8 Islam to the Mamluks

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8.1 CHRONOLOGY

632 – 661 CE	Rashidun Caliphs
661 – 750 CE	Umayyad Caliphate
750 – 1258 CE	Abbasid Caliphate
909 – 1171 CE	Fatimid Caliphate
1096 – 1487 CE	Crusades
1171 – 1250 CE	Ayubid Sultanate
1250 – 1517 CE	Mamluk Sultanate

8.2 INTRODUCTION

An inveterate adventurer and renowned intellectual, **Ibn Khaldun** was born into a family of ascendant Andalusian Arabs who had immigrated to North Africa. There, present day Tunisia, he received a traditional Islamic education until his parents died from the plague. At the time of their deaths, he was just seventeen years old. On his own, the young and resourceful Ibn Khaldun exploited personal relationships to secure an administrative position at court and thus began a career as an itinerant statesman. Time and time again, Ibn Khaldun landed in prison for his role in conspiracies against various ruling dynasties, only to be released by their heirs. Envoys and grandees recognized his remarkable intelligence and the value of his council. His reputation preceded him, and many dignitaries openly entreated him to join their court. Serving various dynasties, Ibn Khaldun held many important offices, like diplomat, court advisor, and prime minister. But he eventually grew weary of the hazards of palace intrigue and sought instead a more reclusive lifestyle.

Ibn Khaldun retired to the safety of a Berber tribe in Algeria, where he composed ***al-Muqaddimah***, or *Prolegomenon*, an outstanding work of sociology and historiography. Published in 1377, he theorized in *al-Muaqddimah* that tribal '***asabiyah***, roughly translated as "social soli-

darity," is often accompanied by a novel religious ideology that helps a previously marginalized group of people, usually from the desert, rise up and conquer the city folk. Once ensconced in power, these desert peoples evolved into a grand civilization, but '*asabiyah* contained within it destructive elements that could precipitate their collapse. Known for this **Cyclical Theory of History**, Ibn Khaldun posited that, seduced by the wiles of urban culture, the dominant group would over time become soft and enter into a period of decay, until a new group of desert peoples conquered them, when the process would begin anew. This theory applies to the development of Islamic history discussed throughout this chapter.

8.3 QUESTIONS TO GUIDE YOUR READING

1. How does geography play a role in Islamic history?
2. Why were the concepts defined by *muruwah* so important to the early development of Islam?
3. What are the Five Pillars of Islam, and why are they important to the religion?
4. What were the five roles that the Prophet Muhammad played in Medina?
5. What factors led to the rapid expansion of Islam?
6. How did the Umayyads come to power following the Rashidun caliphs?
7. How do you account for the rise of the splits in the Islamic community, like the rise of the Kharijis and Shi'a?
8. Describe the transition from the Umayyads to the 'Abbasids. Compare and contrast the two caliphates.
9. The Fatimids marked the end to the High Caliphate. How did Egypt gain its autonomy from the 'Abbasids? How did the Fatimids take over Egypt?
10. How did the Crusaders gain a foothold in the Middle East? What did it take for Salah al-Din to push them out?
11. What led to the establishment of the Mamluk Sultanate? How did the Mamluk Sultanate go into decline?
12. Does North African history move in cycles of birth, renewal, expansion and decadence? Ibn Khaldoun says that nomads come from the frontiers, desert, and periphery, settle down, and within 120 years, become decadent and collapse. Do you agree?

8.4 KEY TERMS

- ‘Abd Allah al-Mahdi
- Abdul Malik
- Abu al-‘Abbas al-Saffah, Caliph
- Abu Bakr, Caliph
- Ahmad Ibn Tulun
- ‘A’isha
- Al-Azhar
- Al-Hakim
- ‘Ali, Caliph
- al-Ma’mun
- Al-Mansur, Caliph
- Al-Mu‘izz
- *Al-Muqaddimah*
- Alexios Komnenos, Emperor
- Alids
- *Amsar*
- *Ansar*
- *Asabiyyah*
- Aybak
- Battle of Ajnadayn
- Battle of Badr
- Battle of Karbala
- Battle of Manzikert
- Battle of Marj Rahit
- Battle of Qadisiya
- Battle of Siffin
- Battle of the Camel
- Battle of the Trench
- Battle of Uhud
- Battle of Yarmuk
- Baybars
- *Bayt al-Hikmah*
- Cyclical Theory of History
- Hadith
- *Hajj*
- Harun al-Rashid, Caliph
- *Hijra*
- Husayn
- Ibn Khaldun
- ibn Zubayr
- Isma‘ilis
- *Jihad*
- Jizya
- Ka’ba
- *Kharanj*
- *Kharijis*
- *Majlis*
- *Mamluks*
- Marwan, Caliph
- *Mawali*
- Mu‘awiya, Caliph
- Mu‘tazila
- *Muhajirun*
- Muhammad ad-Darazi
- *Muruwah*
- People of the Book
- Quran
- Qutuz
- Ramadan
- Salah al-Din
- *Salat*
- *Sawm*

- *Shahada*
- Shajar al-Durr
- Sharia law
- Sunna
- The Battle of Ayn Jalut
- The Battle of Hattin
- Treaty of Hudaybiyyah
- ‘Umar, Caliph
- ‘Umar II, Caliph
- *Umma*
- Urban II, Pope
- ‘Uthman, Caliph
- Yazid
- *Zakat*

8.5 GEOGRAPHY OF THE MIDDLE EAST

Academics have not reached a consensus on the geographical boundaries of the Middle East. However, for the purposes of this chapter, this region will encompass the broadly defined areas known as Persia, Mesopotamia, the Levant, Asia Minor, and the Arabian Peninsula. The Middle East straddles three continents, including Asia, Africa, and Europe. The geography of the area promoted cultural diffusion by facilitating the spread of peoples, ideas, and goods along overland and maritime trade routes. In an area generally characterized by its aridity, climate has influenced settlement patterns. Larger settlements are found in river valleys and well-watered areas along the littoral. In these areas, we see the development and spread of productive agriculture.

Map 8.1 | Map of the Middle East
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8.6 RISE OF ISLAM

Legend traces the Arabs back to Isma‘il, the son of Abraham and his Egyptian maid, Haga, a link that would later help to legitimize Islam by connecting it to the Hebrew tradition. In reality, Arabs inhabited the pre-Islamic Arabian Peninsula and shared socio-linguistic commonalities with such other Semitic-speaking peoples in the area as the Hebrews, Assyrians, Arameans, and even the Amhara of Ethiopia. Most of the population of Arabia prior to the rise of Islam resided in the south of the peninsula, in modern day Yemen, where they practiced terraced agriculture and herded ruminants in a relatively small area.

Farther to the north of Yemen, along the highland spine of western Arabia and up against the littoral of the Red Sea, was the Hijaz, a prominent cultural and economic region. Situated in this remote fastness was the dusty city of Mecca, the holiest place in the peninsula and the location

of the **Ka'ba**, or "cube," which contained many of the traditional Arabian religious images, including many Christian icons. So important was the Ka'ba to the religion of polytheistic tribes of Arabia that they negotiated a truce lasting one month every year that allowed for safe pilgrimage to the shrine.

Map 8.2 | Map of the Hijaz Region of Arabia
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The Hijaz was the most arable part of the Arabian Peninsula north of Yemen and distinguished by irrigated agriculture that supported fruit trees and essential grains. Local traders exported a range of Hijazi agricultural products to Syria in the north in return for imperative imports like textiles and olive oil so the region benefited from robust trade. Regional commerce depended on the security of trade, and piracy on the Red Sea threatened to disrupt business. Under these conditions, merchants diverted their trade overland. Many goods journeyed up the Red Sea Rift from Yemen on their way to the eastern Mediterranean. Caravans of camels carried these goods, as well as Hijazi exports, to the Levant. Most of the caravans stopped in Mecca, the halfway point up the spine of the peninsula, thus their commerce brought much needed wealth and tax revenue to the city.

Figure 8.1 | The Mountains of the Hijaz
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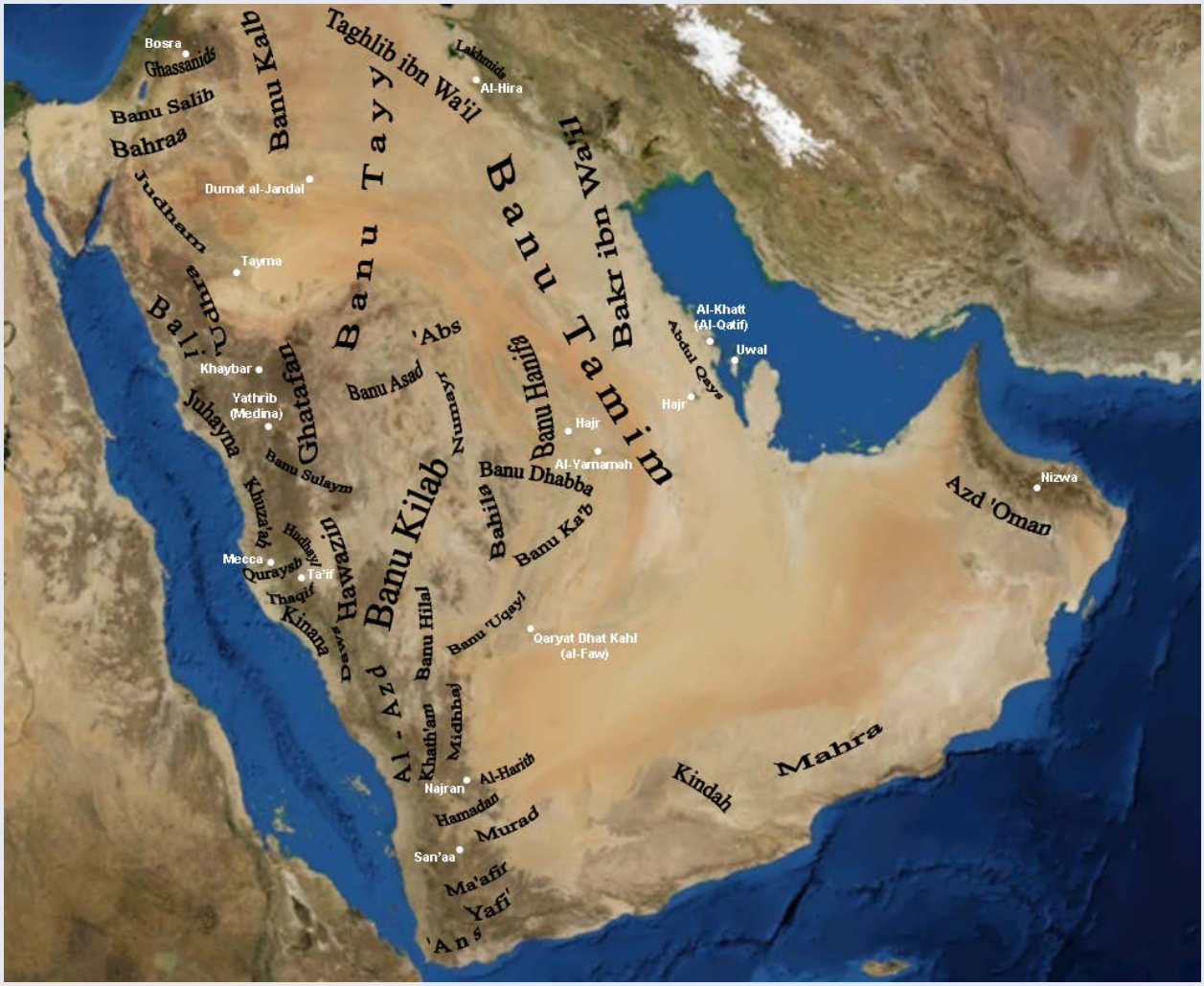
The Arabs first domesticated the camel, probably sometime between 3000 and 1000 BCE. Caravan operators eventually availed themselves of these useful dromedaries because they were so adept at crossing the region's massive deserts. Capable of drinking 100 liters of water in mere minutes, they could endure days of travel without needing to replenish themselves again. Moreover, camels instinctively remembered the locations



Map 8.3 | The Tribes of Arabia | Notice the Quraysh tribe of Mecca.
Author: User "Slackerlwastudent"
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of important, life-sustaining oases. So important were these beasts of burden that the tribes that controlled the camels controlled the trade. And the Quraysh Tribe of Mecca commanded many of the camels in the Hijaz region; therefore, they commanded much of the trade.

Life in the Arabian Peninsula centered around the tribe, which usually consisted of a group of relatives who claimed a shared ancestry. Tribal traditions found meaning in the poetic concept of ***muruwah***, which represented the notion of the ideal tribal man. This uniquely Arabian brand of chivalry focused on bravery, patience, persistence in revenge, generosity, hospitality, and protection of the poor and weak. In the absence of formal government, tribes offered physical security to its individual members. Tribes mitigated violence and theft through the shared understanding that retribution for such acts would follow swiftly. Tribes also organized to compete over increasingly

scarce resources, as they had a responsibility to provide for the economic needs of their individual members. Nevertheless, tribal traditions had been breaking down prior to the rise of Islam; no longer were the dominant members of society adhering to the principles set forth in *muruwah*.

