificent land from which great scientific, astrological, medicinal and mathematical concepts emerged.

It was Musa ibn Nusayr, a young companion of the Prophet (SAW) and brave warrior with outstanding integrity that mediated events in the region.

Musa bin Nusayr was born in 19 AH during the reign of Umar bin Al Khataab (RA). He received his military training in Syria. During the reign of Marwan bin Al- Hakam (and Umayyad Caliph); he was appointed governor of Egypt and later of Qayrawaan (Tunisia) to bring peace and stability to the Berbers. In North Africa Musa encountered a young Berber from Morocco, Taariq bin Ziyaad. Tariq's excellent commanding skills and superior courage attracted the attention of Musa bin Nusayr who appointed him as ruler of Tangier, a Moroccan Mediterranean city.

Spain was ruled by the Visigoth's who conquered the region in the 5th century and whose tyrannical King Rodriguez was at the time exploiting the inhabitants and ruling with severe oppression and racism. Increased uprisings lead to the ruler of Ceuta near Tangier to seek the assistance of Taariq bin Ziyaad whose reputation as a fair and just ruler had reached across the Mediterranean shores. Taariq sought permission from his senior Musa bin Nusayr. Musa discussed the situation with the caliph of Baghdad at the time, Waleed bin Abdul Maalik who instructed that a reconnaissance expedition be send forth to assess the situation. On the 5th Rajab 92 AH (711), Taariq sailed across the Mediterranean Sea with seven thousand Muslim soldiers mainly Berbers and assembled at the Mountain later known as Jabal Taariq or Gibraltar. At this point Taariq burned the boats that had brought his forces across the straits encouraging his men to strive forth in the name of Allah. He marched towards Toledo to face the king's army of over 100 000 warriors armed with the most powerful equipment. The ensuing battle lasted 8 days. The Muslims were courageous and fearless, their firm faith leading them to a remarkable victory on 28th Ramadan 92 AH. The King fled the battlefield. Taariq marched ahead and conquered the cities of Cordoba, Granada and Malaga. In order to strengthen the Muslim army, Musa bin Nusayr, with eighteen thousand soldiers reached the Iberian shores and conquered Zaragoza, Tarragona and Barcelona. These battles lead Musa and Taariq all the way to central France when Waleed bin Abdul Maalik recalled them back to Damascus thus halting further progression.

Under Muslim rule oppression was abolished, fair wages were instituted and taxes were reduced. Christian and Jews received protection from the state to practice their religion.

The next era of Islamic progression in Andalusia occurred when the Abbasid Caliphate defeated the Umayyad Dynasty and assumed the power of the Caliphate in Baghdad.

In order to establish their position as the Caliphate, the Abbasids shifted the Islamic administration from Damascus to Baghdad and pursued in killing all the important members of the Umayyad Dynasty. Amongst them was the devout and brave Abdurrahman bin Muawiyah (grandson of the Umayyad Caliph Hisham) who escaped the assassins and sought refuge in the Andalusian mountains in 755 (AH 138). Abdurrahman I was deeply religious adhering firmly to the Quran and Sunnah and his superb military and leadership skills ensured the cementing of an early Islamic state. After some years he established himself as the Amir and ruled from the capital Cordoba until 1030 (AH 421).

Abdurrahman I began the construction of the great Cordoba Mosque whose powerful presence symbolized the presence of Islam on the Iberian Peninsula. The grand mosque with its magnificent horseshoe arches became a renowned place to many scholars and scientists from around the world. It was also a central hub for congregational prayer, Islamic jurisprudence, military expeditions, research and learning for the next 300 years. Great scholars of medicine, astrology, mathematics, agriculture, literature and various other sciences both religious and academic emerged from Cordoba. For instance Al Zahrawi is renowned for the invention of surgical tools and sutures.

Each subsequent ruler of the region played a vital role in cementing an Islamic system. Hisham I 788-796 (AH 172-180) introduced a legal system based on Islamic jurisprudence which would be used for centuries to come in the western world. Abdurrahman II, 822-852 (AH 207-38) was a warrior who bravely fought with emerging Christians in the north, the Vikings, internal revolts and continued to consolidate vast territory under his rule. In the year 929 (AH 316) when the Abbasid Caliphate in Baghdad disintegrated he proclaimed the title of Caliph.

As an expression of his increased power he commanded the construction of the magnificent Madinat Al Zahra. Madinat Al Zahra thus became the capital of Islamic rule. Madinat Al Zahra transformed into the ultimate palace of grandeur and luxury.

