Muhammad and the Caliphate

POLITICAL HISTORY OF THE ISLAMIC EMPIRE UP TO THE MONGOL CONQUEST

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Islam as a religion and civilization made its entry onto the world stage with the life and career of the Prophet Muhammad ibn Abd Allah (ca. 570–632) in western Arabia. After his death, a series of successors called caliphs claimed political authority over the Muslim community. During the period of the caliphate, Islam grew into a religious tradition and civilization of worldwide importance. A properly historical view of Islam’s appearance and early development, however, demands that these processes be situated against the cultural background of sixth-century Arabia and, more generally, the Near East.
(Left) Pilgrims to Mecca worshiping around the Kaaba, the cubical stone structure covered with cloth, which stands in the middle of the Masjid al-Haram in Mecca. Muslims revere the Kaaba as the House of God and direct their prayers toward it five times a day.

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**Historical Setting**

The Near East in the sixth century was divided between two great empires, the Byzantine or Later Roman Empire in the west and the Sasanian Empire in the east, with the kingdoms of Himyar in southern Arabia and Axum in the Horn of Africa constituting smaller players in the political arena. This Byzantine-Sasanian rivalry was merely the most recent phase in a long struggle between Rome and Persia that had lasted for more than five hundred years. The two empires not only raised competing claims to world dominion, they also represented different cultural traditions: the Byzantines espoused Hellenistic culture, while the Sasanians looked to ancient Iranian and Semitic cultural traditions and rejected Hellenism as alien. This cultural antagonism was specifically exacerbated by religious rivalry; in the third and fourth centuries the Byzantine emperors had declared themselves champions of Christianity, which itself had been heavily imbued with Hellenistic culture, whereas the Sasanian Great Kings espoused the Iranian faith known as Zoroastrianism (Magianism) as their official religion. On the eve of
Islam, religious identities in the Near East, particularly Greek or Byzantine Christianity and Zoroastrianism, had thus acquired acutely political overtones.

The great church of Hagia Sophia in Istanbul was built by the Byzantine emperor Justinian in the sixth century. It was transformed into a mosque after the Ottomans conquered Constantinople in 1453, and the minarets were added then.

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Although both the Byzantine and Sasanian empires espoused official religions, neither empire had a religiously homogeneous population. Large populations of Jews were scattered throughout the Near East; they were especially numerous in such cities as Alexandria, Jerusalem, Antioch, Hamadan, Rayy, Susa, the Byzantine capital at Constantinople, and the Sasanian capital at Ctesiphon. Many more Jews were settled in places like Tiberias in Palestine and in southern Mesopotamia, where Jewish academies continued a long tradition of religious learning and contributed to producing the Palestinian and Babylonian Talmuds (the authoritative bodies of Jewish tradition) during the fourth, fifth, and sixth centuries. Christians were numerous, perhaps the majority of the Near Eastern population in the sixth century, but they were divided into several sects that differed on points of theology. Each sect viewed itself as the true or orthodox (“right-confessing”) Christianity and dismissed the others as heterodox. The Byzantine (or Greek Orthodox) faith, the official church of the Byzantine Empire, was widely established in Greece, the Balkans, and among the large Greek-speaking populations of Anatolia (Asia Minor). In Syria-Palestine and Egypt, however, the Byzantine church was mainly limited to the towns. A few Byzantine Christians were even found in the Sasanian Empire, mainly in Mesopotamia, but their position was precarious. Christians following the teachings of Bishop Nestorius (Nestorianism) had been forced to leave the Byzantine Empire after Nestorius was deposed for heresy by the Council of Ephesus in 431. They had to take refuge in the Sasanian Empire, scattered widely between Mesopotamia, Iran, and the fringes of Central Asia. Another Christian sect, the Monophysites, had been declared a heresy by the Council of Chalcedon in 451, but Monophysitism was nonetheless
the creed of most indigenous Christians of Axum, Egypt, Syria-Palestine, Mesopotamia, Armenia, and Iran, particularly in the countryside. Zoroastrians were found mainly in Iran and southern Mesopotamia; few lived outside the Sasanian Empire. Communities of all three religions (Christianity, Judaism, and Zoroastrianism)—which are called the scriptural religions because they shared the idea of a divinely inspired, revealed scripture—were also found in Arabia.

