

The Rise of Islam

Islam was the last of the three major monotheist religions to rise. Like Judaism and Christianity before it, Islam was born in the Middle East. But whereas the two earlier religions had their origin to the west of Mesopotamia, cradle of so many polytheist religions, Islam came into being on the Arabian Peninsula, the land mass bounded on the northeast by the Persian Gulf, on the east by the Strait of Hormuz and Gulf of Oman, on the southeast by the Arabian Sea, on the south by the Gulf of Aden, on the southwest by the Strait of Bab-el-Mandeb, and on the southwest and west by the Red Sea. The peninsula is occupied today by Saudi Arabia, along with Kuwait, Qatar, the United Arab Emirates, Oman, and Yemen. Bahrain, an island nation off the peninsula's east coast, is considered part of this geographical area. Before the Arabian Peninsula was carved into these modern nations, it was all generally referred to as Arabia.

Muhammad of Mecca

As the founding of Christianity is identified with a single personality, Jesus Christ, so Islam began, some 600 years later, with Muhammad. The precise year of his birth is disputed. Islamic tradition places it in 570, called the Year of the Elephant to commemorate the Askumite king Abraha's unsuccessful attempt to destroy Mecca, which he assaulted with an army that included a multitude of elephants. More recent scholars date this assault to 568 or 569. Whether this means that Muhammad was born in either of these years, and not 570, remains undetermined.

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- Muhammad: Early life, revelation, and emergence as the founder of a new Abrahamic faith
- Muhammad's three roles: religious teacher, political leader, military commander
- The Constitution of Medina, basis of the first Islamic state
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DID YOU KNOW?

Records of the use of elephants in warfare date to India in the fourth century B.C.E., but the most the animals were most famously used by Alexander the Great, especially at the Battle of Gaugamela in 331 B.C.E., and by the Carthaginian General Hannibal a century later. It is little wonder that the people in and around Mecca should commemorate Abraha's use of elephants in combat by naming an entire year after the event. The sight of war elephants, whose role was to charge and trample the enemy, inducing panic in the troops, must have been memorably terrifying.

It is known that he was born in Mecca—today a city of two million in Saudi Arabia—a child of the Banu Hashim clan, which was part of the Quraysh tribe. Although Muhammad's clan was prominent in Mecca, the family had apparently fallen on hard times, and Muhammad's father, a merchant named Abdullah, died about six months before he was born. The city of Muhammad's birth had become, by the sixth century, a bustling trading community. With Mesopotamia and Egypt wracked by increasing turmoil and lawlessness, caravans abandoned the ancient trade routes running through them and turned instead to alternatives on the Arabian Peninsula. Mecca became a major stop along the most important of these routes.

Islamic tradition holds that, shortly after his birth, Muhammad was sent out of Mecca to live with Bedouins in the desert, an environment considered healthier for infants than the teeming city, and that he did not return to Mecca and his birth mother until he was two. Recently, some scholars have rejected this traditional biographical narrative. What is known for certain is that the boy's mother, Amina, died when he was six and that he was put under the guardianship of his paternal grandfather, who died just two years later. The eight-year-old was then taken into the care of his uncle, Abu Talib.

Mercantile Life

Young Muhammad accompanied Abu Talib on trading trips to Syria. He learned about trade, becoming a merchant in his own right by the time he was a young man, working routes between the Indian Ocean and the Mediterranean Sea. We can safely assume that his vocation brought him into contact with a wide variety of people and that he likely became sensitive to the economic inequality separating dwellers in increasingly wealthy Mecca from the struggling Bedouins of the surrounding desert. He would also have experienced firsthand the resentment the Bedouins harbored against the urban dwellers, as well as the fear and distrust with which the Meccans reciprocated the desert peoples' resentment. We also know that Muhammad was sufficiently honest and honorable in trade to earn the sobriquets "al-Amin"—faithful and trustworthy—and "al-Sadiq"—truthful. Islamic tradition tells us that when Muhammad was a boy (9 or 12 years old), a Christian hermit named Bahira encountered Muhammad with his uncle's caravan in Syria and foretold his future as a prophet of God.

