

An Overview of Islam and Muslims

Islam literally means submission and in the context of the global religion it means to submit oneself to the Will of God. The monotheistic religion is based on five principles; affirmation of belief in Allah as God and Muhammad as His messenger, prayer, fasting, pilgrimage and charity. Muslims, literally 'Submitters', lay claim to all prophets from Adam to Muhammad as Islamic theology dictates in the Qur'an (The Recital). The Qur'an is believed to be the actual uncreated Word of God brought to Prophet Muhammad by the Angel Gabriel over a span of approximately twenty-three years. The Qur'an consists of over six thousand verses divided into one hundred and fourteen chapters referred to as *Sūrah*. These verses detail stories of Prophets and nations from times gone by in order to warn present peoples and for them to learn from past communities' mistakes; vivid descriptions of the Unseen which comprises of explanations of the afterlife and details of other species of life and also, injunctions and rulings from which principles can be derived so Muslims can live according to the desire of God. As it is believed that the Prophet is divinely inspired his words, actions and tacit approval are recorded in books of *Hadīth* and like the Qur'an are used to derive principles for everyday life. It is believed that the world will come to an end and a Day of Reckoning will be held upon which all of mankind will be taken to account.

Period of Revelation 610-632

Muhammad was born to Aminah bint Wahb and Abdullah ibn Abdul Muttalib, who died before his birth, during the year 570CE in the trading city of Makkah. He was born in the Hashimite clan of the tribe of Quraish, the aristocrats amongst the Arab tribes. At the age of twenty-five he married Khadijah, a twice divorcee and wealthy businesswoman, and they had six children; two boys who died in infancy and four daughters two of whom would eventually marry the third Caliph Uthman and one who would marry Muhammad's cousin Ali, the fourth Caliph; the descendants from this marriage are revered by both Sunni and Shia'. Muhammad who received no formal education was a man of reflection and righteousness and would regularly seclude himself from society; it was during one of these moments of contemplation when he claimed prophethood after Angel Gabriel brought him the first verses of the Qur'an. Initially, his proclamation was rejected by his polytheistic brethren via ridicule and mockery, however, with time and frustration this changed to physical abuse and social exile. It was within these circumstances in 615 that a small group of Muslims immigrated to Abyssinia (present-day Ethiopia) for protection under the Christian King Negus. It was not until 622 that the Muslims migrated en masse to Yathrib (later to be called Madinah an-Nabi, City of the Prophet, and finally Madinah) to establish the first Islamic state. Over the next several years physical confrontations took place between the Muslims of Madinah and the polytheists of Makkah; three in particular were the Battle of Badr (624), Battle of Uhud (625) and the Battle of the Ditch (627). Soon after the Battle of the Ditch a pact was established at Hudaibiya through which Prophet Muhammad gave concessions in order to establish peace and allow the Muslims to preach without fear and to gain support by arranging treaties and pacts with neighbouring Arab tribes and empires. In 630 the Muslims marched on Makkah, conquered the city without a fight and established it as the centre of Islam. By the time of his death in 632 much of the Arabian Peninsula

had accepted Islam and saw Makkah as the capital of the Islamic state and the Prophet as the politico-religious leader.

The Four Rightly Guided Caliphs 632-661

Following the death of the Prophet, four groups debated and eventually decided upon the next leader of the Muslim Ummah (nation); the groups were the Muhajirun, those Muslims who had migrated with the Prophet from Makkah; the Ansar, those who had welcomed the Prophet and the immigrating Muslims in Madinah; the Shia't al-Ali (Party of Ali), who felt that the Prophet's cousin and son-in-law should succeed, and the Umayyads who were the tribal leaders in Makkah prior to Islam. It was accepted that Abu Bakr would lead the Muslim Ummah. During Abu Bakr's reign (632-4) many tribes expressed their view that their allegiance was with the Prophet and after his passing was no longer valid; his strong leadership quickly stabilised a potential volatile situation, which could have led to the implosion of Islam as a political force.

Umar ibn al-Khattab was selected as the next Caliph with a new title of Amir al-Mu'minīn (Prince of the Believers) after the passing away of Abu Bakr. Islam was seen to stretch its borders under Umar's reign (634-44) at the detriment of the Byzantine empire (Syria, Palestine, and Egypt, in particular at Yarmouk in 634) and the Persian empire (Persia and Khurasan in particular Qadisiya in 637, with Kufa and Basra becoming garrison towns). Umar's caliphate came to an abrupt end when he was assassinated in the Prophet's mosque in Madinah. He called a council of six individuals to select the next Caliph and they nominated Uthman ibn Affan. The third caliph was of the Umayyad tribe whose twelve-year reign (644-56) was initially a continuation of the successes that had occurred under Umar's reign. However, due to assigning positions to his tribesmen was accused of nepotism and favouritism, this led to the re-emergence of pre-Islamic mistrust between the Hashim and Umayya tribes. Further accusations of mismanaging booty obtained in various conquests added to the resentment amongst various Muslim groups towards Caliph Uthman. During his caliphate the Qur'an was recompiled and this compilation became the official version in the empire and is the same version that is available today. The dissatisfaction towards Uthman eventually led to his murder and threw the Muslim Ummah in disarray.

