

The First Four Caliphs of Islam

Betsy Omidvaran

Abstract

This paper was originally written for submission during the final year of an undergraduate Degree in Arabic. Many Bahá'ís appear to know little about Islam and most of they do know is based on the Shi'i tradition, which does not constitute the mainstream of Islamic studies in general. It was thought that this overview, presented from a perspective of Western scholarship, of the first four caliphs, known as "rightly-guided", would help a Bahá'í readership put the subject into a broader perspective than exists at present.

At the time of the death of Muhammad in 632 CE, Islam and the Islamic community were vibrant, active and expanding. They controlled most of the Arabian Peninsula and had already begun to expeditions north into Syria and west into Africa. The two great empires, the Byzantine (East Roman) to the north-west (covering present-day Syria, Palestine, Turkey and Egypt) and the Sassanian (Persian) to the north-east (covering present-day Iran and Iraq), had exhausted themselves in warring with each other. In the few years after 610, Persia had taken over most of the Byzantine lands and even almost besieged Constantinople, and only in 628 had Byzantium regained the territory and taken the Persian capital. The Byzantine Emperor made a pilgrimage to Jerusalem in 630, two years before the death of Muhammad.

From the perspective of a historian, the thirty years after the death of Muhammad are very problematic. There are very few historical sources from Byzantium covering this period and they generally date from one or two centuries later. The most important are Nicephorus (late eighth century) and Theophanes (early ninth). There are numerous non-historical sources, such as sermons, religious tracts and poetry, which can reveal a few details if carefully sifted: there would not be enough detail to get any kind of clear picture. The Islamic sources, on the other hand, are voluminous and detailed. They, too, however, date from a later period. Three of the best-known and reliable are al-Baladhuri, al-Tabari and al-Ya'qubi, all from the late ninth century, but are held to be based on much earlier materials. In the past twenty years, much work has been done to critically examine the sources, as well as to communicate between those who specialise in Byzantium and those who specialise in Islam (from Kaegi). Most experts still accept, with a variety of caveats, the broad outline of events as they are presented in the Islamic sources. (Bahá'ís are inestimably privileged in that their history is so well-documented in the contemporaneous records of writers like Nabíl-i-A'zam).

Muhammad's death, which occurred on 8 June 632 CE, was unexpected, and He had left no clear instructions as to His successor. Thus, His followers had to decide how the governance of the community would be organised and how it would continue to progress and expand. There were three main groupings within the central body of the Muslims: the ansar, the natives of Medina who had invited the persecuted Muslims there from Mecca, the muhájírun, the early Muslims who followed Muhammad from Mecca to Medina, and the Meccans, who converted later

and after the Prophet overcame Mecca. After some initial discussion of the rights of these three groups, they finally agreed on Abu Bakr. Abu Bakr had been one of the earliest Muslims, accompanying Muhammad on His emigration from Mecca to Medina, and had been asked by Muhammad to lead the prayers during His illness.

Abu Bakr was determined to carry forward the programme for expansion that Muhammad had initiated. However, his first priority had to be the re-conquest of the tribes who had pledged their allegiance to Muhammad, a series of conflicts known as the Riddah Wars. Riddah is usually translated as “apostasy,” and many of the tribes felt that they had a treaty with Muhammad which did not have to be honoured after His death. This was seen as apostasy from their declared Islamic faith. In the process, the other tribes which had been waiting to see the outcome of these conflicts and some of those who had never been under the banner of Islam were won over. Another aspect of this problem was that a number of people had arisen even before Muhammad’s death who claimed to be prophets, on a par with Him, to their particular tribes. They had seen this as their opportunity. Success in re-establishing Muslim control was a major achievement of his reign as Caliph, the name which he took for the office of successor to the Prophet; without this accomplishment, the future unified expansion of the Islamic community could not have taken place.

At the same time as he was prosecuting these wars, with the support of the Meccans and Medinans and nearby tribes, he sent expeditions north to Palestine and to Mesopotamia, as the Prophet had been planning to do before His death. The success of Abu Bakr’s two enterprises, internal and external, were interlinked since “[t]he Arabian tribes would probably never have been conquered had not the conquests in the north provided an attractive solution to the internal economic problems of the peninsula. The first northern expeditions were merely raiding parties aiming at plunder not conquest. The latter only followed when the weakness of the enemy was revealed.” (1)

The main general of the Riddah Wars was Khalid ibn al-Walid, a Meccan from a powerful clan who had lately converted. Once the wars within the peninsula were successful, he took it upon himself to begin venturing into the territory of the weakened Sassanian Empire, where the booty to be gained was rich. In 634 Abu Bakr sent four separate contingents into Byzantine territory, which indicated that they were not looking for a military confrontation, but for the fruits of raiding. (2) However, the Byzantine Empire took the threat seriously and sent an army to meet them. The Muslims requested reinforcements and Abu Bakr felt it was too dangerous to use the tribesmen who had just been overcome in the Riddah Wars, so he directed Khalid and his army in Iraq to go to their assistance. Khalid assumed command of the combined forces and they won a decisive victory at Ajnadayn.

