## I. Arabia Before Islam

To understand the rise of Islam in 7th-century Arabia, a bit of historical background is required. Though our conventional narrative is that Muhammad, an illiterate young man involved in trade in the territory that is now Saudi Arabia, began to receive revelations in 610 at the age of 40, the world in which he lived was not one of barren desert.

Instead, it was an arena riven by conflict between the Byzantine and Sasanian empires, centered in Constantinople and Ctesiphon (in present day Iran), respectively. The conflict certainly did not begin in the 7th century –it goes back to the 3rd and 4th centuries –but the sixth century had seen the Sasanians get the upper hand. We aren't, however, concerned with this battle as a whole but rather with its connection to Arabia and our key point of consideration here is that the Byzantines and Sasanians built alliances with Arab tribes. Their names –Ghassanids for the Byzantines, Lakhmids for the Sasanians –aren't crucial, but the key point is that they contributed to organized military action in and around Arabia. Neither was the influence of the broader world limited to the militarization of Arab tribes; commodities from Egypt, Syria and Iraq circulated in local market and learned men within Arabia debated the doctrines of Christianity and Judaism. Byzantine-Sasanian fighting between 603 and 628 would weaken both, thus producing circumstances in the Near East that would facilitate the spread of Islam.

Neither was Arabia a blank tablet upon which Muhammad drew. On the one hand, many Arabs were traditional pagans who worshipped idols. On the other hand, many of these idol worshippers in fact seem to have believed in one supreme God whose

"house" was the Ka'ba, a black rock in Mecca that would become a center of Islamic worship. Many other Arabs were dedicated monotheists: there were Christians up and down the east coat of the Arabian Peninsula, in south-central Arabia and in the north of the peninsula. Both Yathrib (where the Prophet would eventually emigrate) and Yemen had large Jewish populations. Monotheism wasn't just something that Arabs of this time saw locally but also something that they encountered while trading. As they accompanied caravans throughout Arabia, they became familiar with the cultures and lifestyles of the Sasanian and Byzantine Empires –one adhering to the ancient Iranian religious of Zoroastrianism the other Christian –who had sent their own traders.

## II. Early Islam: A New Monotheistic Faith Arises in Arabia

It was in this environment of religious diversity that Muhammad ibn Abd Allah, known later to Muslims as the Prophet Muhammad, was born in 570. He grew up an orphan in the house of his uncle, Abu Talib who lived in Mecca, and worked as a trader. As a young man, Muhammad married a widow and fellow merchant Khadeeja, who was also from the tribe of Quraysh which dominated Mecca. There is much more to tell about the story of Muhammad's early life but what concerns us most here is that, around 610, Muhammad began meditating at night and, over the next 22 years, until his death in 632, he received revelations. These revelations alleged to supersede Jewish and Christian revelations, yet they spoke about many of the same figures we find in the Bible, such as Noah, Moses and Jesus, whom it called "messengers." Put a bit differently, as Muhammad preached to a population familiar with the messages of Judaism and

Christianity, his call drew on elements in these traditions even as it represented a new vision in the form of Islam.

These revelations, though, did not emerge in a political vacuum; whom you worshipped and whom you allied with politically were tied closely together in the ancient world. It was for this reason that, even after Muhammad began to receive revelations in 610, he didn't notify anyone for three years. Eventually, he began preaching within Mecca and this caused great political conflict. The leaders of Quraysh in Mecca, the powerful tribe of which he was a member, feared that to accept Muhammad as the messenger of God would threaten their hold on political power, so they pressured his relatives to disown him and isolated him and his followers. It was for this reason that, in 622, Muhammad and his followers emigrated to an agricultural community called Yathrib, later renamed Medina, which was 215 miles to the north of Mecca. This journey, called the Hijra, or "immigration," marks "Year 0" in the Muslim calendar.

It was in Medina that Muhammad became not merely a religious leader, as he had been in Mecca, but a political leader as well. In this setting, confessing belief in one God and in Muhammad as his prophet implied a commitment to building a new political order. On a theological level, the core Islamic belief (one that persists to the present day) is that there is one God who makes himself known in his book, the Quran, *and* in the experience of the Prophet Muhammad and his community. We read that the Prophet instructed his followers not only about how to perform religious rituals (including prayer, fasting, and penance) but also how to tax and distribute booty. Taxation was no less a religious ritual than praying for these earliest Muslims. Eight years later, after much

warfare with hostile tribes, Muhammad returned to Mecca, victorious, and Muslims began to worship at the Ka'ba, the black rock that had once been a pagan ritual center.