Into this evolving cultural milieu Muhammad (c.570 – 632) was born in the city of Mecca. Muhammad's father, 'Abdallah, was a member of the Hashimite Clan, a less prosperous branch of the Quraysh Tribe. 'Abdullah died just prior to his son's birth, and Muhammad's mother passed away when he was just six years old. Orphaned at such a young age, his tribe intervened to ensure Muhammad's survival. His uncle, Abu Thalib, the leader of the Hashimite Clan and an important member of the Quraysh Tribe, eventually took custody of the young boy. These early privations influenced Muhammad's later desire to take care of those who could not care for themselves.

In his youth, Muhammad found employment in the regional caravan trade as a dependable herder and driver of camels. During this period, he cultivated a reputation of an empathetic and honest man, one who earned the respect of many Meccans. His upright character soon attracted the attention of a wealthy merchant known as Khadija who hired Muhammad to manage her caravans. Once Muhammad proved his reliability, Khadija, who was fifteen years older than Muhammad, proposed to him, and they married. This marriage afforded Muhammad a financial security that allowed him to begin meditating on religion in the abstract.

Muhammad had been concerned about the direction society had recently been taking and that the concepts defined by *muruwah* were no longer being upheld. He believed that some of the most influential members of society, namely the merchant elite of the Quraysh Tribe, were no longer respecting their traditional responsibilities to the weaker members of society because of their own greed. He thought that the **People of the Book**, specifically, Christians and Jews, might have a better answer for the ills afflicting Meccan society. Muhammad had contact with the Christians and Jews of the peninsula and even traveled to Christian Syria while working in the caravan trade. In this context, the Angel Gabriel appeared to Muhammad at a cave nearby to Mecca in 610, during the holy month of Ramadan. The Angel Gabriel instructed him to "recite," and then he spoke the divine word of God. His revelations became the **Quran**.

At first, Muhammad displayed the very human reactions of fear and distrust to the apparition of the Angel Gabriel. He also expressed embarrassment because he did not want to be associated with the pagan diviners of the region. Fortunately, his wife Khadija had a cousin who was a *hanif*, someone who was neither a Christian nor a Jew, but who believed in a vague concept of a monotheistic god. Her cousin trusted the veracity of Muhammad's revelations. So with trepidation, Muhammad eventually accepted his role as God's vehicle. His wife became the first convert to Islam, with Abu Thalib's son **'Ali** converting soon afterwards.

8.6.1 The Religion of Islam

As a religion of the Abrahamic faith, Islam holds much in common with Judaism and Christianity. Islam grew out of the Judeo-Christian tradition, a link which helped to legitimize the new religion. In fact, Muslims believe in the same God, or Allah in Arabic, as the Jewish and Christian God. Although Muslims trust that the People of the Book had received the word of

God, they believe that it had become distorted over time, so God sent the Angel Gabriel to deliver His word to Muhammad, the Seal of the Prophets, or Khatam an-Nabiyyin, for Muslims believe that he represented God's final word to man. Muhammad never claimed to be founding a new religion, rather he served as the last in a long line of God's messengers, beginning with the Hebrew prophets, and including Jesus. His revelations, therefore, represent the pure, unadulterated version of God's message. The Prophet's followers memorized the revelations and ultimately recorded them in a book called the Quran. Together with the Quran, the **Hadith**, traditions of Muhammad used to illustrate a concept, and the **Sunna**, the teachings of the Prophet not found in the Quran, helped guide and inform Muslims on proper behavior. And with that knowledge came great responsibility, as God held His people to a high standard of behavior, based on their obedience, or submission to His will. In fact, the word Islam means submission in Arabic, and a Muslim is one who submits (to God).

Figure 8.2 | The Birmingham Quran Manuscript | Dated among the oldest in the World.
Author: Anonymous
Source: Wikimedia Commons
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Figure 8.3 | Pilgrimage to Mecca | Notice the prominently featured Ka'ba.
Author: User "BotMultichillT"
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Derived from a Hadith, the Five Pillars of Islam are essential, obligatory actions that serve as the foundation of the faith. The first pillar, known as the witness, or ***shahada***, is a profession of faith, in which believers declare that "There is no God but God, and Muhammad is His messenger." Prayer, also called ***salat***, is the second pillar of Islam. Islam expects faithful Muslims to pray five times a day, kneeling towards Mecca, at dawn, noon, afternoon, sunset, and evening. One should perform ritual ablutions prior to their prayers in order to approach God as being symbolically clean and

pure. The third pillar is almsgiving, or ***zakat*** in Arabic. Islam requires Muslims to contribute a proportion of their wealth to the upkeep of the Islamic community. This proportion, or tithe, accorded with the size of one's wealth; therefore, the rich should expect to contribute more than the poor. Fasting, or ***sawm***, is the fourth pillar of Islam and takes place during Ramadan, the ninth month of the Islamic lunar calendar. For the duration of **Ramadan**, believers consume neither food nor drink from dawn to dusk. This practice is meant to remind them of what it is like to be poor and go hungry. The fifth and final pillar of Islam is pilgrimage, or ***hajj***. Islam expects all able-bodied Muslims to make a journey to Mecca at least once in their lifetime. All five pillars combine to unite the Islamic community.

8.7 THE EXPANSION OF ISLAM

The Prophet Muhammad started publically preaching his strict brand of monotheism in the year 613, by reciting the Quran, quickly convincing some of the commoners of Mecca to believe in him. Most of his early converts belonged to groups of people who had failed to achieve any significant social mobility, which, of course, included many of the poor. His followers memorized his recitations and message that called for the powerful to take care of the weak, a message that resonated with many of these economically and socially marginalized. Islam served as a binding force, replacing tribal solidarity, or *'asabiyah*.

Muhammad's message challenged the Umayyad Clan's leadership of society. The most powerful branch of the Quraysh Tribe, the Umayyads had been enriching themselves from the lucrative caravan trade while, at the same time, ignoring the privations of the needy. Prodding his tribal brethren, Muhammad had also spoken out against the traditional pagan gods. Tribal tradition dictated that the polytheistic Arabs of the peninsula worship their tribal gods; they also believed in *jinns*, or nature spirits. As custodians of the Ka'ba, which contained all of these traditional Arabian religious images, the Umayyad Clan augmented their income by collecting revenue from the traditional pilgrimage to Mecca.

The political implications were clear. The Muslims threatened to disrupt a delicate equilibrium. The Prophet's message jeopardized the social and economic standing of the elite members of society, who accused the Muslims of serving as agents of unwelcome change. Tensions grew, and conflict spilled into the streets of Mecca, dragging the two respective camps into the fray. The more that Muhammad's followers grew in number, the more opposition they encountered from the Umayyad Clan. To avoid this conflict, some Muslims fled to the Kingdom of Aksum, located in Ethiopia, at this stage in the early history of Islam, where they received protection from Muhammad's enemies under the Christian King Armah. Indeed, the first Muslims went by the name of ***muhajirun***, meaning "emigrants," for they would soon be forced to leave Mecca under pain of severe Umayyad persecution.

During this period, Muhammad's wife Khadija died in 619. With her death, Muhammad lost his source of emotional support and fell into depression, thus enduring a personal crisis. That same year, the Prophet's uncle Abu Thalib passed away. Already bereaved, Muhammad further suffered the loss of his personal protector in the Quraysh Tribe. Now cut off from the tribal leadership and accused

Figure 8.4 | The Quba Mosque of Medina | The oldest mosque in Islam.
Author: User "Abderlrhman 1990"
Source: Wikimedia Commons
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of stirring sectarian tension, Muhammad was on his own and vulnerable to Umayyad harassment in Mecca.

While Muhammad endured harsh reprisals from the Umayyads for his public preaching, a conflict was boiling in Yathrib, later called Medina, a trade city located a few days to the north of Mecca. Some individuals from Medina had traveled to Mecca in 620, where they heard the Prophet preach and soon adopted Islam. Impressed by his reputation as an honest man, the leaders of Medina invited Muhammad to their city in 622 to act as a mediator of tribal infighting over a shared oasis. As opposition in Mecca had become too intense for Muhammad and his followers to remain there, they migrated to Medina in 622, a seminal event known as the ***hijra*** that marks the first year of the Islamic calendar. The Prophet rapidly converted many of the city's inhabitants to Islam. These new Muslims came to be identified as the ***ansar***, meaning "helpers." Together with the muhajirun, the ansar helped the Prophet institutionalize the religion of Islam and develop an ***umma***, or community of believers, that would dominate the social and political life of Medina.

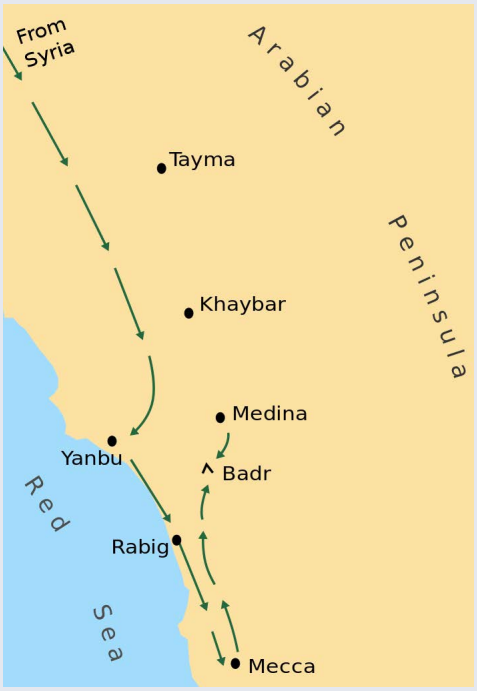
Muhammad assumed five different roles in Medina. First and foremost, he was the Prophet of Islam; therefore, he was the religious leader of the community. Second, he acted as the political leader of the *umma*. Because his followers agreed with him politically, they agreed with him religiously as well. Third, Muhammad served as a judicial leader, using the Quran as the basis of law. Fourth, the Prophet functioned as a legislator, working with the ***majlis***, or council of elders, to enact laws. He therefore governed his capital, Medina, with no separation of church and state. Finally, Muhammad was a military leader who ensured that statehood would prevail for the Muslims.

A major concern of Muhammad's leadership was to determine how the Muslims could contribute to the Medinan economy. He received a revelation during this period that suggested the Muslims should raid the caravans coming north out of Mecca. (Qur'an 22:39) In 624, the Medinans engaged a caravan of Meccans along a popular trade route bypassing Medina. In the ensuing **Battle of Badr**, named after a nearby oasis, 300 Muslims defeated nearly 1000 Meccans and seized their caravan. They considered their signal victory a sign from God that he was on their side. Their success enhanced Muhammad's prestige and that of the Islamic community among the Arab tribes in the peninsula.

Unwilling to cede control of the lucrative caravan trade to the upstart Muslims of Medina, the Umayyads confronted the Muslims in 625 in the **Battle of Uhud**, which referred to a local mountain. Foot soldiers in the vanguard of the Muslim forces led their defense. Meanwhile, a group of ambitious archers, ignoring the Prophet's command to remain stationary, joined the battle. Their imprudent action let the Meccan cavalry strike the unprotected flank of Muhammad's warriors. The Meccans failed to capitalize on their victory, however, and were unable to take Medina, a failure that leads some historians to consider the battle an ultimate success for the Muslims.

In 627, the Umayyads of Mecca and the Muslims of Medina met in a final confrontation in what became known as the **Battle of the Trench**, or *khandaq* in Arabic; this battle ended in another triumph for the Muslims. In preparation for a foreseeable Umayyad attack, a Persian engineer named Salman had suggested that the Medinans build defensive works around the city. So the Muslims survived the Meccan assault by entrenching themselves behind a near-impregnable barrier. In 628, the Umayyads finally realized that they were unable to vanquish the Muslims so sent a delegation of Meccans to sue for peace. The resulting **Treaty of Hudaybiyyah** symbolized their desire to extricate themselves from a losing situation, as Mecca ultimately compromised so their merchant elite would not lose any more trade to the Medinans. The treaty provided for an official tolerance of Islam and for the Muslims to return to Mecca the following year, free from persecution.