Ali ibn Abu Talib was elected as the fourth Caliph (656-661) and his caliphate was rarely free from trouble for he was from the Hashim tribe and many from the Umayya were demanding the murderers of Caliph Uthman to be found and dealt with immediately. A number of civil wars took place during his caliphate; the Battle of the Camel when Talha ibn Ubaidullah and Zubair ibn Awwam with Aisha bint Abu Bakr (wife of the Holy Prophet and daughter of the first Caliph) fought against the Caliph Ali; the Battle of Siffin against Mu'awiya ibn Abu Sufyan (Umayya tribal leader) led to the first sect, the Khawarij who supported the Caliph, to separate from mainstream Muslims. This battle and its subsequent arbitration undermined Ali's caliphate and eventually led to a splitting of the Islamic empire into two, Mu'awiya ruling over Syria and Egypt and Ali ruling over Iraq and Persia. After Ali's assassination by a Khawarij and the subsequent abdication by his son Hassan, Mu'awiya became the caliph of the complete empire.

The Umayyad Period 661-750

Islam entered a new political climate with its first dynasty as the caliphate was passed from father to son; this era saw fourteen such successions from generation to generation with its capital in Damascus. This period was witness to a dark episode whose effect reverberates until today; the slaughter of Husain, grandson of the Holy Prophet at Karbala in 680, during Yazid ibn Mu'awiya's watch.

In 691 Caliph Abdul Malik built the Dome of the Rock and Masjid Al-Aqsa in Jerusalem, this was the first Islamic building with a dome. Muslims revere this whole site and regard it as the third holiest place upon the earth, as it was the point from where the Prophet had commenced his night journey to visit God as well as the first direction of prayer.

The Muslim empire grew towards the western and eastern front; Tariq ibn Ziyad took present-day Gibraltar (Jabal Tariq – Tariq's Mountain) and the majority of the Iberian Peninsula by destroying the Visigoths, eventually they would reach as far north as 150 miles short of Paris, where the last stand is referred to as the Battle of Poitiers; Muhammad ibn Qasim fought and successfully captured present-day Karachi and Hyderabad, Sindh and Multan, hence Islam had reached the Indian subcontinent. In other developments the whole empire was arabicised with progression in Arabic literature, science and architecture.

Even during this relatively stable dynasty many internal feuding factions existed in various parts of the empire which were quelled by physical force only to resurface somewhere else in a different guise.

Muhammad ibn Ali, great-grandson of Abbas the Prophet's uncle (hence referred to as the Abbasids), initiated a revolution in Khurasan against the Umayyads taking advantage of the ill feeling that existed in some non-Arabs towards the ruling party and giving apparent support to the cause of Ali and his family. In 750 at the Battle of Zab the Abbasids overthrew the Umayyads and took charge of caliphate. The Abbasid government, being Sunni, was not too different to the Umayyad dynasty which it overthrew hence the Shia' were still feeling aggrieved and continued to wait for the opportunity to lay their claim for leadership.

Following the near complete destruction of the Umayyad dynasty in Damascus no subsequent dynasty could lay claim as supreme leaders of the whole Islamic empire. Several dynasties were established in various parts of the empire with varying success. There were a number of smaller dynasties that have not been mentioned or only touched upon for sake of brevity hence references can be consulted for more details.

The Four Sunni Schools of Jurisprudence

Hanafi School

The founders of this school are Imam Abu Hanifah (702-772) and his two students Abu Yusuf (735-804) and Muhammad al-Shaybani (754-811) who were based in present-day Iraq. It became the state religion during the reign of the Ottoman Turks and continues to influence Muslims, as it is has the largest number of followers who are predominantly based in the subcontinent, Central Asia and large parts of the Arab lands.

Maliki School

The school takes its name from Imam Malik ibn Anas (715-795) and was based in Madinah; it now has followers predominantly in western and northern Africa.

Shafi'i School

This was founded by Imam Muhammad ibn Idris al-Shafi'i (767-820) in the western part of the Arabian Peninsula; it continues to have adherents in that area as well as east Africa and southern Arabia.

Hanbali School

This school was founded by Imam Ahmad ibn Hanbal (780-855) and has followers of large numbers in present-day Saudi Arabia as well as being the state's juristic view.

The Shia' Schools of Jurisprudence

The Shia' concept of who can interpret the law is different to the Sunni in that they believe the Imam of the time is the one who is capable of interpreting God's Law. The Ismailis believe the Imam continues to exist from generation to generation whereas the Twelvers, also referred to as the Ja'fari school after Imam Jafar as-Sadiq ibn Muhammad (702-765) the sixth Imam and great-great grandson of Caliph Ali, believe the twelfth Imam, Abu al-Qasim Muhammad, is in occultation since 874 and will appear close to the end of time with the title of *al-Mahdī* (The guided one) hence the scholars of the era must interpret it to the best of their ability; the Twelvers has the greatest following and can be found in Iran, Iraq and parts of the subcontinent and Arabian peninsula.