Beyond this, little is known of Muhammad's life as a merchant. It is likely that he was successful in his vocation, for in 595 the 25-year-old Muhammad attracted a marriage proposal from a 40-year-old widow named Khadijah, who became his first wife. It is also likely true that, in 605, Muhammad played a central role in setting the *Black Stone* in the wall of the Kaaba. The stone—possibly a rare black meteorite—was revered as a sacred symbol of Allah. At this time, Arabs worshipped many gods, among whom Allah was considered supreme. The Black Stone was housed, in Mecca, within a sacred

monument called the Kaaba. In 605, the stone had been removed during repairs and renovations to the Kaaba. Once these were completed, the leaders of the often disputatious clans could not agree on who should have the high honor of resetting the Black Stone. At length, all agreed to await the arrival of the next man to come through the gate and ask him to make the choice.

That next man was Muhammad, and his response to the leaders' request was inventive, diplomatic, and wise. He asked for a cloth. Given it, he placed the Black Stone in its center, and then gave each clan leader a corner of the cloth to hold. Muhammad accompanied them to the Kaaba wall, lifted the stone, and set it in place—to the pleasure and satisfaction of all.



DEFINITION

The **Black Stone** is the eastern cornerstone of the Kaaba, the ancient monument toward which all Muslims pray, located at the center of Mecca's Grand Mosque. The Black Stone is said to date to era of Adam and Eve. As it exists today, it consists of a number of stone fragments surrounded by a silver frame and fastened to the Kaaba cornerstone by silver nails. Traditionally described as a meteorite, the Black Stone may actually be a "pseudometeorite," a rock of terrestrial origin mistaken for a meteor.

Disillusionment and Enlightenment

The setting of the Black Stone occurred when Muhammad was 35. By this time, he may have started to become disillusioned with life and his tribe, the Quraysh. Like Muhammad, most Quraysh were merchants. Unlike him, they had largely forsaken or forgotten the communal values of their nomadic desert origins. As Muhammad saw it, material prosperity and outright greed had come to replace traditions of charity and unity.

Seeking to re-center his spiritual self, Muhammad took several weeks out of each busy year to retire to the solitude of a cave on Mount Hira, outside of Mecca. His disillusionment and dissatisfaction put Muhammad in a spiritually receptive state of mind. Islamic tradition holds that, during one of his sojourns to Mount Hira in 610, the angel Gabriel, the same figure who is mentioned in the Old Testament of Judaism as well as the New Testament of Christianity, appeared to him. Gabriel commanded Muhammad to recite verses—unknown to Muhammad, who (according to Islamic tradition) was illiterate, yet miraculously now familiar to him. These would become a part of the *Quran*, the holy book of Islam.



DEFINITION

The **Quran** (also Qur'an or Koran) is the central religious document of Islam, embodying (the faithful believe) the revelation Allah made to Muhammad through the Archangel Gabriel over a period of 23 years, from 609 to 632, the year of the prophet's death. The word, in Arabic, means "recitation," and thus reflects the oral nature of the revelations. The book was first assembled, after Muhammad's death, by Uthman ibn Affan, one of his companions and caliph during 644-656. Assemblage of the present Quran took decades, if not centuries, and is at the subject of continual scholarly debate following new archaeological finds.

Sunni Islamic tradition relates that Muhammad was deeply disquieted by this first visitation of Gabriel. He seems to have feared that the apparition was a hallucination and that he was becoming unbalanced. He even contemplated suicide, afraid to share the revelation with others, lest they brand him a madman. In contrast, Shia accounts of the first revelation depict Muhammad as profoundly grateful for the visitation and the enlightenment it brought. In both versions, the first visitation of Gabriel is followed by a three-year period in which Muhammad devoted himself to solitary contemplation and prayer. This evidently prepared him to receive additional revelations and visions, the totality of which would inform his teachings and ultimately be set down in the Quran.