In 630, two years before his death, the Prophet Muhammad advanced on the city of Mecca with an army of some 10,000 Muslims. Encountering only limited resistance, the army of Muslims took control of the city, an act that symbolized the idea of Islamic expansion. Muhammad cleansed the Ka'ba of its purported 360 religious images and dedicated it to God. The prestige of the Muslims extended with their victory over the Meccans. As tribes learned of this triumph, they soon followed the lead of the winners, both politically and re-



Map 8.4 | Map of the Battle of Badr
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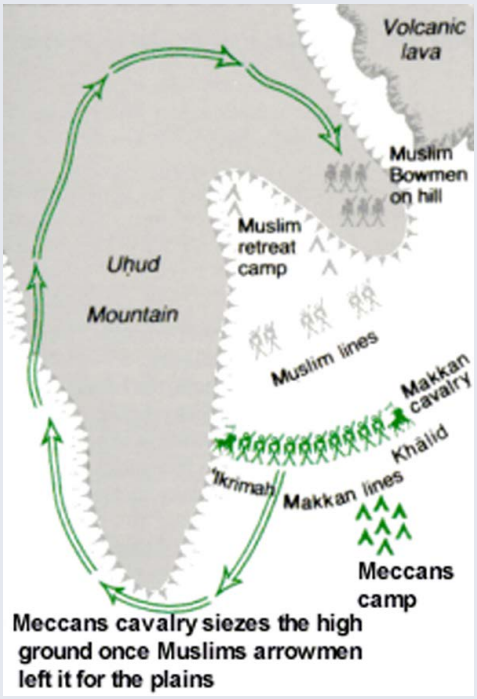

Map 8.5 | Map of the Battle of Uhud
Author: User "Warda99"
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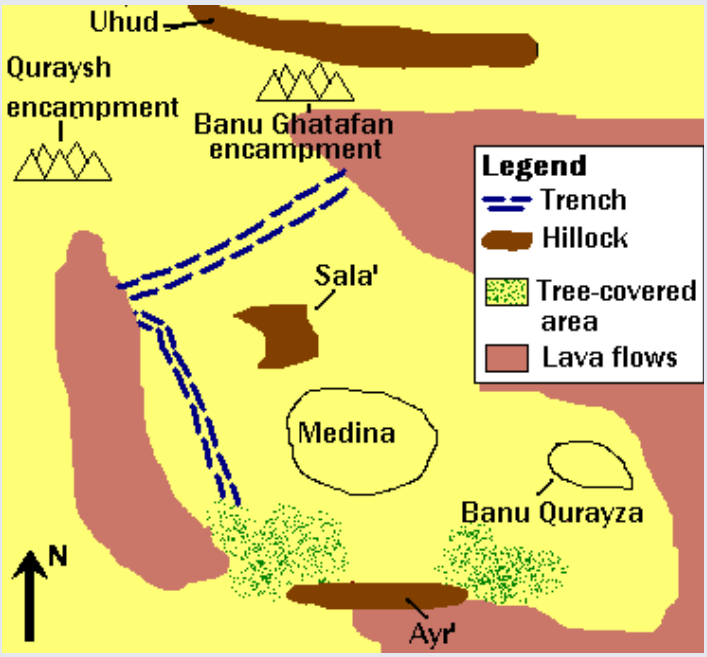
ligiously, sending delegations to forge alliances with the Prophet. By the time that Muhammad passed away, most of Arabia had converted to Islam. The religion provided the Muslims of the peninsula with a new '*asabiyah*, or social solidarity, endowing the movement with a unity of purpose.

In the absence of the Prophet, Muslim leaders had to develop a body of law to deal with important legal questions. Over time, **Sharia law** became a legal system in which Islamic principles provided an accepted means to regulate all features of daily life, including, but not limited to, economics, politics, family life, and society. Sharia law is based on the Quran, Hadith, precedent, and interpretation. In fact, the capacity for various interpretations of the law has led to the development of several schools of Islamic jurisprudence.



Map 8.6 | Map of the Battle of the Trench
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8.8 THE RASHIDUN CALIPHS

Muhammad did not formally appoint a successor, or *khalifa* in Arabic, and no clear replacement arose to lead the Muslim community forward at the time of his death. In fact, the *umma* divided into three groups, with each willing to appoint their own successor to the Prophet. Emerging as a vocal leader at this critical juncture, 'Umar, one of Muhammad's closest companions, convinced the *majlis*, or elders of the community, to elect **Abu Bakr** by consensus as a compromise candidate. Abu Bakr had been Muhammad's closest friend; Muhammad's marriage of political alliance to **'A'isha**, Abu Bakr's daughter, further solidified their relationship.

The election of Abu Bakr (632 – 634) brought much-needed stability and an almost democratic form of government to Islam. As caliph, Abu Bakr held together the converts to Islam by deploying the forces at his disposal, thus cementing his authority among the Arabian tribes. He prevented any rebellious Muslim tribes from reverting to the worship of their traditional tribal gods, as they were wont to do. Abu Bakr died in 634, two years after the Prophet Muhammad had died.

The *majlis* chose **'Umar** (634 – 644), a close friend of Abu Bakr, to be the next caliph. 'Umar had been the military power behind Abu Bakr. A dynamic and uncompromising leader, 'Umar recognized the necessity of expansion northward to achieve various ends. First, he sought to subdue the security threat of raiding nomads, many of which remained a law unto themselves. Second,

in his struggle to contain discontent, he used the cohesive element of ***jihad*** to unite the Muslim community against unbelievers and expand God's dominion. (The Arabic term of *jihad* actually refers to a "struggle," usually against spiritual impurity, often known as "greater *jihad*," and is associated with fulfilling God's objectives here on earth. The "lesser *jihad*," alternatively, is a physical struggle against the unbelievers of the *Dar al-Harb*, or Abode of War, until it is absorbed into the *Dar al-Islam*, or Abode of Islam, where believers were free to practice their faith as members of the predominant faith. Of note is the fact that Muhammad did not consider jihad important enough to make one of the pillars of Islam.) Third, 'Umar understood the importance of plunder for the nascent caliphate. Troops received four-fifths of the loot from conquest; the remainder of the revenue went to him to be dispersed amongst the neediest members in the Islamic community.

'Umar directed the full might of Islam northward against the Eastern Roman Empire, sometimes referred to as the Byzantine Empire. In 634, their first encounter took place in southern Palestine. The ensuing **Battle of Ajnadayn** was a decisive victory for the Muslims and a major loss for Emperor Heraclius. Two years later, an outnumbered Muslim army defeated the Eastern Roman Empire yet again at the **Battle of Yarmouk**, located on the eponymous river, somewhere between Damascus and Jerusalem. In both instances, the Byzantines relied on their slow, heavy cavalry, whereas the Arabs capitalized on their light armor and their superior mobility. The Muslims realized that they could not just charge the East Roman lines; they showed their tactical superiority by flanking the Byzantines and executing a successful rearguard action instead. These victories opened up greater Syria to Muslim conquest. Antioch, Aleppo, and Jerusalem fell to

Map 8.7 | Map of Muslim and Byzantine Troop Movements, 635-636 CE
Author: User "Magnus Manske"
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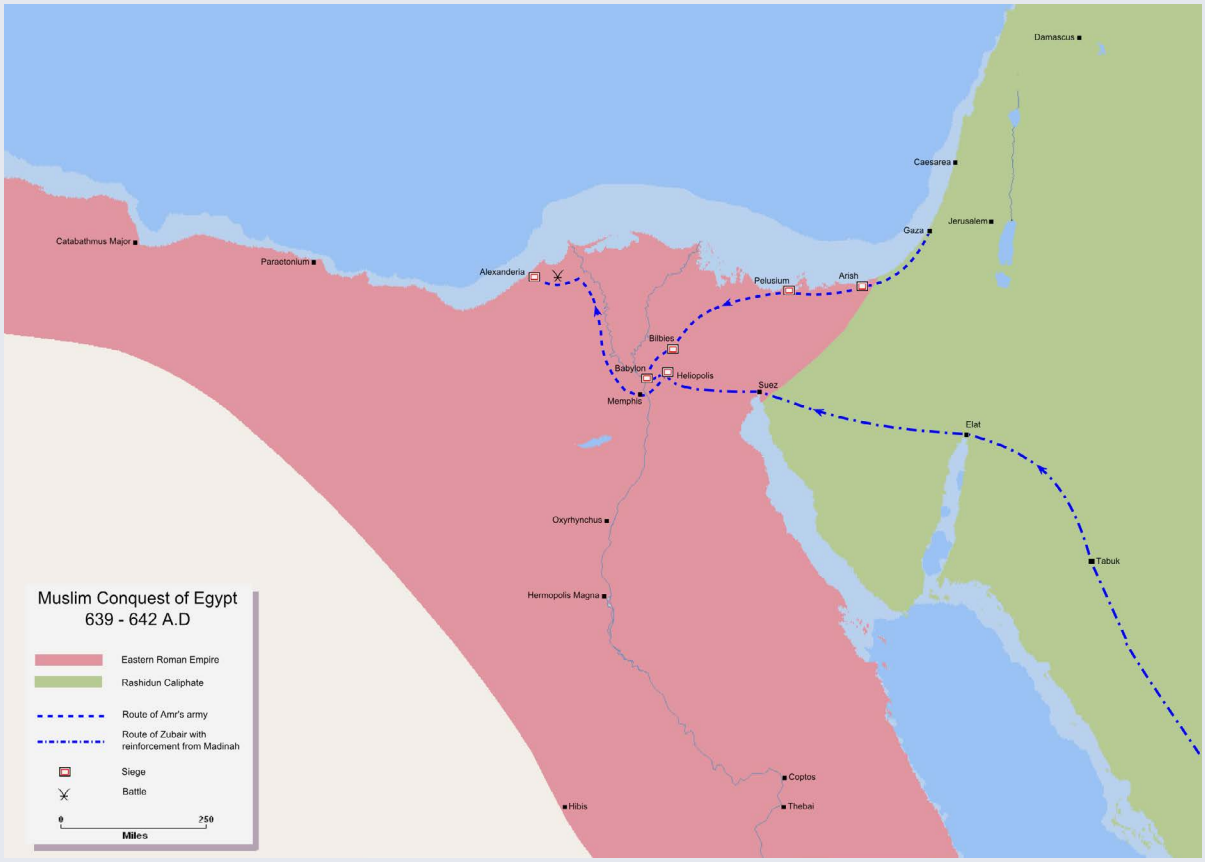
the Muslims not long thereafter. ‘Umar appointed Mu‘awiya, a member of the Meccan Umayyad aristocracy to govern Syria at his behest.

Once he dealt with the increasingly vulnerable Byzantines in the Levant, ‘Umar directed his army to the east against the Sasanian Empire of Persia. In 636, fighting along the banks of the Euphrates River, a smaller Arab force triumphed over the Persians, at the **Battle of Qadisiya**. After successive days of exhaustive combat, the Muslims took advantage of environmental conditions and their light cavalry’s mobility when they chased a dust storm and took the Sasanids by surprise.

To save their empire, the Persians mounted a failed counterattack. In 642, Umar’s army eventually defeated the forces of the Sasanian Emperor Yazdagird III at the Battle of Nahavand, situated deep in Iran’s Zagros Mountains. Yazdagird fled to the east as a fugitive, and, in 651, met his death at the hands of a local miller who killed the emperor in order to rob him of his belongings.

In 639, General ‘Amr petitioned ‘Umar for permission to invade Egypt and eventually persuaded the caliph that he could easily take Egypt so gained his reluctant consent. In 641, he received a message from ‘Umar recalling his forces. The general ignored the order and seized Egypt with just a few hundred soldiers. With promises of toleration, ‘Amr convinced the Egyptian Coptic majority to



Map 8.8 | Map of the Muslim Conquest of Egypt, 639-641 CE
Author: User “Magnus Manske”
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side with him against the Greek Orthodox ruling minority, whose Patriarch Cyrus had been actively persecuting the Copts as followers of a Christian heresy that failed to recognize the Holy Trinity.

Clearly outnumbered Muslim armies thus successfully defeated two long-standing empires in the span of just a few decades. Several explanations help us understand the rapid expansion of Islam during this period. One concept, termed the vacuum theory, posits that the Byzantine and Persian empires had been severely weakened from near-continuous fighting, dating back decades prior to the rise of Islam, so they both suffered from the fatigue of war. Islam, therefore, occupied the vacuum of political power resulting from the collapse of these two exhausted empires.

The success of Muslim military strategy offers a second explanation. While Byzantine forces adopted a defensive stance on the battlefield, the Arabs employed more aggressive tactics, making use of their mobile light cavalry against their enemies' heavily armored armies. Once victorious, the Arabs populated garrison cities on the frontier, called ***amsar***, with Muslims. These military settlements provided security, served as logistical loci, and discouraged Muslim troops from mingling with the locals. The caliphs thereby prevented their warriors being assimilated into the communities of the conquered while also preventing soldiers from disturbing the peace. Fustat in Egypt, as well as Kufa and Basra in Iraq, were the largest of the *amsar*. From bases like these, the Arabs could expand and consolidate their hold over the frontier.

Religion also provided an impetus for the expansion of Islam. Fearing that internal tribal divisions threatened the early Islamic state, 'Umar united the Muslims through their common Islamic theology and faced them against a common enemy. Dedicated to the expansion of Islam, Muslims used the concept of *jihad* as a way to unify the *umma*, or Islamic community, against a foreign foe. Faith motivated the troops, who were zealous and determined to fight.

Simple economics also served as a primary motivating factor in the expansion of Islam. For one, Muslim rulers applied the **jizya**, an annual tax levied on non-Muslims, to newly-conquered lands. The money derived from conquest functioned as a driving force in the growth of the caliphate. With the expectation of material reward, soldiers could earn money for their service. While the practice of dividing the spoils of war amongst the soldiers continued under 'Umar, he also started offering salaries to his troops, determining salaries according to the length of service.

The Muslims further exploited the internal divisions of targeted societies, as exemplified in Egypt, where the Coptic Christian majority, together with a large Jewish minority in Alexandria, had suffered under the rule of an oppressive Greek Orthodox Christian minority but gained autonomy and toleration within an Islamic state. And in Syria, another monophysite Christian minority called the Syrian Orthodox Church, or Jacobites, collaborated with the Muslims and hastened the collapse of the Byzantines. All these factors led the early Islamic state to expand exponentially.