The Abbasid Period 750-1258

With the bloody end of the Umayyads the Abbasid period began by the transfer of the capital to Baghdad by al-Mansur in 762. In this period much of the empire started to break into separate states; the sole remaining survivor of the Damascus massacre established an Umayyad dynasty in Spain from 756 to 1031 based in Cordova

The Umayyad Dynasty of Spain 756-1031

This dynasty became fragmented following a prosperous period up to 1000 during which they were regarded as being more culturally advanced than the Abbasids; in its last few decades many smaller dynasties emerged.

The Aghlabids 800-909

The Samanids 860-999

The Tulunids 868-905

The Fatimids 909-1171

Ubaidullah, an alleged descendent of Ali and Fatima, took North Africa and established his capital in present-day Tunisia. Following a number of successors the fourth caliph of this Shiite Dynasty transferred the capital to Cairo after the conquest of Egypt. Al-Azhar was built in 970 and soon became a major centre of learning, it boasts to be the oldest university in the world. The Fatimids became the custodians of Makkah and Madinah in the last part of the tenth century. During the end of the 10th and beginning of the 11th centuries three dynasties simultaneously claimed the caliphate; the Umayyads in Spain, the Fatimids in North Africa and in the southern part of the Arabian Peninsula and the Abbasids in the northern and eastern Arab lands.

The Buyids 932-1062

Whilst the Fatimids governed much of the south-eastern empire, this Shiite dynasty controlled Persia and Iraq.

The Buwayhids 945-1055

The Ghaznavids 962-1186

Party Kings of Spain 1009-1091

This group was made up of twenty-three local dynasties.

The Great Seljuks 1038-1194

The Seljuks, a Turkish people who invaded Persia and eventually removed the Buyids, were welcomed by the Abbasid caliphate as they were Sunnis. They moved further south and achieved similar success against the Fatimids in the Arabian Peninsula. In terms of religious education one vizier established madrassahs in most cities of the empire in order to facilitate the training of religious scholars.

The Rum Seljuks 1077-1307

Rum, from the Arabic roman or of European descent, Seljuks established their own state in Asia Minor.

Almoravids – Spain 1090-1145 & Northwest Africa 1056-1147

This Berber dynasty was supporter of the Abbasids and was sole ruler of Northwest Africa before the Berbers crossed into Spain in order to challenge the Party Kings. Their name is based on *al-murabitūn*, meaning ‘residents of frontier fortresses’.

The Atabegs 1127-1270

Originally there to assist the governors, this Turkish people established dynasties in the Arabian Peninsula and Syria at the expense of the Seljuk who they were supposed to be protecting.

Almohads – Spain 1171-1212 & North Africa 1130-1269

Similar to the Almoravids they were also a Berber dynasty. Their name is based on *al-muwahhidūn*, meaning ‘those who affirm God’s unity’.

The Ayyubids 1171-1252

This dynasty was founded in Egypt by Salah ud-Din Ayubbi, the famous general who captured Jerusalem from the Christians.

Nasrids 1231-1492

A relatively small dynasty that controlled around Jaen with its capital in Granada

The Mamluks 1254-1516

The name literally means ‘those who are owned’ and they succeeded the Ayyubids in Egypt. The Mamluks were defeated in 1516 by the Ottoman Turks who subsequently annexed Egypt a year later.

The Mongol Il-Khan 1258-1353

The Mongols, who had recently accepted Islam, established themselves in Persia and Iraq after the fall of the Abbasid caliphate.

The Ottoman Turks 1281-1924

This dynasty was founded by Othman a Turk who was affiliated with the Rum Seljuks. With the destruction of the Rum Seljuks by the Mongols the Turks became independent which removed restrictions from their political aspirations. Over the next four hundred years or so the Ottomans captured swathes of eastern Europe and at times nibbled on their eastern front at the expense of the Safavids. In the last decade of the seventeenth century the Turks fortune started to change and over the next half a century or so lost much of what they had gained. The last few centuries of the empire witnessed a number of wars with Russia and a number of territories claiming independence; with the passing of time as with all great powers it was a mere shadow of its former self.

The Safavids 1495-1736

A Shia' state founded by Shah Ismail in Persia; the fact that it was a Shia' state brought him into conflict with his neighbours, the Sunni Ottoman Turks. The Safavids faced a number of battles with the Ottoman Empire on its western borders and the Mughal Empire, also Sunni, on its eastern borders.

The Mughals 1526-1858

Zahir ud-Din Muhammad Baber founded Mughal rule in India when he defeated the Lodhis in Panipat. Over the next hundred years a number of battles were fought against the Afghans on the east and they conquered a number of cities to the west with newfound allies, the Rajputs. In the last hundred years of the Mughals' reign internal strife caused many problems and instability within the empire. This was compounded by the involvement of the British from the beginning of the 19th century, who within fifty years had established themselves as administrators of India, which brought an end to Mughal and Muslim domination in India.

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