It was the period of Abdurrahman II that marked the arrival of an individual known as the legendary Ziryab. He was a musician from Iraq who arrived at Madinat Al Zahra and established a school of Music amongst other things. New concepts alien to the simple Berbers and Arabs were introduced by Ziryab. He taught them the etiquette of fine dining and sophisticated singing. Ziryab is also credited with new techniques for cooking and make up, dining with silken tablecloths, new fashions and hairstyles. The result was importation of luxurious consumer goods to obtain this elegant life.

The influence of this materialism on the Muslims in part epitomized by the coming of Ziryab to the Iberian Peninsula may have contributed to the trails and disintegration of Cordoba.

No doubt these influences led the Muslims to preoccupation with extravagance, following worldly desires and abandonment of military expeditions.

The increasing threat of the Christians from the north in the wake of disunity and materialism amongst the Muslims led to decentralization of the power of the Caliphate in Cordoba.

The next one hundred years was marked by the emergence of the Taifa Kings- the proliferation of separate states governed by power hungry kings striving for territory amongst each other.

When the discord of the Taifah kings increased in severity in conjunction to the Christian threat of Alfonso VI in 1086 (AH 479), Yusuf bin Tashafin, the leader of the Al Moravids in Marrakesh was summoned by the Taifah rulers.

The Al Moravids (or Moors) were the Al Murabittun, who ruled Marrakesh at the time dedicating their lives to military expeditions. The empire was founded by Yusuf bin Tashufin between 1058 and 1060 (AH 450-52). They dominated North Africa from 1059 to 1147 (AH 451-539) and subsequently dominated Spain from 1070 to 1146 (AH 412-541).

After being summoned by the Taifah rulers, these powerful warriors surged across the Sahara desert to inflict a crushing defeat on the Christian King Alfonso VI in the famous battle of Zallakah. History bears testament to fearful horses from Alfonso's cavalry bolting from the oncoming Moors, the king himself leaving the battlefield with a dagger in his thigh. Islam was once again firmly established on the Iberian Peninsula.

Yusuf bin Tashafin struggled to unite the Taifah rulers due to differences in legal and religious opinions. He eventually began to occupy Tarifah, Cordoba, Seville, Almeria, Lisbon, Badajoz, Denia, Jativa and Murcia under Al Moravid rule. Before his death in 1106 (AH 500), Yusuf ibn Tashafin designated his son Ali Ibn Yusuf as governor of Al Andalusia. In 1115 (AH 505), Ibn Yusuf conquered the Balearic Islands and the Kingdom of Saragossa.

In 1121 (AH 515) the Al Mohads emerged from Marrakesh. The Al Mohads were Berbers from the Atlas from the Atlas Mountains whose leader was Ibn Tumart 1089-1128 (AH 482-522). Their capital was Tinmal a city near to Marrakesh. They were firm monotheists and Islamic revivalists who believed that the Al Moravids had become lax with religious issues and subjected to extravagance. They declared the Al Moravids infidels and waged a war against them. After the death of Ibn Tumart, Abd Al Mumin was proclaimed the caliph and during his reign, he captured Oran, Tlemclen, Fez, Aghmat, Tangier, Seville and Marrakesh. During their reign the Al Mohads attempted to enforce a strict observance of Islamic laws. A period of uprising and instability followed. As a result of the unrest the Christians fled to the north of Spain. Many Jews relocated to Castille. Within a few generations, many of these Jews had moved on and settled in the south of France. They had brought many principal Arab works with them which they translated into Hebrew and then into Latin which was later distributed throughout Europe. The western world thereby acquiring the classical sciences through Arab translation.

The Al Mohads position was consolidated under the rule of Abu Yaqub Yusuf 1139-1184 (AH 534-580), the successor of Abd Al Mumin. He defeated Alfonso VIII at Alarcos in 1195 (AH 592) laying siege to Madrid, Toledo, Alcala and Gaudalajarra. His son and successor Abu Abdullah Muhammed conquered the Balearic Islands in 1202 (AH 599) however he was defeated at Las Navas de Tolosa in 1212 (AH 609). This battle marked the decline of the Al Mohad dynasty and the gradual entry of the Marinids to the capital Marrakesh. The loss of Al Mohad Seville to the Castillian King Ferdinand III in 1248 marked the end of the Al Mohad dynasty.