In 644, an Iranian captive from the Persian campaign stabbed 'Umar to death. His successor, **'Uthman** (644 – 656), was an elderly man from the Umayyad Clan who won a contentious election over 'Ali. 'Ali possessed all of the 'Alid bona fides. 'Ali was not only son of Muhammad's early protector, Abu Thalib; he was also the Prophet's cousin and son-in-law. He had married Muhammad's daughter Fatima; together, they had two sons, Hasan and Husayn. 'Ali had also earned a well-deserved reputation as a virtuous Muslim. One of the first converts to Islam, he had

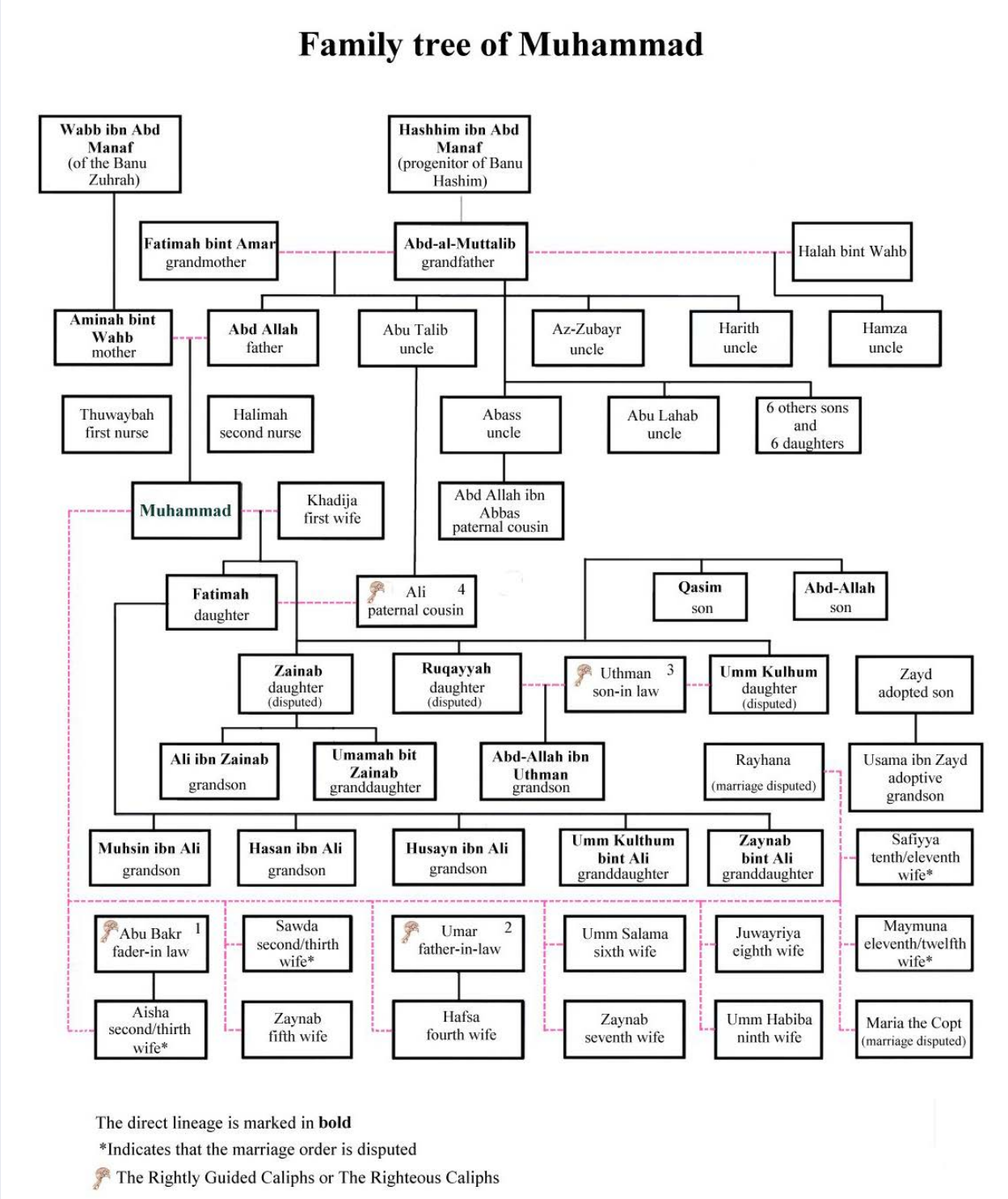

Figure 8.5 | Family Tree of the Prophet Muhammad
Author: User "Basilio"
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journeyed with Muhammad on most of his expeditions and fought against the Meccans. Finally, ʻAli also served as a valued advisor to the early caliphs on questions of dogma.

Two factions formed in the wake of questions over ʻUthman's succession, thus initiating the development of a division within Islam. One faction was a group of **ʻAlids** who believed that ʻAli should inherit the mantle of Islam and referred to traditions suggesting that Muhammad had proclaimed to the faithful that ʻAli should be his successor. The *amsar* followed the ʻAlids and later adopted the Shiʻa appellation. The other faction, the Umayyads contended that the method of appointing successors should be by consensus, as was done with the first caliphs. Mostly based in Mecca, they later identified as Sunnis. Over time, these factional differences became increasingly difficult to bridge.

Although ʻUthman, one of the Prophet's first converts, was a pious Muslim, he was a corrupt administrator. He displayed nepotistic tendencies that gave precedence to the Meccan elite, a practice that diverged from ʻUmar's policies of favoring soldiers who had been the first to respond to the call to action. ʻUmar's beneficiaries had usually originated from lesser tribes, those too weak to constitute a coherent threat to the establishment; by contrast, ʻUthman's appointees were members of the Meccan elite who generally pursued policies benefiting the Umayyad merchants of Mecca.

Government also began to disintegrate under ʻUthman's rule, as opposition and instability plagued his tenure as caliph. He managed to offend three separate groups of Muslims. The first of these were the older, pious Muslims, who hailed from Medina. They resented how the hated Umayyads had taken over the same *umma* that they had previously persecuted and had once tried to destroy. Second were the Quran reciters. When ʻUthman commissioned and authorized a single official version of the holy text, an act for which he received many accolades, the Quran reciters lost the opportunity for gainful employment. Third were a disgruntled contingent of ʻAlids who called for ʻUthman to resign and advocated the election of ʻAli. Their discontent culminated in 656, when resentful devotees of ʻAli from Egypt broke into ʻUthman's home in Medina and assassinated him, purportedly while he was reading the Quran. They then hastily arranged for the election of ʻAli as ʻUthman's successor.

Thrice rejected by the *majlis* in favor of the first three caliphs, **ʻAli** (656 – 661) reluctantly accepted the position of leader of the Islamic community. His selection represented a victory for the faction of legitimists disappointed in the earlier choice of ʻUthman. ʻAli assumed the role of caliph amid high expectations, for he was a pious and generous man. Yet the caliphate suffered under his rule. During this time of instability, he constantly had to suppress revolts. For example, tensions between the supporters of ʻAli and the family of ʻUthman eventually erupted into the first civil war in Islam. In 656, at the **Battle of the Camel**, ʻAli engaged the combined forces of the Prophet's favored wife, **ʻA'isha**, and her associates, Talha and Zubayr, who were both relatives of ʻUthman. Because ʻAli had failed to bring the dead caliph's assassins to justice; these three together demanded satisfaction for his death.

The conspirators challenged ʻAli near the garrison city of Basra, in southern Iraq, before he had the chance to move the caliphate from Medina to the sympathetic military settlement of Kufa. A first, diplomacy seemed to prevail, as ʻAli sought to avoid bloodshed by negotiating. He succeeded in convincing the three to lay down their arms; however, a group later known as

Figure 8.6 | 'Ali and 'A'isha at the Battle of the Camel
Author: Unknown
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Kharijis conspired to undermine their reconciliation and set fire to the tents in both camps in the dead of the night. Pandemonium ensued. Because of this single impetuous action, both parties thought the other side had flouted the agreement, committing a violation of trust. During the ensuing battle, 'A'isha was pushed into the middle of the fray on the back of a camel, as was Arab custom. The supporters who rallied to her side were cut down, and 'Ali emerged victorious from a very bloody battle. The repercussions of his victory reverberated across the Islamic world, as older Muslim men castigated 'A'isha for her part in the conflict and suggested that women should not play a role in public life.

This threat was not the only one 'Ali faced, for he also had to contend with **Mu'awiya**, 'Uthman's cousin and former governor of Syria. Conspicuously absent from 'Ali's new administration, Mu'awiya refused to pay homage to 'Ali and asserted his own independence in Syria. He also echoed the accusations of 'A'isha, Talha, and Zubayr, as members of Mu'awiya's Umayyad Clan had expressed dismay about the quick election of 'Ali, and questions still lingered over the new caliph's part in 'Uthman's death. 'Ali's failure to act against 'Uthman's assassins proved his culpability, Mu'awiya and the Umayyads, and Mu'awiya asserted the traditional Arab custom of exacting revenge on one's enemies.

His conflict with 'Ali culminated in 657 when they met at the **Battle of Siffin**, on the Euphrates River in northern Syria. After months of clashes, 'Ali agreed to arbitration with Mu'awiya. Still preferring negotiation over bloodshed, 'Ali had been of the opinion that Muslims should never take up arms against fellow Muslims. His willingness to negotiate with Mu'awiya, however, caused some of Ali's own soldiers to defect and adopt the appellation of Kharijis, from *kharaja*, meaning "to depart." The first sect in Islam, they departed from Ali because they believed that "judgement belongs to God alone" (Quran 6:57); they saw 'Ali's willingness to negotiate with Mu'awiya as somehow reducing the role of God in determining a successor. In lieu of arbitration, they thought that God would determine the rightful successor by influencing the outcome on the field of battle.

Figure 8.7 | Battle of Siffin, from Balami's Tarikhnama
Author: Bal'ami
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8.9 THE UMAYYAD CALIPHATE

In 661, 'Ali suffered the same fate as his predecessor when a Khariji stabbed him to death. And, just like with 'Uthman, the murder of 'Ali took place during prayers. 'Ali's death represented a deep loss for his followers, who saw him as an advocate of an egalitarian version of Islam and a believer in a just and righteous government. His martyrdom came to be regarded as a sacrifice in the service of God and prompted his supporters to pattern themselves after their champion, who, they insisted, had developed spiritual gifts that remained virtually unattainable for others.

The 'Alids encouraged 'Ali's oldest son, Hasan, to succeed his father; however, Mu'awiya threatened the Prophet's grandson with continued warfare and convinced him to renounce his claim to the caliphate. Mu'awiya promised Hasan that he would not appoint an heir so that election of future caliphs would return to the *majlis*. Handsomely compensated by Mu'awiya, Hassan subsequently retired to Mecca and took up religion. He remained there until his death in

Map 8.9 | Map of The Umayyad Caliphate at its Greatest Extent
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669. With this major obstacle removed, Mu'awiya became the fifth caliph, ending the period of the four rightly guided caliphs, also known as the Rashidun Caliphate.

Mu'awiya (661 – 680) founded the Umayyad Caliphate; the tribal *'asabiyah* of his Umayyad Clan contributed to their ascendance. And once ensconced in power, the Umayyad Caliphate ended the election of caliphs by consensus and established instead a hereditary principle of succession. Mu'awiya established the caliphate to Damascus, where he previously served as 'Uthman's governor. In Syria, Mu'awiya reformed the bureaucracy by eventually centralizing it. Unable to rely on the Arab tribal system or peninsula traditions to administer to an ever expanding empire, he depended on related Greek merchant families for administrators and adopted the existing administrative machinery of Byzantines, including their imperial customs and bureaucratic practices.

Mu'awiya had received much recognition for his unfaltering determination to seek retribution for 'Uthman's death; however, he had squandered much of that good will in harassing 'Ali. As anti-Umayyad sentiment increased, the rift that existed between the Sunnis and Shi'a continued to expand, for recalcitrant 'Alids continued to harbor resentment against the Umayyads. They remembered when the ruling aristocracy of Mecca had opposed Muhammad and the Muslim community. In fact, Mu'awiya himself had fought against Muhammad until the Treaty of Hudaybiyyah, only to reverse course, convert to Islam, and become the Prophet's secretary.

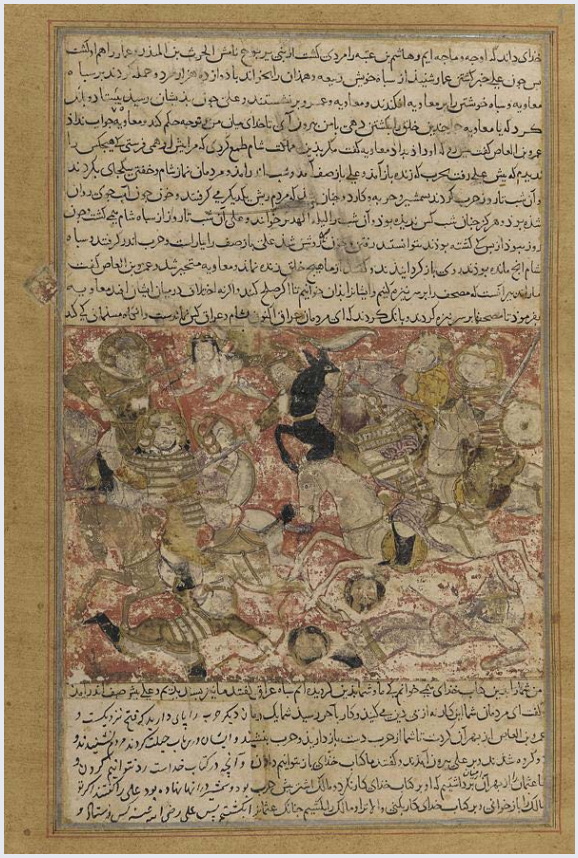

Figure 8.8 | Hasan fought at the Battle of Siffin, from Bal'ami's Tarikhnama
Author: Bal'ami
Source: Wikimedia Commons
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Unlike the two caliphs who preceded him, Mu'awiya died peacefully in bed. Prior to his death, he designated his son **Yazid** (680 – 683) as his successor, thus violating his agreement with Hasan. Most notable for his well-deserved reputation as a fierce fighter, Yazid was also known for generally dissolute behavior that offended the religious sensibilities of many pious Muslims. Once ensconced as caliph, Yazid failed to secure an oath of allegiance from **Husayn**, brother of Hasan, one of the most important of Muslim leaders. Their rivalry escalated into a full-scale civil war.