The Byzantines and Sasanians fought many wars between the fourth and sixth centuries in an effort to secure and extend their own territories. They competed with particular intensity for key border zones such as upper Mesopotamia and Armenia. They also tried to seize key towns from one another to gain control over, and therefore to tax, the lucrative “Orient trade.” This commerce brought southern Arabian incense, Chinese silk, Indian pepper and cottons, spices, and other goods from the Indian Ocean region to the cities of the Mediterranean basin. The Byzantines and Sasanians also attempted to gain the advantage by establishing alliances with lesser states in the region. The most important of these client states was the Christian kingdom of Axum, with which the Byzantines established an uneasy alliance. Both Byzantines and Sasanians also formed alliances with tribal groups who lived on the Arabian fringes of their territories. Arabia was wedged between the two empires. The Sasanians established a series of protectorates over tribes and small states on the east Arabian coast and in Oman, whereas the Byzantines brought tribes on the fringes of Palestine and Syria into their orbit.

The Sasanians, rulers of Iran and adjacent areas in the centuries before Islam, maintained their capital at Ctesiphon, near present-day Baghdad. The main room of their palace was a giant iwan, a barrel-vaulted space, under which the ruler sat.

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Arabia occupied a strategic position in relation to the Orient trade, a fact that led both empires to intervene decisively in its affairs during the sixth century. In 525 the Byzantines persuaded Axum to invade and occupy the kingdom of Himyar in Yemen and its important trading ports,
thus bringing the Red Sea trade to the Indian Ocean securely within the Byzantine orbit. In 575, however, the Sasanians, invited by the Himyarites, sent an expedition to oust the Axumites from Yemen, which for the next several decades was a Sasanian province ruled by a governor appointed by the Great King. Some time later, the Sasanians inaugurated the last and greatest of the Sasanian-Byzantine wars by launching a series of assaults on Byzantine territories farther north. Between 611 and 620 the Sasanians seized most of Anatolia, all of Syria-Palestine, and Egypt from the Byzantines. But in the next decade the Byzantine emperor Heraclius regained these territories, and in 628 he was able to conquer the Sasanians’ Mesopotamian heartlands, depose the Great King, and install another, more docile king. These dramatic events formed the political backdrop to the career of Islam’s Prophet Muhammad in the western Arabian towns of Mecca and Medina.

Although distant from the main centers of high civilization in the Near East, Arabia was not isolated. The Arabian peoples were aware of and affected by political, economic, and cultural developments in the more highly developed surrounding lands of the Near East. Trends in religion in particular resonated in various parts of Arabia. Many religions had established themselves in Arabia on the eve of Islam. Christianity was well-established in parts of eastern Arabia along the Persian Gulf coast and in Oman as well as in Yemen. The Yemeni city of Najran in particular later became famous because of the martyrdom of Christians there during the sixth century. Christianity had also spread among some of the pastoral nomadic tribes that occupied the northern fringes of the peninsula, where it bordered on Syria and Mesopotamia, and may also have been current among some pastoral groups farther south, in northern and central Arabia itself. Judaism was similarly widespread; important Jewish communities existed in the string of oasis towns stretching southward along the northern Red Sea coast of Arabia, including the towns of Khaybar and Yathrib (later called Medina, the Prophet Muhammad’s adoptive home). Jews were also found in eastern Arabia and especially in Yemen. Zoroastrianism was far less widespread in Arabia than either Christianity or Judaism, but a small following existed, particularly in parts of eastern Arabia and Oman, where the Sasanian Empire had established protectorates among the local populations. Arabian communities of all three scriptural religions—Christianity, Judaism, and Zoroastrianism—sometimes maintained contact with their co-religionists in the lands surrounding Arabia, where these religions were much more firmly established. For example, bishops from lower Mesopotamia were sent to Yemen, and Arabian Jews may have had some contact with the great academies of Jewish learning in Mesopotamia.

