

## Omar Ibn Abdul Aziz

### (part 1 of 2): Islamic principles transform an Empire



After the death of Prophet Muhammad, may the mercy and blessings of God be upon him, the rapidly expanding Islamic nation was led by a series of men known as the Rightly Guided Caliphs. They were men who had learnt their faith directly from the Prophet himself and governed strictly according to the Quran and authentic traditions of Prophet Muhammad. By 644CE both the Persian and Byzantium empires had fallen to the Muslim armies. Slowly over the next decades the people of the conquered empires adapted both the language and religion of the conquerors. At the same time the character of the Muslim leaders was changing. The men who had ruled strictly by the word of God had been replaced by others. The caliphate that was to have been an elected position was replaced by hereditary succession. The Umayyad dynasty was established.

Although they did not strictly follow the ways of their predecessors they were historically considered to be an extremely successful dynasty. The Umayyads managed to maintain political and religious unity of the Islamic nation and greatly expanded its borders. However they have gone down in history as particularly autocratic. When Omayyad Caliph Sulaiman (714-717) lay on his deathbed, he attempted to earn the pleasure of God by following the example of the early Caliphs and nominating someone other than one of his own sons as the next Caliph. He therefore appointed his distant cousin Omar Ibn Abdul Aziz, his successor. Omar was then faced with the seemingly impossible task of returning the Islamic nation back into a nation of people who obeyed the laws of God above all else.

Omar Ibn Abdul Aziz had served as the governor of Egypt and Medina for more than twenty-two years. He had been educated and trained by a well-known scholar by the name of Salah Ibn Kaisan. Before his accession to the Caliphate, Omar Ibn Abdul Aziz was a young man, fond of fashion and fragrance, however when he accepted the responsibility of leading the Islamic



nation he proved to be the most pious, able, far-sighted and responsible of all the Omayyad Caliphs.

He tried to rule in a way similar to how the Islamic state was governed in its infancy. He immediately began by adhering to Islamic principles. When news reached him of his nomination to the Caliphate, he addressed the people saying, "O people! The responsibilities of the Caliphate have been thrust upon me without my desire or your consent. If you choose to select someone else as the Caliph, I will immediately step aside and will support your decision". This was a breath of fresh air to the people who were longing for a return to the days of Prophet Muhammad, may the mercy and blessings of God be upon him, and the Rightly Guided Caliphs. Omar Ibn Abdul Aziz was unanimously elected.

Omar immediately discarded his extravagant lifestyle and tried to emulate Prophet Muhammad and his closest companions. One of his first actions was to return the lavish estates and palaces owned by members of the Umayyad dynasty to the public estate. When previously there was no answerability to the people, Omar re-established accountability and abolished the corrupt practices by which the government officials had become rich, powerful and abusive. The people responded with enthusiastic support and overall productivity throughout the Islamic State increased. Renowned Islamic scholar, Ibn Kathir, records that because of the reforms undertaken by Omar, the annual revenue from Persia alone increased from 28 million dirhams to 124 million dirhams.

Omar continued to follow the example set by Prophet Muhammad and sent emissaries to China and Tibet, inviting their rulers to accept Islam. It was during this time that the religion of Islam began to be accepted by large segments of the populations of Persia and Egypt. When the once corrupt officials complained that because of conversions, the revenues of the state had declined, Omar wrote back saying he had accepted the Caliphate to invite people to Islam and not to become a tax collector. Omar used his position to uphold the rights and responsibilities that are inherent in the Quran and the life and teachings of Prophet Muhammad.

The infusion of non-Arabs into the fold of Islam shifted the centre of the Islamic State from Medina and Damascus to Persia and Egypt. Omar made large and astonishing changes to the way the Islamic State was run. His strict adherence to Islamic principles even allowed him to offer stipends to teachers whilst encouraging education for men, women and children. Through his personal example, he instilled piety, steadfastness, business ethics, and Islamic morals and manners into the general population. His reforms included the strict abolition of alcohol and he forbade public indecency.. Omar also oversaw the fair dispensation of money given in charity.

Omar's efforts to transform the Islamic State into a well-run Islamic community knew no bounds. Just as he transformed his life he also transformed the Islamic State. Omar undertook extensive public works throughout the Islamic State, in Persia, Khorasan (includes parts of modern day Iran, Afghanistan and central Asia) and across North Africa. This included



roads, bridges, canals, inns for travellers, educational facilities and medical dispensaries.

In the following article we will elaborate more on the life and works of Omar Ibn Abdul Aziz and learn how and why his life was cut short at the pinnacle of his Caliphate.