A direct descendent of the Prophet Muhammad and the younger son of the Caliph 'Ali, Husayn rejected the deal that his brother had negotiated, instead pursuing his own claim to the rightful leadership of the Islamic community. His 'Alid supporters loathed the Umayyads and believed that the caliph must be closely related to the Prophet. Husayn's refusal to recognize Yazid as the next caliph and their subsequent conflict culminated in 680 at the Battle of Karbala, located to the west of present day Baghdad. Yazid dispatched a military detachment to Iraq and overwhelmed Husayn's small band of armed followers so that many of Husayn's own men deserted him in his hour of need. The Shi'a perceived this seminal event as a turning point in their history.

Much like the loss of 'Ali, the death of Husayn shocked the incipient Shi'a community, many of whom suffered from intense guilt for failing to assist his little band. Increasing numbers of Shi'a became profoundly affected by his martyrdom, interpreting it as a sacrifice in the best interests of their community; over time, a passion narrative developed that commemorated his last hours. Through this commemoration of the Battle of Karbala on Ashura, the tenth day of the month of Muharram, they remember the terrible suffering and his untimely death and strive to experience an existential intimacy with their martyr.

Yazid had inherited an empire punctuated by civil war and rebellion. Another principle figure among those in revolt was **ibn Zubayr**, grandson of Caliph Abu Bakr. Following the death of Mu'awiya, Ibn Zubayr had sworn allegiance to Husayn. He remained in Mecca, where he stood in opposition to the Umayyads. The general unpopularity of the Umayyads advanced his cause, and many Muslims considered him the rightful caliph. Indeed, much of his support came from Muslims who rejected the idea of hereditary succession and sought a return to the election of caliphs by consensus.

Figure 8.9 | Artistic commemoration of the martyrdom of Imam Husayn at the Battle of Karbala | The focus of the painting is on Husayn's half-brother 'Abbas on a white horse.
Author: Abbas Al-Musavo
Source: Wikimedia Commons
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Yazid invaded the Hijaz in order to put an end to ibn Zubayr's rebellion, but the caliph's abrupt death in 683 halted the campaign. **Marwan** (684 – 685) followed his cousin Yazid but was not universally recognized as caliph, for many considered ibn Zubayr the legitimate successor. To garner support, Marwan exploited latent tribal animosities that existed between his Kalb Tribe, also known as the Yemen, and the Qays Tribe, who supported ibn Zubayr. At the **Battle of Marj Rahit** in 684, Marwan's Kalb forces defeated the Qays, allowing him to consolidate Umayyad control over Syria and Egypt, thus shrinking ibn Zubayr's rule down to Iraq and the Hijaz. Not until 691 did **Abdul Malik** (685 – 705), heir to Marwan, recover Iraq from ibn Zubayr. In the process, he also had to pacify Khariji and Shi'a areas. Abdul Malik then dispatched

Figure 8.10 | The Mourning of Muharram in Iran
Author: Payam Moein
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General Hajjaj to the Hijaz. A brutal military leader, Hajjaj laid siege to the holy city of Mecca in 692 in order to secure the submission of ibn Zubayr's men. He then beheaded ibn Zubayr and crucified his body. Abdul Malik rewarded the brutal general for his loyal service with the governorship of Iraq, where his ruthless reputation persisted.

Once he had assumed the throne, Abdul Malik promoted the Arabization of the caliphate. He rejected the use of Greek, Persian, Coptic, or Aramaic in government, decreeing that all bureaucracy had to be only in Arabic. Non-Arab administrators had to learn Arabic in order to keep their government jobs. Their integration did not lead to the complete Arabization of Umayyad society that Abdul Malik envisioned, however, and the spread of Arabic was not as great as the spread of Islam.

Figure 8.11 | Abdul Malik on One of the New Coins
Author: World Imaging
Source: Wikimedia Commons
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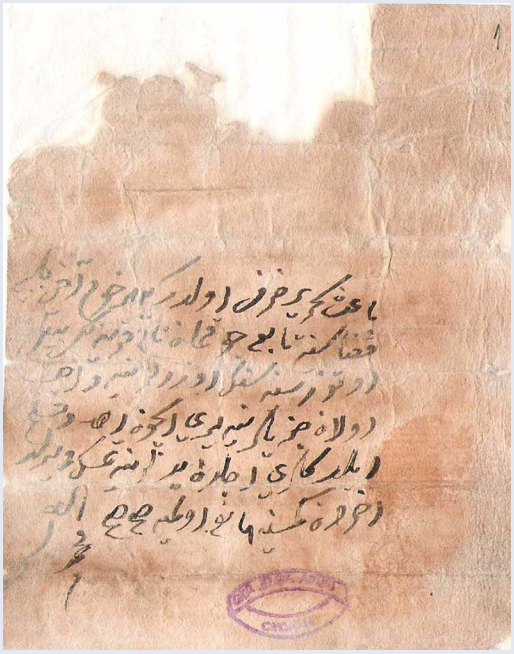

Figure 8.12 | Early Ottoman Jizya Document
Author: World Imaging
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Many Muslims continued to speak Berber, Turkish, Kurdish, and Persian. Although a separate process, Arabization only accompanied Islamization.

Abdul Malik also sought to Islamize the caliphate. First, he discontinued the earlier Byzantine coinage and created the first Islamic currency. Then he instituted a tax code based on the principles of Islam. Caliphs levied an additional tax on non-Muslims, known as the ***jizya***, as was customary in Islam. Christians and Jews in conquered lands also paid a property tax called ***kharaj***. By converting to Islam, one could avoid paying the *jizya* and *kharaj* altogether. Most important for ordinary citizens was the fact that Muslims bore lower tax rates than non-Muslims. As one could imagine, the thrust for conversion became primarily economic. Although the process of Islamization was relatively peaceful and gradual, Islam did become the dominant religion of the region. And the parallel processes of Arabization and Islamization helped to reestablish centralized rule after the second civil war.

Not all of Abdul Malik's reforms adhered to the egalitarian principles set forth in Islam. Arab tribal elites did not want to recognize the ***mawali***, non-Arab Muslims, as social equals, so did not afford them the same rights as Arab Muslims. However, the emerging power and influence of the *mawali* was apparent. They had become the intellectual elite of society and were the bureaucrats and commercial leaders of the *umma*. Nevertheless, they faced social discrimination. For example, Umayyad caliphs taxed the *mawali* as if they were non-Muslims. This inequitable practice became a social problem for the Umayyads, for it stood in stark relief against the values of justice and equality that had originally compelled them to convert.

An extremely devout and pious man, the Caliph **'Umar II** (r. 717 – 720) upended the Umayyad moral order. He considered it immoral to show prejudice against the *mawali* and to favor the Arabs, so he attempted to resolve the lingering hostilities of the *mawali* by advocating the equality of all Muslims. 'Umar II declared an end to the practice of taxing the *mawali* like the Christians and Jews. His advisors warned him against this change because it precipitated numerous conversions of non-Muslims, so he decreased military expenditures to compensate for an expected drop in revenue. His reforms might have ended the official discrimination against the *mawali*, but they alienated the Umayyad privileged class, who paid a servant to poison 'Umar II to death in 720.

8.10 THE 'ABBASID CALIPHATE

For many Muslims, 'Umar II's reforms had come too late. The Umayyads had already managed to alienate three important groups of Muslims, Kharijis, the *mawali*, and the Shi'a, whose combined power and influence were coopted by the 'Abbasids and threatened the internal security of the caliphate. Kharijis eschewed disputes over lineage and advocated a more egalitarian brand of Islam than the Sunni Umayyads. They believed that any Muslim could be the rightful heir to the mantle of the Prophet, so long as that person rigorously adhered to the examples set forth in the Sunna. Kharijis thought that caliphs who diverged from the Prophet's example should be overthrown, as evidenced by their assassination of the Caliph 'Ali. Second, Umayyad authorities had enacted punitive measures against the *mawali*, mostly Persians, but also Kurds and Turks. They treated them like second-class citizens, no different than the People of the Book. Finally, it angered most of the Shi'a that

Map 8.10 | The 'Abbasid Caliphate at its Greatest Extent, c. 850 CE
Author: User "Gabagool"
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Figure 8.13 | Abu al-'Abbas al-Saffah is proclaimed the first 'Abbasid Caliph, from Balami's Tarikhnama
Author: Bal'ami
Source: Wikimedia Commons
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the Umayyads could not trace their ancestry to the Prophet Muhammad. They also blamed the Umayyads for the death of their martyr Husayn. The 'Abbasids collaborated with these disaffected groups to incite unrest and rebellion. They particularly cultivated Shi'a anti-Umayyad sentiment, emphasizing their own connection to the Prophet; indeed, the 'Abbasids traced their ancestry to Muhammad's uncle 'Abbas and the Hashimite Clan. They also vaguely promised to adopt Shi'a Islam once in power. Together, these three groups formed a constituency that campaigned on behalf of the 'Abbasids.

A secretive family, 'Abbasids bided their time until the opportune moment to rebel against the Umayyad Caliphate. In 743, the 'Abbasids began their revolution in remote Khorasan, a region in eastern Persia, just as the Umayyads were contending with not only revolts but also the inopportune death of the Caliph Hisham. In that moment of Umayyad disorder, the 'Abbasids dispatched Abu Muslim, a Persian general, to Khorasan to start the revolution. Abu Muslim's early victories against the Umayyads allowed **Abu al-'Abbas**, leader of the 'Abbasid dynasty, to enter the sympathetic city of Kufa in 748. Together, Abu Muslim and Abu al-'Abbas, who adopted the honorific of as-Saffah, or "the generous," confronted the Umayyad Caliph Marwan II in 750, at the Battle of the Zab, in modern day Iraq. Sensing defeat, Marwan II fled, but his pursuers eventually caught and killed him in Egypt. As-Saffah captured the Umayyad capital of Damascus shortly thereafter. The 'Abbasids attempted to eliminate the entire house of the Umayyads so that not one remained

to come forth and rise up against them, but one, ʻAbd al-Rahman, escaped eminent death and fled to Egypt. The only member of the family to abscond from certain demise, ʻAbd al-Rahman fled across North Africa to Spain, where he recreated a Spanish Muslim dynasty in a parallel fashion to the Umayyad dynasty in Syria. Under the Umayyads, Spain became the wealthiest and most developed part of Europe (see Chapter Seven). In fact, it was through Islamic Spain that ancient Greek learning entered Europe.