In addition to the scriptural religions, Arabia also was home to a host of local animist cults, which attributed divine powers to natural objects—the sun, the moon, Venus, certain sacred rocks or trees, and so on. These cults seem to have been late vestiges of the animist religions once widespread among the peoples of the ancient Near East, such as the Babylonians and Canaanites. Although animism still existed in Arabia in the sixth century, it was being supplanted by the scriptural religions in many areas. The remaining strongholds of these animistic cults were in central and western Arabia, especially in towns such as Taif and Mecca, which contained sanctuaries (harams) within whose confines members of the cult
were forbidden to fight and had to observe other rules of the cult—a feature that made such harams important centers for markets and for social transactions of all kinds. In Mecca the cultic center was a cube-shaped building called the Kaaba, embedded in which was a meteoric black stone around which cult members performed circumambulations to gain the favor of the cult’s dieties.

The religious, cultural, economic, and political environment in Arabia and the Near East was thus a very complex one. Before examining Islam’s rise, however, it is important to note a feature of the Near Eastern landscape that profoundly influenced the course of the region’s history, including its history during the early Islamic centuries. There are extensive tracts of agriculturally marginal land in the Near East; these marginal lands consist either of arid steppe and desert, as in much of Arabia, or of semiarid mountainous terrain, as in parts of Iran and Anatolia. In these regions settled life, particularly larger towns and cities, tended to be widely scattered and in some cases virtually nonexistent. Some such areas, however, could sustain thinly scattered populations of pastoral nomads or mountaineering peoples living in small settlements and relying on a mixture of subsistence agriculture and herding. These nomadic or mountaineering peoples were often outside the effective control of any state, and they organized themselves politically in kinship-based entities (tribes) or in larger confederations of tribes. In many cases they also had strong martial traditions, apparently rooted in such diverse factors as their skill with riding animals and a culturally based attitude of superiority toward nonpastoralists or lowlanders. The result was that for several millennia the history of the Near East was marked by the repeated intrusion of powerful pastoral nomads or mountain tribespeople into the richer, settled lands and towns belonging to the various states of the region. Sometimes these intrusions were merely raids along a state’s borders, usually undertaken when a state was not strong enough to defend a district effectively. During other intrusions, however, nomads or mountain tribes toppled the ruling dynasties of moribund states and supplanted the rulers with members of their own group, who became a new ruling dynasty—usually settling down in the state’s heartlands in the process, but keeping a power base in the marginal region from which they had come. This process of periodic intrusion by peoples from the marginal regions into the state-dominated areas of the Near East is one of the main themes in the area’s history.
The Prophet Muhammad and the Nascent Community of Believers

The historian, whether Muslim or non-Muslim, who wishes to write about the life of the Prophet Muhammad faces grave problems of both documentation and interpretation. The first rule of the historian is to rely whenever possible on contemporary documents—yet for the life of the Prophet these are virtually nonexistent. Fortunately, many accounts produced within the Muslim community in later times provide us with copious information about the Prophet. When dealing with such accounts, however, the historian must try to identify and set aside those features that reflect not the Prophet’s life and times but later attitudes and values of all kinds that have been interpolated into the story of his life by subsequent writers, whether consciously or unconsciously. This is never an easy task, and a significant measure of honest disagreement inevitably emerges among historians engaged in the work of evaluating the reported events and providing a sound interpretation of them. The brief sketch of the Prophet Muhammad’s life and career that follows is drawn largely on the basis of the traditional
narratives, but the choice of traditional materials selected, and the interpretation of their overall meaning, reflect mainly the author’s general concerns as an historian interested in questions of social and political integration and in the evolution of religious movements.

Little is known with certainty about the Prophet Muhammad’s early life. He was born Muhammad ibn (son of) Abd Allah in the small western Arabian town of Mecca some time around 570 C.E. (traditional accounts differ on the date). He belonged to the Hashim clan, one of the smaller segments of the tribe of Quraysh that dominated Mecca. At an early age Muhammad was orphaned and came under the guardianship of his paternal uncle, Abu Talib, head of the Hashim clan. Mecca was the site of an important pagan shrine, the Kaaba, during Muhammad’s youth. The Quraysh tribe served as guardians and stewards of the cult of Hubal, centered on this shrine. The tribe was also involved in trade; although they probably dealt mainly in humble goods such as hides, their commercial activity gave them contact with much of Arabia and the surrounding lands, and it provided them with a measure of experience in the organization and management of people and materials.