Abu Bakr died before he heard the news of the victory. His term as Caliph lasted for only two years, from 8 June 632 to his death on 23 August 634, but it was very eventful, providing a crucial foundation for future growth and development. Before his death he designated Umar ibn al-Khattab as his successor. ‘Umar was also one of the Muhájirun, commanded respect among the Muslim community and had proposed Abu Bakr as leader upon the Prophet’s death. He added the title

Amir ul-Mu'minin ("prince of the believers") to the title of Caliph. He was known for his integrity and ability, and he provided a firm foundation for the future administration of the vast territory that the Arabs were to control. For example, he set up the diwan system for dividing the spoils of war and a clear revenue system for subjugated people, which was important for the continuity of the empire.

Unlike Abu Bakr, 'Umar favoured the Muhájirun over the ansar, and among the newly converted Meccans, he favoured the rich and powerful Umayyad clan, which would have implications in the future. In addition, "'Umar's first act was to reverse Abu Bakr's policy towards the ex-rebels of the ridda. He not only allowed but even encouraged their participation in the raids on Sasanian territories... It was the most meaningful step towards the unification of the Arabs." (3) During 'Umar's reign from 23 August 634 to 4 November 644, the first and greatest conquests were achieved by the Muslim armies.

There is a historiographical problem here, described by Kennedy:

The Arab conquests in Syria and Iraq pose the historian an unusual problem. The Arab literary sources which describe them are very full... They are, on the other hand, hopelessly confused about the chronology and order of the main events. (4)

That said, it is possible to give a general description of the events. In Palestine and Syria against the Byzantine Empire following the victory at Ajnadayn in 634, there were a number of sieges and small confrontations. The last and most major battle was that on the Yarmuk River, probably in 636 or 637, which led to the final fall of Damascus and the breaking of the Byzantine army in Syria. The Byzantine Emperor Heraclius at this point abandoned Syria. In early 638, the Muslims took Jerusalem and, as the Patriarch would surrender only to the Caliph himself, 'Umar travelled to Jerusalem, the first and only time that he travelled from Medina to the scene of the conquests. The Umayyad Mu'awiya ibn Abi Sufyan was appointed governor of Syria, and he set about establishing garrison towns and settling it with divisions of the conquering army.

In relation to the Sassanian Empire, "... in the summer of 637, 20000 Persians were decisively defeated by a far smaller Arab force at Qadisiya. The Arabs followed up their victory by capturing the Persian capital of Ctesiphon... and occupied the whole of Iraq." (5) A decisive victory was won by the Arabs at Nihavand in 642. The battle for most of the remainder of the Sassanian Empire went on for several more years, with successive Sassanian kings retreating into the mountains and trying desperately to hold on.

A small force had gone into Egypt, although the 'Umar had initially been reluctant to sanction it, and laid siege to Alexandria. In 641, they gained control of Alexandria by treaty. Four years later, Byzantium made an effort to regain it but failed in the end.

The Muslim community during the caliphates of Abu Bakr and 'Umar went from strength to strength. Muslim authority within Arabia was firmly established and the unity of the Muslim community largely maintained. The conquests included victory over the two most powerful empires of the day and a vast expansion of the lands

over which they had hegemony, from southern Arabia west into Iran, north to the border of Anatolia and east into Egypt. It seems from this record that these first twelve years comprised all gain and virtually no setbacks, and so it was. However, some of the seeds of future setbacks had been sown and these became evident during the reigns of the next two Caliphs.