## **(part 2 of 2): Greed does not surrender to faith**

Omar Ibn Abdul Aziz became known as a rightly guided Caliph of the Islamic nation because of his similarity to the Rightly Guided Caliphs. The Rightly Guided Caliphs learned their practice of Islam straight from Prophet Muhammad, may the mercy and blessings of God be upon him, and kept strictly to the guidelines of the Quran and the authentic traditions of Prophet Muhammad. However after their death the Caliphate became a dynasty, and a more lax approach was taken to implement certain commandments. Omar Ibn Abdul Aziz revived righteous Islamic principles and began to put jewels into the crown of the Islamic Empire. One of his first acts was to replace corrupt and tyrannical Umayyad administrators with honest and just people and another was to restore to the rightful owners their properties that were confiscated from them.

Within the first ten years of the conquest of Sindh (part of modern day Pakistan), in 718 CE Omar became the first Caliph to commission a translation of the Quran from Arabic into another language - Sindhi. This was at the request of the Raja of Sindh. Sindh was yet another area of the Islamic State conquered by the will of God and the impeccable Islamic morals and manners of war, not known in other parts of the world at that time. At the same time Omar's armies waged a defensive war against the Turks who had ravaged Azerbaijan and massacred thousands. Omar permitted his forces to wage war only under strictest conditions, including that women, children or prisoners would not be executed, and that a fleeing, defeated enemy would not be pursued.

Amongst many firsts, Omar ibn Abdul Aziz was the first Muslim ruler to turn his attention away from external conquest. He recalled the Muslim armies from the borders of France, India and the outskirts of Constantinople. It was during his Caliphate that internal uprisings and disturbances ceased, and the true Islamic faith taught by Prophet Muhammad, may the mercy and blessings of God be upon him, flourished once again. Greed however does not surrender to faith without a battle, thus there were many disgruntled people, unhappy with Omar's rule.

Yet the reforms continued. Under Omar's instructions the viceroy in Spain, took a census of the diverse nationalities, races and creeds, inhabiting that section of the Empire. A survey of the entire peninsula including cities, rivers, seas and mountains was made. The nature of the soil and varieties of mineral sources and agricultural produce was carefully counted and recorded, bridges



in southern Spain were constructed and repaired and a large mosque was built at Saragossa in northern Spain.

In the time between the Rightly Guided Caliphs and Omar Ibn Abdul Aziz the Public Treasury was freely used for private purposes by the Umayyad Caliphs. Omar immediately put a stop to this practice but at the same time made himself a number of dangerous enemies. Nevertheless he continued to institute reforms and revivals that caused the poor, weak and righteous Muslims to feel strong and protected as they once had under the early Caliphs. One of the most important measures was his reform of taxation.

Omar Ibn Abdul Aziz, following in the footsteps of his beloved prophet Muhammad was kind and just toward non-Muslims. Christians, Jews and Zoroastrians were allowed to retain their churches, synagogues and temples. In Damascus, where the Basilica of John the Baptist had been turned into a mosque, Omar ordered it returned to the Christian church.

Omar's administration of the Empire was impartially just and went directly against the interests of the Umayyad dynasty, of which Omar was a distant member but far from the line of succession. The influential Umayyad's could not tolerate their loss of power, prestige and finances. Omar's reforms were too much for them to tolerate. A slave was bribed to administer a deadly poison. When the Caliph felt the effects of the poison and had come to understand the plot he sent for the slave and asked him why? The slave replied that he was given one thousand dinars so Omar then deposited that exact amount into the Public Treasury and freed the slave. He advised him to leave immediately in case Omar's enemies killed him. Omar Ibn Abdul Aziz died after a rule that lasted only two and a half years. He was thirty-nine years old at the time of his death.

### **Post script**

There is an unauthenticated but nonetheless beautiful story about Omar Ibn Abdul Aziz's lineage.

Omar Ibn Abdul Aziz is related to Omar Ibn al-Khattab because of a famous event during the second Caliph's rule. During one of his frequent journeys to survey the condition of his people, Omar overheard a milkmaid refusing to obey her mother's orders to sell adulterated milk. The girl replied that although Caliph Omar was not looking at them, God was always watching over everyone. The next day Omar Ibn al Khattab sent an officer to purchase milk from the girl and found the milk unadulterated. He then summoned the girl and her mother to his court and told them what he had overheard. As a reward, he offered to marry the girl to his son Asim. She accepted, and from this union was born a girl named Layla who would in due course become the mother of Omar Ibn Abdul Aziz.