In the first centuries of Islam, many fine manuscripts of the Quran were copied on parchment in the distinctive angular script known as Kufic and embellished with gold chapter headings.

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Traditional sources portray Muhammad as having been a promising and respected young man who participated in both Mecca’s cultic activities and its commerce. He also seemed to have had an inward, contemplative side, however, which expressed itself in his periodic withdrawal to secluded spots for prolonged periods of meditation and reflection. It was during such a retreat, in about 610, that he began to have religious experiences in the form of visions and sounds that presented themselves as revelations from God. These experiences initially so terrified him that he sought comfort from his first wife, Khadijah, but the visions occurred again and slowly Muhammad came to accept both the message itself and his own role as God’s messenger. The revelations, coming to Muhammad as sonorous utterances,
were eventually collected to form the Quran (sometimes spelled “Koran” in earlier English writings), which is sacred scripture for Muslims. To Muhammad and to all who have since followed his message, the Quran is literally the word of God, God’s own eternal speech.

The message Muhammad received in these revelations was a warning that only through devotion to the one and only God and through righteous observance of the revealed law could people attain salvation in the afterlife. Some revelations thus emphasized the oneness and omnipotence of God, Creator of the world and of everything in it, including humankind. Others warned that the Last Judgment was near; and then those who had lived righteously would be sent to heaven and those who had lived evil lives would be sent to eternal damnation in hell. Other revelations laid out the general guidelines for a righteous existence. These included worship of the one God and rejection of idols and false gods; regular prayer; almsgiving and charitable treatment of the poor, widows, orphans, and other unfortunates; observance of strict modesty in dealing with the opposite sex, and of humility in all one’s affairs; the need to work actively for the good and to stand up against evil when one sees it; and many other injunctions. Still other revelations retold stories of earlier prophets (among them Abraham, Moses, David, and Jesus) who, like Muhammad, had been charged with bringing God’s truth to their people, and who provided for Believers inspiring models of righteous conduct: as the Quran put it, “Surely in this there is a sign for you, if you believe.”

Many aspects of Muhammad’s message were conveyed in concepts and sometimes in words that were already familiar in Arabia. In part, this was what made Muhammad’s message comprehensible to his first audience. The ideas of monotheism, a Last Judgment, heaven and hell, prophecy and revelations, and the emphasis on intense, even militant, piety were widespread in the Near Eastern scripturalist religions in the sixth century. In this sense Muhammad’s message can be seen as an affirmation and refinement of certain trends among the scripturalist religions of the late antique era, perhaps as an effort at their reformation. To adherents of the pagan cults of western Arabia, however, including Muhammad’s fellow tribespeople of Quraysh, his message came as a blunt repudiation of all they stood for. He proclaimed their polytheism as incorrect and profoundly sinful, an affront to the one God’s unity, in itself sufficient to condemn them eternally to hellfire. He made it clear that in their behavior, they failed in many ways to meet God’s demands for humility, for modesty, for charity for the less fortunate, and especially for pious dedication to God himself through regular prayer. Muhammad pointed out that the tribe’s pagan ancestors, even his own grandfathers, were similarly destined for perdition—an idea certain to generate outrage in a tribal society that highly revered ancestors. The Quraysh were aghast.

Much of Muhammad’s prophetic career, from the time he began publicly preaching in about 613 until his death in 632, was consumed with warding off and eventually overcoming the opposition of his own tribe, the Quraysh. His early followers included some close relatives, such as his paternal cousin, Ali ibn Abi Talib (ca. 600–61), as well as a few prominent Meccans of leading clans, such as Uthman ibn Affan (ca. 575–656) of the Umayya clan. He was also joined at first by many people of lower social stature in Mecca—clients, freed
slaves, and individuals of lesser clans of Quraysh—perhaps because their weaker family ties made it easier for them to act in accordance with their conscience. As his following grew, however, the opposition and abuse by the remaining Quraysh hardened; conditions became so bad for some that Muhammad arranged for a number of them to take refuge with the ruler of Axum in perhaps about 615. His situation in Mecca became critical with the death, in close succession, of his wife Khadijah and his uncle Abu Talib, in about 619; almost simultaneously, he had lost his main source of emotional support and his main protector, because Abu Talib, although he never embraced the Prophet’s message, had nonetheless used the solidarity of the Hashim clan to defend Muhammad.