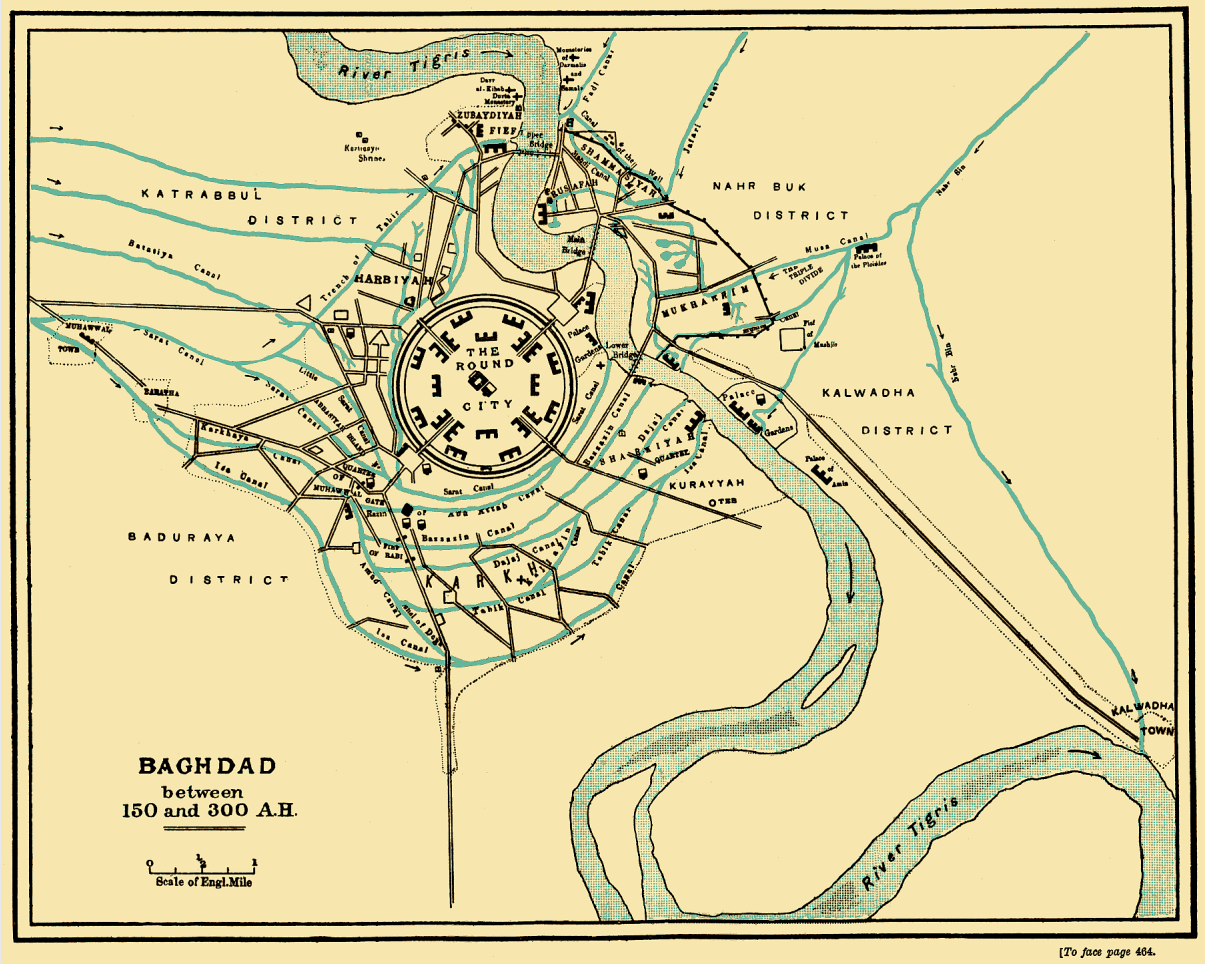
The change from the Umayyad's Arab tribal aristocracy to a more egalitarian government, one based on the doctrines of Islam, under the ʻAbbasids, corresponds to Ibn Khaldun's Cyclical Theory of History. The ʻAbbasids officially advocated Sunni orthodoxy and severed their relationship of convenience with the Shiʻa. They even went so far as to assassinate many Shiʻa leaders, whom they regarded as potential threats to their rule. To escape ʻAbbasid persecution and find safety and security, many Shiʻa scattered to the edges of the empire. While the Shiʻa might have been disappointed with the ʻAbbasids for refusing to advocate Shiʻa Islam, most Muslims welcomed the ʻAbbasid's arrival. They had justified their revolt against the corrupt Umayyads because the latter had digressed from the core principles of Islam. As standard bearers of the Prophet's own family, the ʻAbbasids were publicly pious, even digging wells and providing protection along hajj routes.

Caliph al-Mansur (754 – 775) abandoned the Umayyad capital of Damascus and moved the caliphate close to the old Persian capital of Ctesiphon. Construction of the new city of Baghdad began in 762. Situated at the confluence of the Tigris and Diyala rivers, it boasted a prime location that provided access to the sea with enough distance from the coast to offer safety from pirates. Modeled after circular Persian cities, Baghdad rapidly escaped its confines and expanded into its environs. Quickly eclipsing Chang'an, it became the largest city in the world, with over half a million inhabitants. In effect, Baghdad became a public works project, employing 100,000 citizens and stimulating the economy. Al-Mansur's newly-founded city proudly displayed lavish ʻAbbasid family residences and grandiose public buildings. It even had working sewers, which dumped raw sewage into the nearby canals and rivers.

Prominently featured in *One Thousand and One Nights*, **Harun al-Rashid** (789 – 809) represented the climax of ʻAbbasid rulers; as such, he improved upon the work his predecessors had begun. For example, Harun furthered Baghdad's development into a major economic center by encouraging trade along the Silk Road and through the waters of the Indian Ocean. He also made marginal agricultural land more productive, taking advantage of technological advances in irrigation to cultivate borrowed crops like rice, cotton, and sugar from India, as well as citrus fruits from China.

Harun al-Rashid's reign coincided with the so-called Golden Age of Islam when Baghdad developed into a preeminent city of scholarship. He began construction of the ***Bayt al-Hikmah*** (House of Wisdom), the foremost intellectual center in the Islamic world. The complex boasted of several schools, astronomical observatories, and even a giant library, where scholars translated scientific and philosophical works from neighboring civilizations, including works from Persian, Hindi, Chinese, and Greek.

As a result of this move from Damascus to Baghdad, Persia increasingly influenced the Islamic world, with a synthesis of Arab and Persian culture beginning under the ʻAbbasids. For instance,



Map 8.11 | Map of Baghdad between 767 and 912 CE
Author: William Muir
Source: Wikimedia Commons
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the Persian Sibawayah (d. c. 793) responded to the need for non-Arab Muslims to understand the Quran by systematizing the first Arabic grammar, titled *al-Kitab*. The greatest poet of the period, Abu Nuwas (d. c. 813), was of mixed parentage, Arab and Iranian. The avant-garde themes of his poems often emphasized dissolute behavior. Although ibn Ishaq (d.768), a historian of sorts, was born in Medina, he relocated to Baghdad, where he too came under the influence of Persian culture. At the behest of Caliph al-Mansur, he composed the first authoritative biography of the Prophet Muhammad. Another important Persian scholar, al-Tabari (d. 923) wrote the *History of Prophets and Kings*, a great resource on early Islamic history.

Inheritors of Sasanian court traditions that emphasized ceremony, the ‘Abbasids slowly distanced themselves from their subjects. The harem embodied this spatial separation. A forbidden place, the caliph’s family made the harem their personal residence. Caliphs controlled the empire through family, solidifying political alliances by marrying many powerful women.

Figure 8.14 | John the Grammarian as Ambassador Before Theophilos and Mamun | The Embassy of John the Grammarian in 829, between the Byzantine emperor Theophilos on the right and the Abbasid caliph al-Ma'mun on the left.
Author: Unknown
Source: Wikimedia Commons
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The harem bestowed power to women, and they played an important role in influencing 'Abbasid politics, particularly in terms of questions over succession. In the late 'Abbasid period, various women selected and trained the successors. Young men who were to rule resided in the harem, and much scheming over which son the caliph preferred occurred there. The mother of the caliph, however, dominated internal politics of the space. Harun's mother played a significant role in his reign, for example. The second most powerful woman in the household was the mother of the heir apparent. She could be any woman, even a concubine, for young, beautiful women were highly sought after at a time when the harem became more important under the 'Abbasids.

Riven apart by palace intrigue, the 'Abbasid Caliphate eventually succumbed to internecine warfare. In fact, Harun al-Rashid himself divided the caliphate when he designated his eldest son, al-Amin, as his heir, for he had already bequeathed the province of Khorasan to his younger son, al-Ma'mun. Upon their father's death in 809, al-Amin demanded his brother's territory and obeisance. Of course, al-Ma'mun refused, and a catastrophic civil war ensued. In 812, al-Ma'mun's army, under the command of his Persian general, Tahir, laid siege to Baghdad. Tahir caught al-Amin attempting to escape from the city and decapitated him. Al-Ma'mun succeeded his brother as caliph, but remained in Merv, his former capital. He ultimately relocated to Baghdad in 819, by which time, years of sporadic violence and lawlessness had severely damaged the city.

Al-Ma'mun (r.813 – 833) continued his father's tradition of sponsoring scholarship. He completed the *Bayt al-Hikmah* that his father had begun. He also expressed a love for philosophical and theological debate and encouraged the Islamic doctrine known as the **Mu'tazila**, a rationalist formulation of Islam that stressed free will over divine predestination. Influenced by Aristotelian thought, the Mu'tazila attempted to solve the theological question of evil. It asserted that human reason alone could inform proper behavior. Condemned as a heresy for incorporating extra Islamic patterns of thought into their belief system, many Muslims concluded that the Mu'tazila's rationalism exceeded the holy doctrines of Islam.

The 'Abbasids began their long, slow decline under al-Ma'mun, who was the first caliph to confer greater freedom upon his emirs, or provincial governors, initiating a process of decentralization that eventually unleashed uncontrollable centrifugal forces. This process began when

al-Ma'mun first awarded his general Tahir with the governorship of Khorasan, where Tahir raised his own revenue and directed his own affairs. The Tahirid dynasty dominated the politics of the region, resisting Abbasid attempts to restrain them. From Khorasan, Tahir's family represented an existential threat to the caliphate.

Internal problems continued under al-Mu'tasim (833 – 842), the successor to al-Ma'mun, who replaced undependable tribal armies with ***mamluks***. The *mamluks* played an increasingly important role in the fate of the caliphate. They were part of an elite slave system that imported young boys from various backgrounds, though usually Turkic, and trained them in the military arts. Because the enslavement of Muslims was not permitted in Islam, caliphs obtained slaves by raiding outside of the Islamic world or by trading for them. Indoctrinated at a young age, *mamluks* remained loyal to their leaders, serving as their personal bodyguard. Once emancipated, however, they entered into a contractual relationship with their former masters and benefited from certain property and marriage rights. Although often portrayed as slaves in the popular imagination, *mamluks* actually formed a proud caste of soldiers who considered themselves superior to the rest of society. As the elite bodyguards to the caliph, they supplanted the traditional ethnic hierarchy of the 'Abbasids, a shift which led to much class conflict often resulting in unrest and civil disturbances. In order to remove the *mamluks* from the volatile situation in Baghdad, the caliph moved the capital to Samarra, some 60 miles to the north, a measure that only delayed the inevitable, as subsequent caliphs could not control the rising tensions that resulted in social instability and contributed to the decentralization and fragmentation of the empire.

Figure 8.15 | Mamluk Lancers on Horseback
Author: Nick Michael
Source: Wikimedia Commons
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The transition from tribal armies to *mamluks* had profound repercussions for the 'Abbasids. *Mamluks* like **Ahmad ibn Tulun** (835 – 884), a slave from Circassia, most exemplified this pattern of decentralization and fragmentation that had disastrous consequences for the 'Abbasid Caliphate. He had been sent by the 'Abbasids to Egypt in order to restructure and strengthen it on their behalf. An intellectual and religious person, ibn Tulun founded schools, hospitals, and mosques in Egypt, the most famous being

the eponymous ibn Tulun Mosque. However, he saw weakness back in Baghdad, as the ‘Abbasids suffered from instability, including palace intrigue, disorderly *mamluks*, and revolts like the Zanj Rebellion, a slave rebellion that threatened the fate of the caliphate. The ‘Abbasids could not control ibn Tulun, and, as the caliphate broke down, he managed to secure almost complete autonomy from Baghdad. By the end of his reign, he was so independent that he kept his own tax revenue and raised his own *mamluk* army, for he, too, depended militarily and politically on his loyal *mamluks* to stay in power.

Figure 8.16 | The Ibn Tulun Mosque, Cairo, Egypt
Author: Berthol Werner
Source: Wikimedia Commons
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Ibn Tulun’s autonomy in Egypt portended the decline of the ‘Abbasids, whose real authority came to an end in 945. The Buyids, an Iranian dynasty, overthrew the ‘Abbasids and relegated them to the status of mere religious figureheads; the caliphate continued in name only. Following the collapse of the Abbasids, the centralization and political unity of the lands formerly under their control broke down; however, economic, cultural, and religious unity remained.

8.11 THE FATIMID CALIPHATE

While Egypt grew increasingly independent of Baghdad under the Tulunids, the rule of the ‘Abbasids over their broad empire generally declined. From this vacuum of power, the Fatimids (910 – 1171) emerged. Members of the Isma‘ili sect of Shi‘a Islam, the Fatimids traced their genealogy

to the relationship between Fatima, the Prophet's daughter, and 'Ali. **Isma'ilis** believe that the divinely ordained spiritual leadership of the Islamic community, or caliphate, descended from 'Ali down to Isma'il, the son of Jafar al-Sadiq. They refused to recognize the legitimacy of the 'Abbasids and sought to convert the masses of Sunnis to their own schismatic brand of Islam. To do so, Isma'ili missionaries spread out to the far flung fringes of the empire and preached a religious revolution. These emissaries achieved their greatest success in the North African Maghreb.

Map 8.12 | Map of the Fatimid Caliphate, 969 CE
Author: User "Gabagool"
Source: Wikimedia Commons
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'Abd Allah al-Mahdi, founder of the Fatimids, proclaimed himself the *mahdi*, the precursor to the final judgement, representing an ideology that compelled people to change. Hounded by 'Abbasid agents of persecution who sought to uphold Sunni orthodoxy, he fled from his family's homeland in Syria and, disguised as an ordinary merchant, traveled westward through the Maghreb to Sijilmasa, where he went into hiding. In 909, local Isma'ili missionaries rescued him from Sijilmasa. By 920, he had consolidated power and made his capital at Mahdiya, located in present day Tunisia. As the *mahdi* and a catalyst for change, he converted tribal troops and inspired them to fight on his behalf. 'Abd Allah al-Mahdi endowed the Fatimids with a new *'asabiyah*, providing them with the unity of purpose necessary to defeat the 'Abbasids in North Africa. Within forty years, 'Abd Allah al-Mahdi had conquered the whole of Northwest Africa. He aimed his expansion at Egypt but failed to seize it. His grandson, al-Mu'izz, however, succeeded in this aim.

