

III. The Early Spread of Islam

This is a brief section on the expansion of Islam after the death of Muhammad. You are encouraged to take a look at maps, in order to fully comprehend the extent of Islam's influence in the years following the death of Muhammad in 632. The emergence of Islam was based on a militarily and politically expansive society, presenting a cohesive and 'user-friendly' religious framework which was compatible – to varying degrees – with other societies.

Ultimate sovereignty in Islam is with God: Muhammad was God's vice-regent on earth (caliph - successor and deputy). After the death of Muhammad, there was the problem of who was going to lead the Muslim community. According to traditional readings and sources, Muhammad was the Final Prophet - therefore no more Prophets would come to lead the community. There was a need for leadership, in order that the Revelation could be preserved - and Islam could develop and spread further (keeping the momentum established by Muhammad). There was also the need for an arbiter of disputes and maker of community decisions.

Islam promoted ideals of equality amongst believers, therefore the concept of dynastic leadership was contested. There was a series of civil wars, as different parties asserted themselves, and sought control of the Muslim community. The first caliphs - Abu Bakr and 'Umar - were associated with Muhammad, through marriage and clan ties. There are a number of references to them within biographical sources relating to the Prophet. Abu Bakr said, on being proclaimed caliph (apparently recommended by Muhammad):

"O men, if anyone worships Muhammad, Muhammad is dead; if anyone worships God, God is alive, immortal." (cited in *The Life of Muhammad: A Translation of Ishaq's Sirat Rasul Allah*, 1955, 683)

On the death of Muhammad, there was a fear that the tribal alliances he had engendered would dissolve - and that the unity of the Muslim community would fracture (further). Abu Bakr (r. 632-4) affirmed his authority with a series of military campaigns - which carried Islam into (and beyond) the frontier regions of empires.

Abu Bakr maintained the momentum of Islam, and was drawn northwards to richer Syria and Iraq with his army, conquering the Arabian Peninsular and entering Palestine. These military campaigns were maintained by the second caliph 'Umar ibn al-Khattab (r. 634-44), who conquered Damascus in 636. By the end of his reign, Islam could be found within the whole of Arabia, part of the former Sassanian Empire, and the conquered Syrian and Egyptian provinces of the Byzantine Empire.

There were many reasons for this: a change of focus in Mediterranean world, including barbarian invasions, agricultural disrepair, shrinking economic markets, epidemics, and long wars; Arab forces were well organized and

motivated, with military skill and experience; camel transport meant campaigns could be fought over a wide area. Islam may have motivated many, whilst the quest for spoils encouraged others. Some commentators believe that there were possible advantages for some of those 'conquered' to be ruled by Muslims – who may have been more sympathetic to their beliefs (if Christian or Jewish). The Arabic language was shared and spread as a sacred and 'everyday' language, ensuring new Muslim cultural developments, expressions and continuity. There was development of new Muslim cities and settlements, such as Basra and Kufa in Iraq, and Fustat in Egypt (later Cairo), which attracted new migrants.

Power started to shift north, from Arabian peninsular towards the richer and more populous lands of Syria and Iraq - whose new Muslim governors sought greater independence from Arabia:

"By 643 Persia had been overrun... The conquest of Herat and Balkh (651) and the fall of Kabul (664) opened the way to India; Sind, in northeast India, fell to the Muslims in 712.

"Simultaneously, Arab forces pushed west into Egypt, occupying Alexandria in 643, and advancing across North Africa into Cyrenaica. Further progress was held Berber resistance, but the advance was resumed... in 670. After the subjection of the Maghreb, Arab forces crossed the Straits of Gibraltar in 711 and conquered Spain. There were further advances into southern France, but Arab troops met with defeat at Poitiers in 732, and in 759 they withdrew south of the Pyrenees."(Barraclough & Parker, 1993, 104-105)

Tensions and conflicts re-surfaced in the reign of the third caliph, 'Uthman ibn 'Affan (644-56) who was chosen after Umar was assassinated (in a private feud). 'Uthman - an early convert to Islam - came from one of the senior families that had followed Muhammad. 'Uthman sought to reconcile the factions disputing power. However, 'Uthman appointed members of his own clan as provincial governors. This aroused opposition, in Madina (from the sons of Companions and the Prophet's wife A'isha - and in Kufa and Fustat. Some tribes resented the domination of Meccans in their affairs. This unrest led to 'Uthman's murder in 656.

The claimant to the title of caliph was Ali ibn Abi Talib (656-61), a Quraysh, an early convert to Islam, and a cousin of Muhammad who had married Muhammad's daughter Fatima. He was opposed, both by 'Uthman's clan, and by others who disputed his election's validity.

Taking a look at maps helps to facilitate a perspective on the development of Muslim networks, and ideas about knowledge transmission.

This helps to establish key locations of Muslim expansion. This will also develop an appreciation of the geography of the proto-networking of early Muslim communities, and the distances involved.

See, for example, *An Historical Atlas of Islam, Second Revised Edition*, Editor: Hugh Kennedy, Leiden: E.J. Brill, 2002

Examples include:

1. 'The World on the Eve of the Muslim Conquests circa 600 A.D.'
2. 'Early Muslim Conquests' (from Kennedy)
2. 'The Umayyad Caliphate circa 132/750' (from Kennedy)
3. 'The Muslim World circa 287/900' (from Kennedy)
4. 'The Muslim World circa 403/1100' (from Kennedy)
5. 'The Muslim World circa 700/1300' (from Kennedy)

Other historical atlases cover similar themes, and a variety of maps can be found reproduced online. A further recommended atlas is Malise Ruthven & Azim Nanji, *An Historical Atlas of Islam* (Thomson Gale, 2004).

These maps are useful, as they provide an indication of the extent of links between the Near East and other areas at different times. For example, trade links were precursors to Islamic networking, which frequently followed trade routes; military routes also indicate patterns of expansion, although the stereotype of the success of Islamic expansion being "by the sword" should be challenged by the introduction of other factors (for example, trade, culture, language links, and religious affinity). They also indicate the breadth of expansion, as Muslims traversed the globe.

It is not possible within the module to discuss all areas of this historical activity; some elements will appear in other modules, such as Islamic Law. It is suggested that you read the summary of 'Islam' taken from the *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, Online Edition (available through Electronic Resources, Brill Online)

A series of maps is available through Oxford Islamic Studies Online, which highlights the spread of Islam in various regions. These are taken from the *Atlas of the World's Religions: Second Edition*.

For example, [Islam and the Spread of the Sufi Orders](#)

[Islam in Africa](#)

Further reading

Sam I. Gellens, 'The search for knowledge in medieval Muslim societies: a comparative approach', 50-65 in *Muslim Travellers: Pilgrimage, Migration, and the Religious Imagination*, edited by Dale F. Eickelman and James Piscatori, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990