As Muhammad's situation worsened, he began to look to other towns in western Arabia for supporters. It was around 620 that Muhammad won over a few people from Yathrib, an oasis town about 250 miles (400 km) north of Mecca. For some years the population of Yathrib, which included two predominantly pagan tribes and a number of Jewish tribes, had been riven by intractable internal strife. Over the next two years more people of Yathrib agreed to observe the Prophet's message, until finally a large delegation of people from Yathrib agreed to follow his teachings and invited him to come to Yathrib as arbiter of their disputes and de facto ruler of the town. Muhammad gradually sent his beleaguered followers from Mecca to safety in Yathrib, following them himself and taking up residence in 622. Yathrib henceforth came to be known as Medina (from the Arabic madinat al-nabi, “the Prophet's city”). The Prophet's move (the hijra, emigration) to Medina marked the beginning of a new chapter in his life and that of his followers. They were no longer a small, oppressed religious group in Mecca; they were now an autonomous religio-political community of Believers that dominated the oasis of Medina. Muhammad's hijra to Medina in 622 was thus the beginning of Islam's long life as a political force, a fact symbolized by the selection of that year to serve as the first year of the Islamic era.

During his roughly ten years in Medina (622–32), Muhammad consolidated his control over the town's disparate population, and he extended Medina's power and influence in Arabia. When Muhammad first arrived, Medina was still full of smouldering rivalries: between the town's two main Arab tribes; between the muhājirūn (“emigrants,” the Believers who had emigrated to Medina from Mecca or elsewhere) and the ansār (“helpers,” Muhammad's first followers in Medina, who had invited him and his Meccan followers to find refuge with them); and between some of Medina's Jews and the new Believers. While some of Medina's Jews appear to have supported Muhammad, those who challenged Muhammad's claim to prophecy, and in some cases cooperated with his political enemies (or whose leaders did), were handled harshly in a series of confrontations—exiled with loss of their lands, enslaved, or executed, depending on the case. Beyond Medina the most determined opponents of Muhammad's efforts to extend his influence and his message were his erstwhile fellow citizens, the Quraysh of Mecca.

Mecca and Medina became locked in an intense struggle to win over other towns and groups of nomads, a struggle in which Mecca, with its established commercial and tribal ties, initially
appeared to have the advantage. Muhammad, however, launched raids against Meccan caravans, seizing valuable booty and hostages, and, more important, disrupting the commercial lifeblood of Mecca. After a series of raids and battles against the Quraysh that seem to have been indecisive in their results (at Badr in 624; Uhud, 625; and Khandaq, 627), Muhammad negotiated a truce with the Quraysh at Hudaybiya in 628. In exchange for some short-term concessions, the truce gave Muhammad and his followers the right to make the pilgrimage to Mecca's shrine, Kaaba, in the following year. The treaty also gave Muhammad a free hand to subdue one of Mecca's key allies, the oasis of Khaybar north of Medina, whose large Jewish population (some of them refugees from Medina) was hostile to the Prophet. This done, it was relatively easy for Muhammad to turn on Mecca itself, which submitted virtually without bloodshed in 630. Aware of how dangerous the Quraysh could be if their opposition continued, and wishing to win their support, Muhammad was careful to spare their pride. He tied them to his movement by awarding many of their leaders important commands and positions of authority.