Al-Mu'izz (953 – 975) used a combination of *mamluk* and tribal armies to capture Egypt in 969. Rather than contend with older, possibly rebellious cities like Alexandria, al-Mu'izz founded Cairo, the City of the Conqueror. He developed Cairo into the preeminent cultural and economic center of the Islamic world, taking over from a Baghdad in decline. Al-Mu'izz established **al-Azhar**, the largest and most famous mosque in Egypt, which also served as a religious center that focused on the theological development of Shi'a Islam. Once in power, the Fatimids changed the official state religion of Egypt from Sunni orthodoxy to Shi'a heterodoxy, though the majority of the population in Egypt remained Sunni Muslims.

Al-Hakim (991 – 1021) ascended to the throne of his father, al-'Aziz, at the age of eleven. As a young man, he quickly displayed a pattern of unpredictable behavior. Just four years after taking command of the empire, he had his regent, the eunuch Barjawan, murdered. Additionally, al-Hakim earned a place in infamy by targeting Christians and Jews, worsening the generally amiable relations with the People of the Book that the Fatimids had previously enjoyed. For

instance, in 1004, al-Hakim prohibited Christians from celebrating Epiphany and Easter. He also forbad the use of wine, a prohibition which caused religious difficulties for Christians and Jews alike. In 1005, al-Hakim decreed the Law of Differentiation, requiring all of the People of the Book to prominently display religious icons indicating their particular religious adherence. In 1009, he became infuriated by some of the Orthodox Church's religious practices and consequently razed the Church of the Holy Sepulchre in response. A few years later, he ordered the destruction of thousands of churches and synagogues in Palestine. Al-Hakim even made Western pilgrimage to the Holy Land difficult. During this period, pilgrimages to Palestine had been increasing, and many pilgrims returned home complaining of Muslim treatment of Christians in the Holy Land. His behavior towards Christians elicited a strong Western reaction, for Europeans used his conduct as a way to encourage support for the Crusades.

Around the year 1010, **Muhammad ad-Darazi**, an Isma'ili preacher, began teaching that al-Hakim was a manifestation of God. Ad-Darazi believed that universal rationality was made incarnate in the person of Adam and then passed down through the prophets to the family of 'Ali and his descendants, including the Fatimids. His doctrines eventually spread to the Levant, where these ideas found reception amongst the Druze, a cognate of Darazi, although they viewed Ad-Darazi as a heretic. A follower of Isma'ilism, al-Hakim did not want to be associated with ad-Darazi and his teachings, so he had the preacher executed in 1018.

Al-Hakim continued his tendency to display erratic behavior when he walked out into the desert in 1021 and never returned. While his disappearance has remained a mystery for the ages, those who worshiped the caliph believe that he went into Occultation, later to return as the messianic *mahdi*.

Figure 8.17 | The Al-Azhar
Author: User "Buyoof"
Source: Wikimedia Commons
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Figure 8.18 | Al-Hakim
Author: Al-Ahram
Source: Wikimedia Commons
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8.12 THE CRUSADES

In 1071, the Great Seljuq Empire, under the leadership of Alp Arslan, defeated the Byzantines at the **Battle of Manzikert**, near Lake Van, taking the Eastern Roman Emperor, Romanus I, prisoner in the process. This defeat was crushing for the Byzantines, allowing waves of Turkmen *ghazis*, or raiders, to press deep into the heartland of Anatolia, eventually establishing the Sultanate of Rum, with its capital at Nicaea. A series of weak emperors succeeded Romanus I with **Alexios Komnenos** (1081 – 1108) eventually ascending to the throne ten years later. As the new emperor, he made peace with the Seljuqs of Rum, and the two states eventually adopted cordial relations. They began to trade with each other and even lent one another military support when needed. Alexius needed this military support in order to secure his borders from groups of Turkic marauders. To that end, he appealed to **Pope Urban II** (1088 – 1099) for help recruiting mercenary soldiers, namely Frankish knights. An effective cavalry, the Frankish knights had earned an impressive reputation for how they acquitted themselves on the battlefield.

Meanwhile, European leaders had been searching for creative ways of expelling society's troublemakers and were not averse to sending their soldiers abroad, for the region was suffering from overpopulation and endemic violence. They believed that it was better for the martial groups in their society to fight against the Muslims than amongst themselves. In this way, the Crusades externalized continental violence and promoted European peace.

In 1095, Urban II launched the first crusade from Clermont, a city in southern France. He had benefited from recent church reforms, renewed religious fervor, and a concomitant increase in papal power. While traveling through France, he made an argument for the recovery of the Holy Land: because it belonged to Jesus, it should be controlled by his followers. He also appealed to the greatness of the Franks, promising potential pilgrims a land flowing with milk, honey, and riches. And he offered them well-designed spiritual rewards. For example, salvation applied to those who died on campaign, and anyone who invested in a crusade secured themselves a place in heaven.

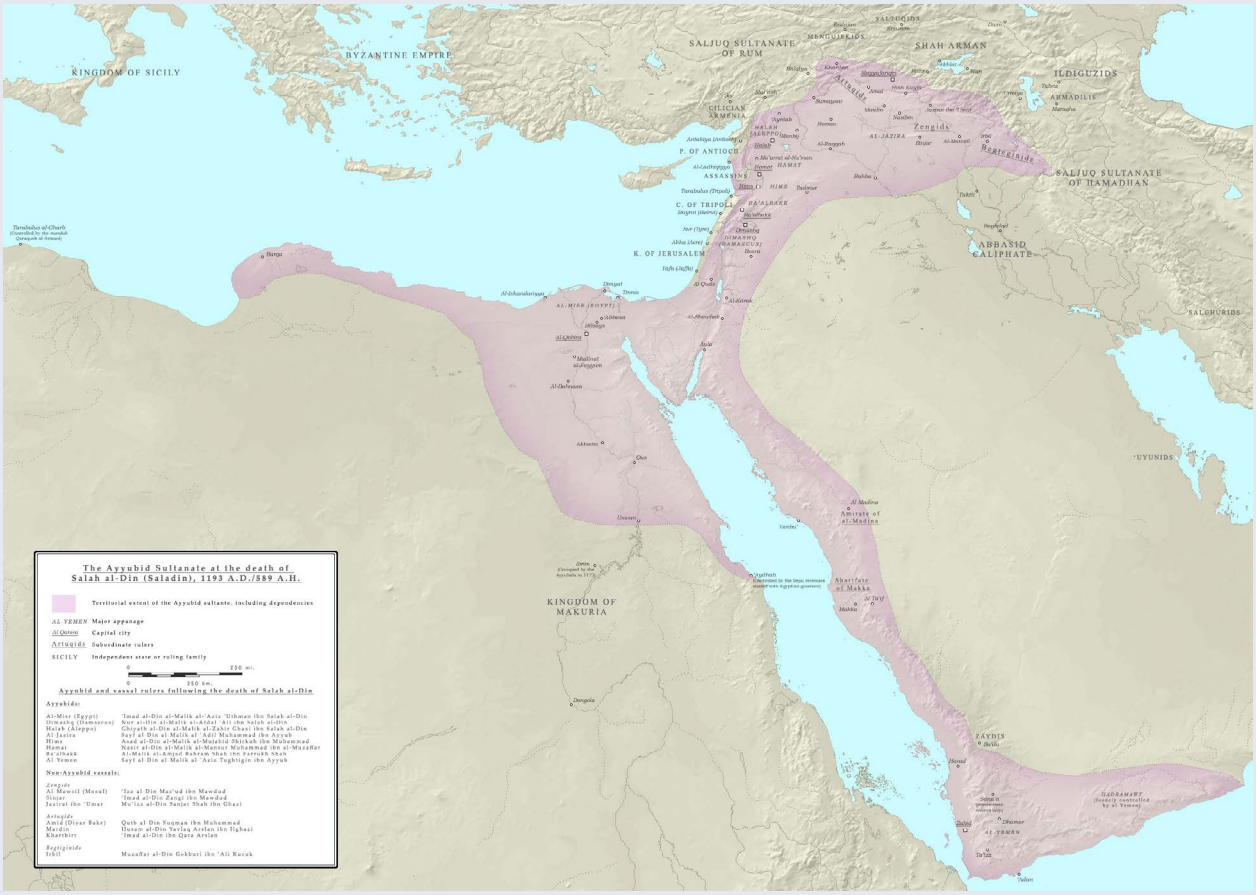
The Crusades started in 1096 and were part of a larger process whereby Muslims ceded territory to non-Muslims, sometimes permanently. Provoked by al-Hakim's treatment of Christians in the Holy Land, as well as the Turkic invasion of Anatolia, Europeans commenced several centuries' worth of armed crusades against the Muslim states of the eastern Mediterranean and North Africa. Save for the first crusade, in which the Christians established the Crusader states of Edessa, Antioch, Tripoli, and the Latin Kingdom of Jerusalem, all of their campaigns ended in disaster. In fact, they were either looting expeditions or responses to the loss of Crusader states to Muslims. The success that the Latin knights did enjoy related to not only the political fragmentation of the Seljuqs in the eastern Mediterranean, but also the general disinterest of the Fatimid Caliphate in Egypt, which had been dealing with both the repercussions of a religious schism and the consequences of famine and plague. Slow to respond to the challenge posed by the Christians, the Fatimids watched the Crusaders from afar with indifference.

The Muslim counterattack eventually came under the direction of **Salah al-Din** (Saladin) (d. 1193), a unifier of various Muslim factions in the eastern Mediterranean. An ethnic Kurd, he hailed

from a family of soldiers of fortune in the employ of the Zengid Dynasty's Nur al-Din, a vassal of the Seljuq Turks. Salah al-Din set off in his twenties to fight battles for his uncle, Shirkuh, a Zengid general. A dynamic leader and tactician, he helped his uncle dispatch with the Fatimid opposition in Egypt and solidified Nur al-Din's rule there. His uncle dying soon thereafter, Salah al-Din eventually became the vizier, or senior minister, to Nur al-Din in 1169. For five years, Salah al-Din ruled Egypt on behalf of Nur al-Din. Then Nur al-Din died in Damascus in 1174, leaving no clear successor.

8.12.1 The Ayyubid Sultanate

In the absence of a formal heir to Nur al-Din, Salah al-Din established the Ayyubid Dynasty (1171 – 1260), named after his father, Ayyub, a provincial governor for the Zengid Dynasty, a family of Oghuz Turks who served as vassals of the Seljuq Empire. Once in power, Salah al-Din established a Sunni government and insisted that the mosque of al-Azhar preach his brand of Islam. He used the concept of *jihad* to unify the Middle East under the banner of Islam in order to defeat the



Map 8.13 | Map of The Ayyubid Sultanate, 1193 CE
Author: User "Ro4444"
Source: Wikimedia Commons
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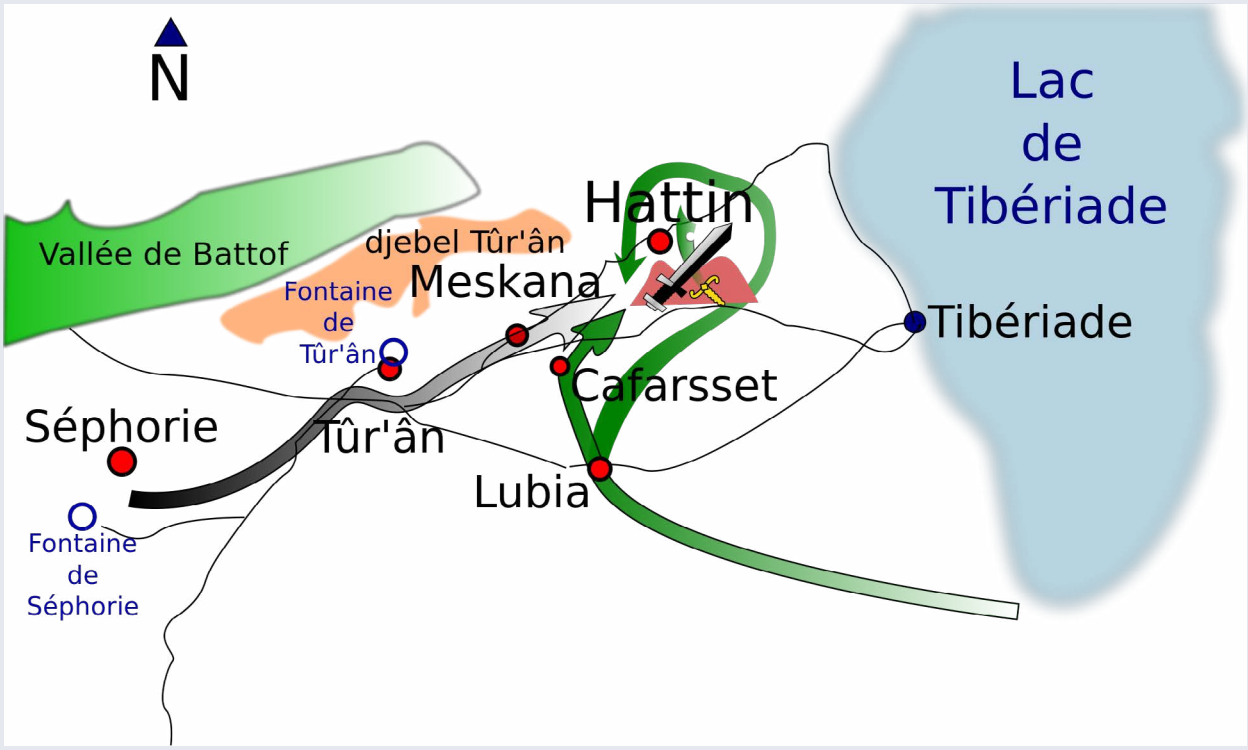
Christians, but he did not principally direct *jihad* towards them. A champion of Sunni Islam, he believed that his religion was being threatened mainly from within by the Shi'a. Like most of their predecessors, the Ayyubids also benefited from tribal *'asabiyah*, or dynastic consensus. Ayyubid 'asabiyah included a Kurdish heritage, as well as a strong desire to return to Sunni orthodoxy. It was as champions of Sunni Islam that they purposely recruited leading Muslim scholars from abroad, ultimately culminating in Egypt becoming the preeminent state in the Islamic world.