What are our takeaways from the life of the Prophet Muhammad? First, although his success as a religious and political leader was exceptional, his call to monotheism was not. Indeed, it reflected a broader religious culture that had taken root among the inhabitants of Arabia; some were already monotheists, including Jews and Christians, while other believed in a powerful high God (even as they entertained the existence of minor deities). Just as importantly, the community he constituted in Medina was both temporal and spiritual, and of course, this legacy would shape Islamic politics to the present.

## III. Islam after the Death of its Prophet: The Succession Battle

Following Muhammad's death from natural causes in 632, the young Muslim community split over the question of who his successor should be and whether he had in fact appointed a successor during his lifetime. Within twenty-four hours a group of Medinese leaders, along with three of Muhammad's close friends, determined that Abu Bakr, one of the earliest believers and the father of Muhammad's favorite wife A'isha should succeed him. There were no Sunnis and Shiis at the beginning, however, the dispute that gave rise to Sunnis and Shiis stems from this seventh-century moment. There was clearly a group that wanted Ali to become the caliph and became upset when he did not. But the formation of a discrete sectarian identity around this grievance would happen much later.

The short of the long is that Muhammad's uncle Abu Bakr won the day and became the first Caliph, to be followed by two other senior members of the tribe of Quraysh, 'Umar and 'Uthman. Abu Bakr's reign lasted a mere two years but it was nonetheless a crucial period as Islam's first caliph solidified ideas put forth by Muhammad during his life, particularly what we now know as Islam's five pillars: (1) avowal that there is only one god and Muhammad is his messenger, (2) prayer five times a day, (3) fasting during the lunar month of Ramadan, (4) paying alms, and (5) making the pilgrimage to Mecca at least once during one's lifetime.

In 634, two years after Muhammad;'s death, 'Umar ibn al-Khattab took over for Abu Bakr, ruling for ten years, until 644, when he died and was succeeded by 'Uthman, who ruled for 12 years, until he was assassinated by rebels in 656. One of 'Uthman's most important achievments was the codification of the Quran.. Previously, it had been written on pieces of leather or bone yet the third caliph collected all of these fragments into one single text. It has 114 chapters, known as suras, in descending order of length: the longest is 300 verses and the shortest only three.

But back to our story. Eventually, after 'Uthman's assassination, 'Ali, Muhammad's son-in-law and cousin who is the key guy for the Shi'ites, got his chance to lead the community. Yet, this didn't quite work out as he'd have liked. After Uthman's assassins nominated 'Ali to be Caliph a civil war broke out. The details of this conflict are complicated, but essentially what happened is that Ali was assassinated by rebels who had initially pushed his candidacy because he had sought to avoid further civil war. The conflict that led to 'Ali's death, however, was only beginning: in 680, 'Ali's son, Hussein died fighting the new caliph, Yazid, as he tried to reestablish the right of Ali's family to

rule. Around this time, there came to form a group of Muslims that today we call Shiites, who lamented that 'Ali had been denied rule over the Islamic communities and it's in this conflict that we have the basis of the division between Sunnis and Shi'is today.

Amidst these civil wars, the domains of the Islamic community were expanding quickly. Arab conquests outside of Arabia began under 'Umar, reaching Damascus (Syria), Cairo and Alexandria (both in Egypt) and defeating the last Sasanid Shah Yazdigird III in 651. The internal conflict I just mentioned distracted the Islamic community from further expansion for about a decade, but soon enough Tunisia (in North Africa) fell too, as did parts of present-day Greece (Cyprus) and Pakistan.. These military successes, though propelled by religious zeal, cannot be explained purely by belief. The Muslims were quick, agile and well-coordinated. Just as importantly, they were pragmatists, cutting deals with local elites to gain control of new territory, though this did not necessarily involve mass conversion to Islam. As I noted earlier, Arabs stepped into a world that was still bruised and bleeding as a result of the Roman-Sasanian wars. They could steamroll the great powers of antiquity because they had just fought a brutal 30 –year war of attrition.