While Muhammad was engaged in his struggle against Mecca, he was also slowly working to bring more and more nomadic groups and towns within Medina's orbit, either as loose allies or as full-fledged members of the community of Believers. In doing so, he used the appeal of his religious message, promises of material gain, or, on occasion, outright force to bring recalcitrant groups under Medina's sway. His conquest of Mecca opened the way for victorious campaigns—with the help of the Quraysh—against the other main town of western Arabia, Taif, and against the remaining groups of powerful nomads in the region. By this time Muhammad's position as the most powerful political leader in western Arabia had become apparent to all, and tribal groups that had until then tried to hold Medina at arm's length now sent delegations to tender their submission. By Muhammad's death in 632, his community had expanded—more by religious persuasion and political alliance than by force—to include all of western Arabia, and he had made fruitful contact with some groups in the northern Hijaz, Nejd, eastern Arabia, Oman, and Yemen.

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Early Expansion of the Community and State

Upon Muhammad's death in 632, the young community of Believers faced a set of difficult challenges. The first and most basic challenge was to resolve the question: Were the Believers to form a single polity under one leader even after Muhammad's death, or were they to belong to separate communities, each headed by its own political leader? In the end the Believers chose to remain a single community and selected the Prophet's father-in-law and staunch supporter, Abu Bakr, to be his first successor. Abu Bakr and subsequent successors as leaders of the Islamic community are known in Islamic tradition as caliphs (from the Arabic khalifa, meaning “successor” or “representative”).

Abu Bakr and the Believers in Medina faced a second immediate challenge. Although the towns of Medina, Mecca, and Taif and the nomadic groups between them were for the most part quite steadfast in their support of Abu Bakr, many groups in Arabia that had once tendered their submission to Muhammad tried to sever their political or religious ties with Medina once the Prophet was dead. Some claimed that they would remain Believers but contended that they did not owe the tax that the Prophet had collected, which Abu Bakr
continued to demand. Other groups gave no assurances that they would remain Believers. In still other cases religious leaders arose claiming to be prophets themselves.

Against these threats, Abu Bakr acted quickly and decisively in what is usually called the Apostasy (or Ridda) wars, during which he sent armed bands of Believers to the main centers of opposition in Arabia: Yemen, Nejd, and Yamama. By making shows of force first among wavering tribes, these campaigns picked up allies as they proceeded, and grew large enough to defeat the more serious opponents, such as the “false prophet” Musaylima of Yamama. These campaigns were followed by incursions into Oman and northward toward the Arabian fringes of Syria and Mesopotamia (what is now Iraq). In 634, at the end of two years of campaigning, Abu Bakr and the Believers of Medina had brought the entire Arabian peninsula under their control, opening the way to further conquests that would, within a few more decades, make the Believers the masters of a vast empire. This was possible partly because the almost ceaseless military activity of the Ridda wars provided the setting in which the loosely organized war parties formed at the beginning of the Ridda wars began to assume the character of a standing army, with a core of devoted supporters (mainly townsmen of Medina, Mecca, and Taif) leading a larger mass of allies drawn from a wide variety of Arabian tribes. It also represented the domination of the pastoral and mountaineer populations of Arabia by the embryonic new state in Medina, which was headed by an elite group composed almost exclusively of settled townsmen.

The Ridda wars brought the Believers to the very doorsteps of the Byzantine and Sasanian empires, but they also did more. The emergence in Arabia of a state where none had been before, one that could harness the military potential of the Arabian population, made it possible for the Believers to organize campaigns of conquest that penetrated the great empires and wrested vast territories from them. The great wave of early conquests was the main work of the second caliph, Umar ibn al-Khattab (r. 634–44), whom Abu Bakr upon his deathbed selected to lead the Believers. The conquests were further continued during the first years of the reign of the third caliph, Uthman ibn Affan (r. 644–56).