Initially, Salah al-Din displayed no particular interest in the Crusader states. He had clashed with the Crusaders, and King Baldwin IV of Jerusalem; also, Raynald de Châtillon even had handed him a rare defeat at the Battle of Montgisard in 1177. But the Crusaders ultimately brokered an armistice with Salah al-Din. Eventually, Raynald broke their truce when he started attacking Muslim pilgrims and trade caravans in the 1180s. Ensuing skirmishes between the forces of Salah al-Din and Guy de Lusignan, the new King of Jerusalem, presaged a forthcoming battle. In 1187, the two sides met near Tiberias, in modern day Israel. Salah al-Din intentionally attacked the fortress of Tiberius in order to lure the Crusaders away from their well-watered stronghold. His plan worked, and the Christians quickly ran out of water. On the night before the battle, Salah al-Din set brush fires to exacerbate their thirst. He coerced the parched Latin Knights down through the Horns of Hattin towards the cool waters of Lake Tiberius. Salah al-Din bottlenecked the Crusader forces, with the double hill of Hattin acting as a choke point.



Map 8.14 | Map of the Battle of Hattin
Author: User "Benherz"
Source: Wikimedia Commons
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The Battle of Hattin represented a smashing victory for Salah al-Din and a major loss for the Crusaders. Tradition dictated that Salah al-Din hold most of the leaders for ransom. Unlike the Crusaders, he treated the defenders of cities with understanding. He showed tolerance of minorities, and even established a committee to partition Jerusalem amongst all the interested religious groups. In this way, he proved his moral superiority to the Crusaders.

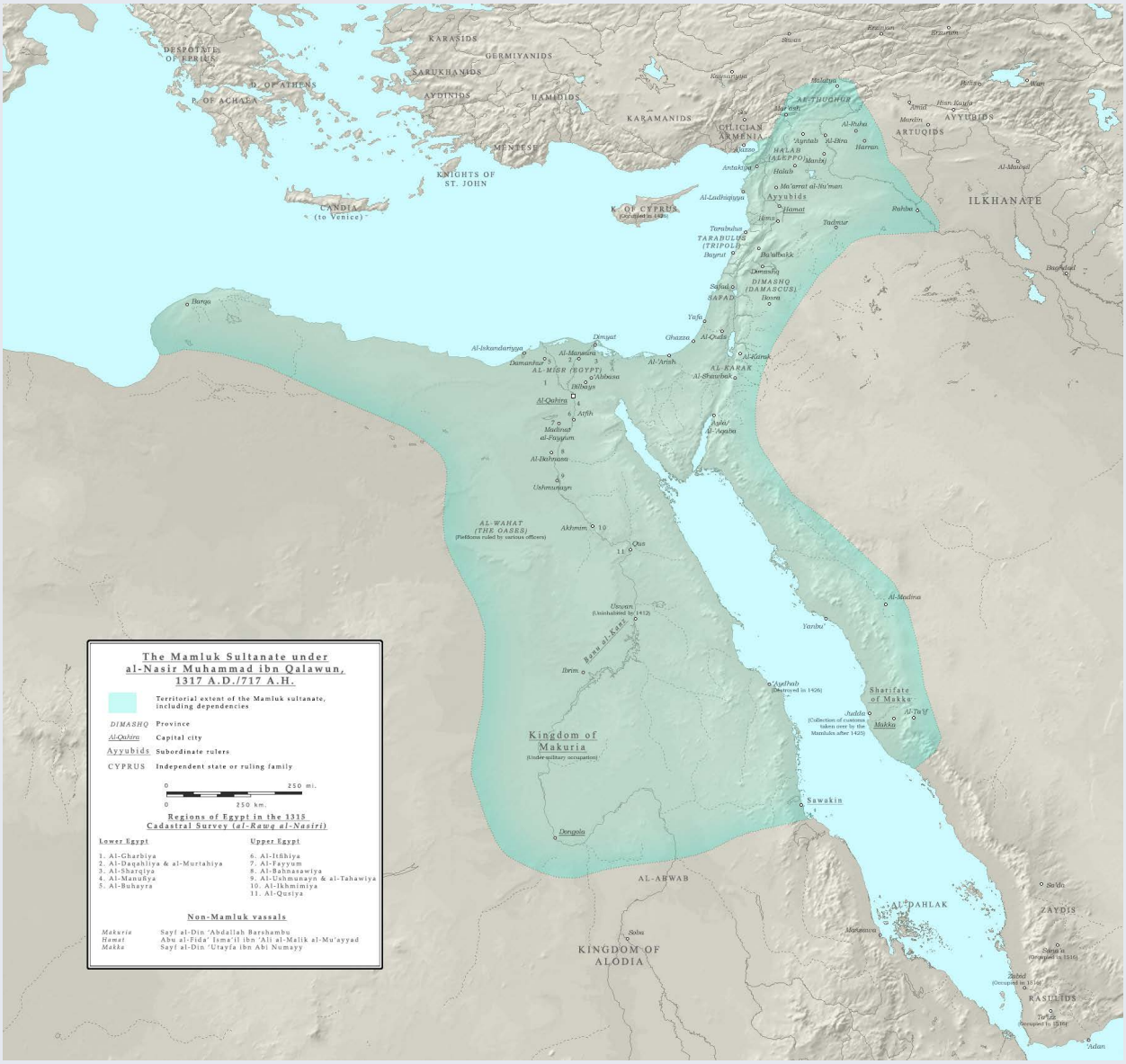
With most of their important leaders either killed in battle or captured, no unified Christian leadership remained to fight against Salah al-Din. Deprived of the backbone of their organization, the Crusaders were left with only a few defenseless fortresses along the coast. Salah al-Din pressed his advantage. Increasingly isolated and relying on ever dwindling numbers of Latin Christians willing to remain permanently in the Holy Land, the Latin Crusaders were eventually expelled from the region in 1291.

Although Salah al-Din had maintained direct control over Egypt, he intentionally distributed control over wide swaths of the empire to loyal vassals and family members, whose governance became increasingly autonomous from Cairo. Salah al-Din's sons and grandsons, who did not have the same ability as their forefather, had trouble managing an increasingly decentralized empire. Widespread *mamluk* factionalism and family disputes over the control of territory contributed to the weakening of the sultanate. In this vacuum of power, the *mamluks* came to the fore.

8.13 THE MAMLUK SULTANATE

The year was 1249, and Louis IX's seventh crusade had just gotten underway when as-Salih, the last Ayyubid ruler, took to his deathbed. Under the eminent threat of a Crusader invasion, as-Salih's wife, **Shajar al-Durr**, a Turkish concubine, agreed to take over the reins of government until her son, Turanshah, could assert himself. But he had never truly gained the trust of his father, and a cabal of *mamluks* loyal to as-Salih murdered Turanshah. They then raised Shajar al-Durr to the throne. Her rule resulted in much controversy and suffered from many internal problems. According to tradition, she sought recognition as sultana from the figurehead 'Abbasid Caliph, but he refused to pay homage to her. The *mamluks* responded by installing into power one of their own, a certain **Aybak**. He married Shajar al-Durr, and she abdicated the throne. The most powerful *mamluk* in Egypt, Aybak placated some of the opposition to Shajar al-Durr's rule and also dealt with Louis IX's crusade to Egypt. While *mamluks* did not possess a tribal *'asabiyah* in the traditional sense, they did constitute a proud caste of elite warriors who had an exaggerated sense of group solidarity. As a social group, their former status as slaves provided them with enough group cohesion to overthrow the Ayyubids.

Shajar al-Durr remained unsatisfied in her new role, however. In fact, she saw herself as another Cleopatra and wanted to rule in her own right. She also feared the consequences of Aybak's potential marriage alliance with the daughter of the Ayyubid Emir of Mosul. In 1257, Shajar al-Durr had Aybak strangled and claimed that he had died a natural death. However, **Qutuz**, a leading *mamluk*, did not believe her story. Under duress, her servants confessed to the murder. Qutuz arrested Shajar al-Durr and imprisoned her in the Red Tower. Not long thereafter, Aybak's fifteen year old son, al-Mansur 'Ali, had Shajar al-Durr stripped and beaten to death. He



Map 8.15 | Map of the Mamluk Sultanate, 1317 CE
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reigned as sultan for two years until Qutuz deposed him, as he thought the sultanate needed a strong and capable ruler to deal with the looming Mongol threat.

The Mamluk Sultanate appeared to be on a collision course with Hulagu's Ilkhanate, one of Mongol Empire's four khanates, whose forces were advancing through the Mamluk-held Levant. Then in the summer of 1260, the Great Khan Möngke died and Hulagu returned home with the bulk of his forces to participate in the required khuriltai, or Mongol assembly, perhaps expecting

to be elected the next Great Khan. Hulagu left his general Kitbuqa behind with a smaller army to fight the Mamluks. In July of that year, a confrontation took place at **Ayn Jalut**, near Lake Tiberias. During the ensuing battle, the Mamluk General Baybars drew out the Mongols with a feigned retreat. Hiding behind a hill, Aybak's *mamluk* heavy cavalrymen ambushed the unsuspecting Mongols and defeated them in close combat, securing a rare victory over the Mongols. The Mamluks captured and executed Kitbuqa, and forced the remnants of the Mongol forces to retreat.

Just days after their signal victory over the Mongols, **Baybars** (1260 – 1277) murdered Qutuz, continuing a pattern of rule in which only the strongest Mamluk rulers could survive. Too clever to be deposed, Baybars developed a strong military oligarchy that rested on the iqta' system, a centralized system of land tenure based on money that, by the thirteenth century, had been perfected in Egypt. Under the iqta' system, individual *mamluks* received a percentage of profit from the sale of crops for their upkeep. Baybars owned all of the land, so *mamluks* only received the right to collect taxes from the land, a right akin to usufruct in feudal Europe.

Baybars relocated the 'Abbasid Caliph from Baghdad to Cairo in order to present a veneer of legitimacy to *mamluk* rule. Since the Ptolemys, Egypt had been ruled by foreigners. In fact, the only impact native-born Egyptians had was in religion. The Mamluk Sultanate practiced Sunni Islam and emphasized Sufism. Sufis believed that traditional, orthodox Islam lacked compassion, and their Sufism helped conversion efforts because of its emphasis on love and making a closer connection to God, as opposed to a strict adherence to the dictates of the Quran. Sufis desired something more from religion and emphasized integrating the reality of God into man. Sufis thought that they could achieve a union with God based on love, a notion that contrasted sharply with the general perception of orthodox Islam which denied believers a direct experience to God because Muhammad represented the Seal of the Prophets and all understanding of God came through the prophet. They set up new religious schools to pass on this Sufism. These *madrasa* consisted of a complex, with a mosque, school, hospital, and water supply for each community.

The fourteenth and fifteenth centuries witnessed the decline of the Mamluk Empire. Several internal and external factors help explain their decline. Domestically, the Black Death ravaged Egypt for years. In fact, it continued in North Africa longer than it did in Europe. This plague caused economic disruption in the sultanate. With fewer people available, labor, or human capital, became much more expensive. Further, plague-related inflation destabilized the economy, as the value of goods and services also rose. The *mamluks* responded to inflationary pressures by increasing taxes, but their revenue from those taxes actually decreased. This decrease made it difficult for the *mamluks* to maintain their irrigation networks and, without irrigation, agricultural productivity decreased.

Externally, plague was not the only cause of inflation. Columbus's discovery of the New World began a process in which gold began filtering through Europe and into North Africa. Egypt's weak economy could not absorb this massive influx of money, thus causing more inflation. New trade routes, like the one pioneered by Vasco de Gama, offered Europeans direct sea routes to Asia. No longer was Egypt the middleman for long-distance trade between Europe and Asia, thereby losing out on valuable revenue from tariffs. The profits from commerce transferred to the ascending states of Portugal and Spain. The decline of the Mamluks set the stage for the rise of the Ottomans.

8.14 CONCLUSION

A contemporary historian who served the Mamluk Sultanate, Ibn Khaldun astutely recognized the applicability of his Cyclical Theory of History to the evolution of Islamic history during the period covered in this chapter. By the eighth century, Islam became the predominant social and political unifier of the Middle East. And for the next nine hundred years, various caliphates used family and religion as tools to rule the region. However, these caliphates faced religiously-inspired revolts that challenged their authority. Quelling these revolts weakened the regimes, often leading to greater decentralization and the fragmentation of empires. Into these vacuums of power, new families armed with tribal '*asabiyah* and a novel religious ideology came forth to supplant a once dominant group who had succumbed to the wiles of civilization and whose influence gradually waned in the face of insurgent desert peoples.

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