A Prophet Comes of Age

At length, Muhammad did begin to share the revelation vouchsafed him. According to Islamic tradition, initially only with his first wife, Khadijah; his 10-year-old cousin Ali ibn Abi Talib; his adopted son Zaid; and his longtime friend Abu Bakr recognized Muhammad as a prophet. Throughout Mecca, his preaching was almost universally scorned and mocked. The principal objection was to his elevation of Allah as the one true God and his condemnation of polytheism as idol worship.

Only over time did Muhammad managed to win a few converts to *Islam*, a word meaning “submission to Allah’s will.” The first were chiefly those at the margins of society, including younger brothers and younger sons of merchants (whose secondary status in the family made them ineligible to inherit great wealth and position); people who, for various reasons, fell out of favor within their tribe or clan; and foreigners, who had no status in Arab society.



DEFINITION

Islam, the monotheist religion founded by Muhammad, is a word that essentially means “voluntary submission to God”—God in the singular, and thus submission to Allah, the one true God among the pantheon of false gods in pre-Islamic pagan religion. A Muslim is an adherent of Islam, “one who (voluntarily) submits to God.”

From the margins of society, Muhammad’s teachings gradually penetrated closer to the center, and those in power came to perceive the prophet as an economic and cultural threat. His overriding message was that Allah was the very God who had already revealed himself to Moses and, later, to Jesus. To worship this one true deity required renunciation of all others who were worshipped in the Kaaba. But, to many, those gods seemed inextricably woven into the fabric of Arabic life, both in its material as well as spiritual aspects. Some merchants approached Muhammad with bribes, offering to admit him—a fellow merchant, after all—into their inner circle, provided that he renounce his teachings. He refused.

When bribery and persuasion failed to turn Muhammad from his course, he was subjected to insults and shunning. Only his membership in the esteemed Banu Hashim clan protected him from physical assault. This protection did not extend to his followers from the lower classes, especially slaves, some of whom were tortured or killed by their angry masters. In 617, leaders of two powerful mercantile

clans within the Quraysh tribe, the Makhzum and the Banu Abd-Shams, commenced a boycott against trading with the Banu Hashim. For three years, Muhammad's clan stood by him, ultimately outlasting the boycott.

Hijra

Amid the opposition and resistance, Muhammad recognized that he was making little progress in converting Mecca, chief among Arab merchant cities, to Islam. In 622, hearing of an assassination plot against him, Muhammad and his closest supporters (known as “companions”) left that city and journeyed north to Yathrib, a town later to become known as Medina, usually translated as “the city of the Prophet.”

This departure—the Arabic word for which is *Hijra*—became recognized as Year One in the Islamic calendar and the day of the Hijra's commencement is celebrated annually as the first day of the Muslim year.

Muhammad found the people of Yathrib—Medina—as receptive to his teachings as Mecca had been resistant. Soon after his arrival, a delegation from the 12 chief clans of Medina asked Muhammad to arbitrate not only among the clans, but between the clans and those outside of them, including Arabs as well as Jews. For some 100 years, the city had been wracked by *thar*—Arabic for “blood feud.” Determined to end the futile eye-for-an-eye bloodshed, the representatives of Medina pledged to accept his judgments and to protect him. This commitment, in turn, moved Muhammad to instruct all of his followers to leave Mecca for Medina. The combination of native converts and Muslim immigrants transformed Medina into the world's first Islamic city.



DEFINITION

Hijra, which is also transliterated as *Hijrat* and *Hegira*, an Arabic word meaning “departure,” is the name given to the migration of Muhammad and his followers from Mecca to Medina from June 22 to July 2, 622.

Muhammad the Prophet and Religious Leader

Muslims believe Muhammad is the prophet of Allah because he was chosen to receive—through the revelations of Gabriel—the Quran, which is the word of God and the central book of Islam. The revelation was made to the prophet verbally—the word *Quran* means “the recitation”—and spanned some 23 years of Muhammad's life, beginning on December 22, 609, when he was 40, and ending in 632, the year he died.