The caliphs launched one set of offensives against the Byzantine-controlled territories of Palestine and Syria, home to many Arabic-speaking tribes (part of the primary audience to which the Quran had been addressed). These incursions elicited defensive reactions from the Byzantine authorities in Syria, against whom several battles were fought. Eventually, the Byzantine emperor Heraclius sent a large army from Anatolia to secure Syria against the threatening Believers, but to no avail; his force was decimated at a battle along the Yarmuk valley (east of the Sea of Galilee) in 636. Most of the countryside and towns of Syria and Palestine fell to the Believers shortly thereafter; the only exceptions were some coastal towns such as Ascalon and Tripoli, which held out for years longer because the Byzantines could supply them by sea. From Syria the Believers sent campaigns into northern Mesopotamia, Armenia, and against the Byzantine frontier in southern Anatolia. An expeditionary force from Syria also wrested the rich province of Egypt from the Byzantines, conquering the commercial and cultural hub of Alexandria in 642.
At the same time as the offensives in Syria and Palestine, the Believers were faced with impending clashes with the Sasanian Empire in what is now southern Iraq. The early contacts of the Believers with the Arabic-speaking pastoral nomads of this region, and their increasing boldness in penetrating Iraq's interior, had caused the Sasanians to mobilize their armies to resist them, but they fared no better than the Byzantines. In a great battle in 637 at al-Qadisiyah (modern Kadisiya) in southern Iraq, the Sasanians were decisively broken, opening the rich alluvial lands of Iraq to occupation by the armies of the Believers. From southern Iraq the Believers sent campaigns into Khuzestan and Azerbaijan, and others pursued the fleeing Sasanians into the Iranian highlands. Gradually the main towns of western Iran, and with time areas farther east, fell to the Believers. By the mid-650s the Believers ruling from Medina had loose control over a vast area stretching from Yemen to Armenia and from Egypt to eastern Iran. And from various staging centers in this vast area, the Believers were organizing raids into areas yet further afield: from Egypt into Libya, North Africa, and Sudan; from Syria and northern Mesopotamia into Anatolia; from Armenia into the Caucasus region; from lower Mesopotamia into many unconsolidated districts in Iran and eastward toward Afghanistan and the fringes of Central Asia.

An important feature of the early expansion of the Believers was its quality as a religious movement, but this was colored by the presence of the state. The caliphs and their followers believed, of course, in Muhammad's message of the need to acknowledge God's oneness and to live righteously in preparation for the imminent Last Day. They saw their mission as *jihad*, or militant effort to combat evil and to spread Muhammad's message of monotheism and righteousness far and wide. But their goal seems to have been to bring the populations they encountered into submission to the righteous order they represented, not to make them change their religion—not, at least, if they were already monotheists, such as Christians and Jews. For this reason the early Believers collected tribute from conquered populations but generally let them worship as they always had; only pagans and at times Zoroastrians appear to have been coerced into embracing Islam or had their places of worship sacked.

The astonishing extent and rapidity of this process of expansion and conquest can only be understood if the nature of the expansion it represented is recognized. It was, first and foremost, the expansion of a new state based in Medina. The ruling elite of this state were mostly settled townspeople of Mecca, Medina, and Taif, who commanded growing armies composed mainly of pastoral nomads from northern and central Arabia or mountaineers from Yemen. It was not an expansion of nomadic or mountaineering peoples as such. The state-sponsored quality of the expansion is reflected in a significant measure of centralized direction of the expansion movement by the caliphs and their circle, who appear to have coordinated strategy between various fronts, as well as in certain bureaucratic institutions that were established during the early conquests. The institutions included the creation of a regular payroll (*diwan*) for the soldiers, as well as the gathering of the expeditionary forces in distant areas into tightly clustered garrison settlements that became the nucleus of new cities: Kufa and Basra in southern Mesopotamia, Fustat in Egypt, and somewhat later, Marv in northeastern Iran (651) and Qayrawan in Tunisia (670). These garrisons helped the Believers
live apart from the vast conquered populations they ruled, and so to avoid assimilation; later, as cities, these garrisons would be among the most important centers in which early Islamic culture was elaborated.

The consequences of the conquests were momentous. They established a large new empire in the Near East, destroying the Sasanian Empire completely and occupying important parts of the Byzantine Empire. Moreover, the leadership of this new empire was committed to a new religious ideology. New economic structures were created with the demise of the old ruling classes and the rise of a new one, consisting at first largely of people of Arabian origin. Property and wealth—as well as political power—were redistributed on a grand scale. Most important, the newly emergent state provided the political framework within which the religious ideas of the ruling Believers, who were but a small part of the population, could gradually spread among the conquered peoples. The many captives taken during the conquests came to be integrated into the tribes and families of their captors as clients (mawali), a fact that facilitated this transformation.

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