Yet, this wasn't just about military success. Islam would also spread through trade over the centuries. This dynamic was most notable in East Africa, as seafaring Muslim traders traversed the Indian Ocean to establish trading communities which trafficked in ivory and slaves. Profit supported piety as local and long-distance trade made a former nomads camp, the Mali city of Timbuktu, into a center of commerce and Islamic learning.

I've just given you the barebones story of a momentous period. A few observations relating to our original questions, though. First, let's note the fact that kinship is still a really big deal in the early Islamic period –the question isn't only whether someone outside of Quraysh can be Caliph, *only* what degree of blood relation to the Prophet Muhammad they must have. This is a society in which kinship ties –central in Arabia –are still really important and can launch civil wars. Second, we see that the people in charge at the very beginning of Islamic history – the very people involved in these bloody civil wars – are a remarkably homogenous bunch. Despite this homogeneity, though, they fight a lot! This is the essence of a messy, human society, one that defies easy predictions of what people will "do" or "think". How would Islam change as it incorporated more and more non-Muslims? It is to the Umayyad Caliphate, which confronted exactly this challenge that we now turn.

## IV. Rise of the Umayyad Caliphate (661-750)

Following the Muslim civil war of 661, the Umayyad caliphate was established, with its center in Damascus, Syria. What is useful for us to focus on in the case of the Umayyad Caliphate is what it meant for Muslims to move from Arabia to Syria. On the one hand, this meant that they developed a much stronger central state. This isn't to say that the previous model of rule had been egalitarian –the first four caliphs, if anything understand themselves to by the viceregents of God –rather than the viceregents of the *messenger* of God. Rather, the shift of the late 7$^{th}$ century was the development of a centralized body which relied on a professional army. This centralized state had a few features of note. First, it resolved the tension over how to transfer rule: ultimately, the

Umayyads decided on a hereditary model (passing to the first born male child) as opposed to rule passing to one's brothers (as in Arab tribal tradition). Second, the rule of the Umayyads, though it aspired to centralization, was often quite thin- the further away one went from Syria, the less control it had. Conversely, distance suggested that the "reach" of Islam was not quite as clear-cut as we might assume from breathtaking maps of the spread of Islamic political control. Finally, and this may be a big surprise for many of you, Muslims were a distinct *minority*, not only in Umayyad Syria, but also across the empire more broadly. Basically, if you looked outside of cities, Muslims were a tiny minority. Part of this is that there were limits to state control. Fair enough- the early Islamic community certainly wanted to spread the word of God. At the same time, though, there were good reasons to not pursue mass conversion with too much vigor. The reason for this lays in the structure of taxation under Islam, specifically that non-Muslims pay a tax, known as the *jizya*, which absolves them from the responsibility to serve in the military. The Umayyad state, though, was in need of tax revenue so, for very pragmatic reasons, too many Christians – who constituted the majority of the population – converting to Islam was not good for business!

The fall of the Umayyads around 750 similarly hints at the changing face of Islam's political domain. The early Muslim community, once homogenous and entirely Arab, came to be suddenly diverse thanks to the conversion of ever larger numbers of non-Arabs, as well as the mixing of Arab and non-Arab Muslims. Indeed, when revolt came, it did so in Khurasan, a region in eastern Iran. The rebels of Khurasan who launched the Abbasid revolution were of mixed Arab and Persian ancestry. They revolted partly because the governance structures of the Muslim

community had not caught up with the changing face of that community. At the same time, though, even a revolt against Syrian Arab elites could not sideline these elites entirely. When the Abbasids arose around 750, they coopted a significant number of Syrian troops so that they would take part in the new regime. Put simply, as the Islamic Empire spread, pervious identities and allegiances, material interests and political divisions did not melt away in the face of religious unity. Instead, they were tensions that had to be managed.