‘Umar was murdered on 3 November 644 by a slave. Although the details are unclear, it seems that it was not for political but for personal reasons. His successor, Uthman ibn Affan, was chosen by a shura, appointed by ‘Umar on his deathbed. This was a group of six likely successors, who were to consult among themselves and decide who the successor would be. The six included ‘Alí, the Prophet’s cousin and the husband of His daughter, Fatimah, and the final choice was between ‘Alí and Uthman. Uthman, like Mu’awiya, the governor of Syria mentioned above, was a member of the family Umayya. Although Uthman himself was an early convert to Islam, his election represents a victory for the Meccans who were later converts to Islam and who still carried their previous sense of superiority to other Arabs. He was weak in character and easily influenced by members of his family to appoint members of powerful Meccan families to important posts. By this time, the conquests had come up against geographical barriers and, while the domains continued to expand, the expansion was not at anything approaching the rate of that during the reigns of the first two Caliphs.

His reign lasted for twelve years, from 4 November 644 to 17 June 656. Many of his appointees to administrative posts were causing discontent among the residents of their areas. In the end a group of discontented soldiers from the army in Egypt came to Medina to complain to the Caliph, caused turmoil in Medina and in the process he was killed. “The murder marks a turning point in the history of Islam. The slaying of a Caliph by rebellious Muslims established a mournful precedent and gravely weakened the religious and moral prestige of the office as a bond of unity in Islam.” (6)

Despite the weaknesses of his reign, ‘Uthman made an important contribution to the religious unity of Islam. By his time, discrepancies had arisen in people’s memories of the sacred text of Islam, the Qur’án, and different readings were beginning to lead to disputes. ‘Uthman arranged for the text to be collected and regularised, so that there was only one authentic version. “For the history of Islam, this editing of the Qur’án was the most important and fruitful achievement of the reign of ‘Uthman.” (7)

Following ‘Uthman’s death, ‘Alí was acknowledged as Caliph and most of the remaining companions of the Prophet in Medina pledged their allegiance to him. But he immediately began to face opposition and problems. ‘Alí had been closely associated with the ansar in Medina, which led to opposition from the Muhájirun of the Quraysh tribe, who had been in the ascendant under ‘Uthman. Several of them left to find military assistance elsewhere; ‘Alí was forced to follow in order to find his own military support, and the two armies met in the Battle of the Camel. ‘Alí’s army won. “But for the first time there had been civil war among the Muslims, the gate of fitna, a strife, had been opened and, like Pandora’s box, once opened it was impossible to close.” (8)

‘Alí felt the need to restore a spirit to the administration more in keeping with the religion of Muhammad and began to remove many of ‘Uthman’s appointees, whom he felt were not living up to the standards of Islam. He was able to establish his authority in most areas of the empire, with the exception of Syria, where Mu’awiya had control. He refused to be removed and, as he was ‘Uthman’s closest living relative, he demanded that ‘Uthman’s murderers be punished before he would recognise ‘Alí as Caliph. Unfortunately for ‘Alí, he was dependent for support on some of the people of the city of Kufa, who had been implicated in the murder. ‘Alí led an army against Mu’awiya and they met at Siffin in 657. ‘Alí was obliged to agree to the arbitration proposed by Mu’awiya, and they chose two arbitrators, and agreed to meet again in a year. This greatly weakened ‘Alí, as he showed himself to be dealing with Mu’awiya on equal terms, and much of his support melted away. When the year was up, the result of the arbitration seemed to favour Mu’awiya and both continued to look for support. During this period a faction of his supporters formed a separate group who criticised his resort to arbitration and what they felt was his betrayal of his position. They came to be known as Kharijites (Khawarij) and continued to make an impact on the Islamic community for centuries, by their insistence on purity and frequent resort to violence. ‘Alí was assassinated in 661 by one of these erstwhile supporters and Mu’awiya became Caliph, the beginning of the Umayyad Caliphate.

The Shi’ih branch of Islam would say that the setbacks began at the very beginning as they quote a tradition in which the Prophet Himself had appointed ‘Alí to succeed Him. They believe that this was ignored to the detriment of the progress of Islam.

Thus ended the rules of the four Rightly-Guided Caliphs. During the reigns of the first two, the gains greatly exceeded the setbacks, but during the reigns of the second two, setbacks multiplied and while the territorial gains were preserved, the vast potential was greatly hampered.

References

1. Lewis, Bernard, *The Arabs in History* (London: Hutchinson University Library, 1966), p. 52
2. Shaban, M.A., p. 25
3. Ibid., p. 28.
4. *The Prophet and the Age of the Caliphates*, p. 59.
5. Lewis, p. 54
6. Ibid., p. 61
7. Spuler, Bertold, *The Age of the Caliphs* (Princeton: Markus Wiener Publishers, 1995), p. 31
8. Kennedy, p. 76.

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