The Al Mohads had been religious reformers and attempted to discipline the extravagance of the Hispano-Muslims as evidenced by the more conservative architectural style of the Al Mohads still witnessed to a certain degree in Seville today. During their rule, the Al Mohads founded public libraries under the influence of the Sultan Yusuf ibn Ali who had a passion for books and learning. Unfortunately, all of these libraries were destroyed.

It was during this period that Ibn Rushd, also known as Averroes, the Muslim philosopher who set out to integrate Aristotelian philosophy with Islamic thought was expelled from the Iberian Peninsula by the Al Mohads.

The fall of the Al Mohad dynasty left a vacuum in the Southern Iberia. This resulted in a struggle between native Iberians also known as Muladies. In the ensuing power struggle, Muhammad ibn Nasr Ibn Al Ahmar emerged as a formidable figure. He ruled the frontier town of Arjona and gradually expanded his influence. After much internal conflict and rebellion, he decided to surrender territory to King Ferdinand III of Castille in exchange for a twenty year truce and a tribute of 150 000 maravedis. This point marks the emergence of the Nasrid Kingdom in Granada in 1232.

The Banu Al Ahmar decided to establish a legacy in Granada and in the year 1238 Abdullah Ibn Al Ahmar laid the foundations and commanded the construction of the Al Hambra. The original castle was modest and largely abandoned during the first half of the 11 century. Between 1052 and 1056 the castle was rebuilt by Samuel ibn Nagrallah.

The Al Hambra had no water supply of its own. The Nasrid Sultans devised a complex and ingenious engineering system to divert water higher on the mountain from the Darro River through a network of pipes, communicating reservoirs and waterwheels. Water was channeled from a distant part of the river descending to the Generalife where it was able to serve both the Al Hambra and the city. Thus, the Al Hambra was gradually transformed from the old fortress to a palatine city.

The Nasrids emblazoned the phrase "There is no conqueror but Allah" on all buildings and by this believe, Islam survived for an additional two and half centuries on the Iberian Peninsula under Nasrid rule.

Granada fell under siege and in 1492 (AH 898) Mohammed X11 (Known as Boabdil) surrendered the city to Ferdinand and Isabella.

From the 13th century many Muslims and those converts to Christianity whether sincere or not continued to live in Spain under harsh Christian Monarch rule until 1610 (AH 1019) when they were expelled from Spain by Phillip III.

Initially the Christian Monarchs Ferdinand and Isabella agreed to respect the religion of the Muslims, however they did not honor their promise for very long. The Spanish Inquisition devised by the catholic sovereigns (1478) had begun which terrorized all of Europe.

The Muslims had brought the noble teachings of Islam to Spain and liberated Europe from the dark ages, bringing culture, civilization and knowledge to its shores for 800 years. Under Islamic rule Christians and Jews lived in tranquility. In tribute to this, the Spanish Inquisition instituted by the Catholic Monarchs was wrought with executions of those very same Muslims who refused to denounce their faith and those who denounced their faith out of fear. They were burned alive, burned at the stake and subjected to severe prolonged torture.

In parallel to ongoing torture of Muslims by the catholic Monarchs, captive Muslim scholars were forced to share their knowledge. Spanish Christians who persisted in the study of sciences, medicine, astrology and mathematics were few in number and even nonexistent. Vast numbers of original Arabic scripts and books were also destroyed. The last execution of the Spanish inquisition was in 1826 during the wars of independence.

The Al Hambra is the only palace from the Muslim era that has remained relatively intact because the king and queen declared it a Royal residence and ensured its preservation. It was the wish of the triumphant catholic sovereign to preserve the Al Hambra as an eternal testimony to their conquest.

When Napoleons troops occupied Granada, they established their barracks in the Al Hambra and when forced to flee the city in 1812, they used dynamite to destroy a large number of Towers.

The revolution of 1868 marked another change to the status of the Al Hambra. The state transferred the jurisdiction of the Al Hambra from the crown to itself and declared the complex a national monument in 1870.

CONCLUSION

Islam on the Iberian Peninsula, current day Spain, remained strong for eight centuries.

We have to wonder when beholding the remnants of this glorious period- How did the Muslims lose this domination?

While many theories can be discussed exhaustively, to a large extent we have only ourselves to blame. Preoccupation with extravagance, weak rulers and weakness in faith lead gradually to the loss of Islam on the Iberian Peninsula.

All that remains today of that great period in the world is the name of Allah- emblazoned on its walls, survived intact through centuries of wars, unrest, change and earth quakes bearing testament to that fact that indeed "There is no conqueror but Allah".

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