## V. The Abbasid Caliphate: 750-1258

When the Abbasids came to power around 750, they were hardly the only empire seeking universal rule for their faith. To give you a little European context: Charlemagne, who united western Europe and laid the foundations for France and Germany, became King of the Franks in 768, king of Italy from 774, and in 800 was recognized as the "Holy Roman Emperor." The new Abbasid caliphate was centered in Baghdad, a far more advantageous site for ruling an empire, most notably because Iraq contained plentiful agricultural lands (as the expression goes, it was a breadbasket) and because it was located right in the midst of Eurasia. Located at a place where the Tigris and Euphrates rivers are closest to each other, it enabled quick communications with the Persian Gulf and contained some of the richest agricultural provinces of the former Umayyad Caliphate. The Abbasids also appeared to be quite serious about their religious credentials. The Umayyads were perceived as corrupt and debauched, and so, part of the 'Abbasids' claim rested on public displays of piety, patronage of religious sciences, and upholding the mantle of the Prophet's family, in order to

contrast them with the dynasty they had replaced. This included investing resources in the study of theology and religious law at the court in Baghdad and supporting scholars of the Quran and the narrated accounts of the Prophet Muhammad's life, known as hadith. In many respects, one can point to the Abbasid Caliphate as a crucial birthplace of much of the Islamic sciences as we know them today.

Yet, despite these investments and displays, the Abbasids rightly sensed the need to appeal to their multi-ethnic subjects in their own language, to speak to not only Arabs but also Iranians. To respond to this challenge, the new dynasty repeatedly spoke of its rule not only in terms of the legitimacy of the family of the Prophet Muhammad but also in terms of the Persian concept of the divine right of kings by which the ruler ruled based on divine imperative. As more and more non-Arabs converted to Islam, the Abbasid ruling elite diversified.

The Abbasids were also deeply enmeshed in a broader world. Its armies increasingly relied on non-Arabs- Turkic young men from the central Asian steppes, and Berber speaking peoples of North Africa, many of whom were in fact slaves—to maintain political control. Yet, this wasn't just about slaves turned soldiers: the Abbasids spearheaded embrace of Greek and Hellenistic learning, Indian science, and Chinese innovations, particularly paper making thanks to the Western Han dynasty, and the production of literary works brought cultural influences from Greece, Iran, Central Asia and Africa. The survival of authors like Plato and Aristotle is thanks to Arabic translations done by Christians and Muslims in Baghdad.

Papermaking also facilitated the growth of libraries within an increasingly global Islamic community. There is of course a longer history of libraries, but in the Islamic

context, these centers of knowledge first developed in early mosques of Cairo, Damascus and Baghdad. At the same time, though, book and manuscript collecting spread rapidly to outskirts of the Islamic world, where libraries in Timbuktu (W. Africa), Samarkand (Central Asia) and Jakarta (Southeast Asia) earned high reputations for extraordinary collections of religious and scientific treaties. Perhaps the greatest collection of this sort was Cairo's House of Learning, assembled by the Fatimid Caliphs, who competed with the Abbasids from their capital in Cairo. Amazingly, this library had roughly 1.5 million books at its height. The growth of these libraries was essential to not only Islamic but also to European history: Arab scholars preserved and expanded Greek and Roman thought while also transmitting Greek works to Europe where they had been lost.

Arabic also became an imperial language of sorts, much like Latin. Both existed alongside local languages (e.g., Celtic languages in Roman Gaul; Syriac in Umayyad Syria or Berber in Abbasid N. Africa). Much as Persian emerged as the principal competitor to Arabic the eastern reaches of the caliphate, Latin competed with Greek in the eastern provinces of the Roman empire. Despite this success, centralized rule was a continued challenge and the Abbasids saw a series of breakaway Caliphates, whether in North Africa, Spain or Iran.

Though the Abbasid environment was far more oriented towards non-Arabs than its Umayyad predecessor, it also faced many of the same challenges of political control. No government ruling so vast an empire could hold power easily. Caravans traveled only 20 miles a day, and the couriers of the caliphal post system usually did not exceed 100 miles a day. As a result, news of frontier revolts took weeks to reach Baghdad and military responses might take months.

The challenge of central control wasn't the only thing the Abbasids shared with the Umayyads. Despite the real changes of the Abbasid period –a reorientation of the Caliphate to the East, a move away from the kinship of the Syrian Arab elite of the Umayyads, a growing emphasis on Islamic scholarship and growth in the ranks of scholars –key non-Islamic influences remained. The ethnic divisions between Arabs and Persians, the necessity of non-Islamic sources of law for effective governance and political legitimacy, and the continued diversity of the population of an expanding Islamic empire argue against a narrative of Islamic history which privileges an "Islamic essence" sealed off from other religions and local cultural influences. We see how Islam was born in a predominantly non-Muslim environment, how many of its signal achievements came about as a consequence of contact with non-Muslims, and how this process continued well beyond the formative period down to the present