According to Islamic tradition, the Quran is literally the word of God. It is not a biography of Muhammad, although it does recount his deeds, but a recitation of God's actual words as related by Muhammad of the Abrahamic faith writ anew in the Arabian peninsula in the seventh century.

Muhammad the Political Leader

The revelations of Gabriel, together with the Hijra and the conversion of Medina, certified Muhammad as a prophet and a major religious leader. His subsequent acts, undertaken to create an enduring resolution of the bloody grievances among the clans and tribes of Medina, revealed his brilliance as a political leader.

He set about drafting what has come to be known as the Constitution of Medina, which did no less than forge a federation among the tribes of Medina and the Muslim emigrants who had arrived from Mecca. The constitution was an extraordinary step in a progression from a community of men to a community of laws. It enumerated and defined both the rights and obligations of all citizens, as well as the relationship between the Muslim and Jewish communities. The document also changed the name of Yathrib to Medina (in full, Medina Al-Munawarra), literally meaning “the radiant (or shining) city,” but often translated as the “City of the Prophet.”

Historically, the most important effect of the Constitution of Medina was to create the precedent and pattern of an Islamic state, the fusion of secular and spiritual order in a single polity (community or state). This would have profound effect through history—especially the recent history of conflict in the Middle East.



DID YOU KNOW?

In an era when people were governed mainly by hereditary rulers in tribes or kingdoms, the Constitution of Medina, drawn shortly after the Hijra of 622, may well be the earliest charter or constitution in the history of government. It is a formal agreement among Muhammad and the tribes and clans of Medina—Muslims as well as Jews and Christians. It was the basis of the first Islamic state.

Muhammad the Warrior

Muhammad the religious and political leader went on to become a military leader—a skilled warrior who led a highly successful and far-reaching campaign of conquest. As his political leadership, with the drafting of the Constitution of Medina, created a precedent and paradigm of Islam as the indissoluble combination of religious faith and secular governance—what Westerners would call Church and State—so his career as a warrior identified Islam the idea of divinely inspired military conquest.

The concept of holy war is hardly unique to Islam. Throughout history, wars have been fought by Jews, Christians, and those of other faiths in the name of God. But in no other major religion is the founder identified as, among other things, a warrior.

Medina vs. Mecca

Westerners tend to think of Muhammad as the Islamic version of Moses (for Judaism) or Jesus Christ (for Christianity)—that is, as essentially the founder of a major religious faith. He was that, but he was also, during the final and highly eventful decade of his life, the leader of a state—the first Islamic

state—Medina. Medina was something new in the world. It was, in fact, a revolutionary state, and like many other revolutionary states throughout history, it faced enemies who sought its defeat and destruction. The fact is that, once he assumed leadership of a state, Muhammad was a wartime leader.

His earliest conflict was with Mecca, which, in his eyes—and those of his followers—was a pagan power opposed to the Islamic state he led. Although Muhammad became a leader of military conquest, his campaigns were not primarily motivated by a desire for conquest, but as a strategic means of defeating those clans of the Quraysh tribe concentrated in Mecca and opposed to Islam.

Muhammad did not come to war easily. At first, he refused his followers permission to engage Mecca and its allies in combat. Eventually, however, he proclaimed as an article of divine revelation that permission is given to fight those who expelled the faithful from their homes “merely for saying, ‘Our Lord is Allah.’” (Quran 22:39–40) In this spirit, Muhammad’s initial military strategy was generally defensive. He deployed personal guards, and he authorized intelligence and reconnaissance missions. The latter evolved into raids on Meccan caravans, and, at this point, Muhammad’s strategy shifted from defensive to offensive. Even so, raiding targeted the sources of revenue by which the Meccan Quraysh financed its own military might. Attacking the caravans was an inherently limited form of warfare that minimized casualties on both sides. Moreover, the raids were defensible in light of the Quran, which permitted action to recover goods and property expropriated by the Meccans when the Muslims left for Medina and in defense against persecution.

Battle of Badr

Some of the caravan raids were large. In March 624, Muhammad led 313 warriors in an ambush at Badr, about 80 miles outside of Mecca. Meccan intelligence discovered the ambush, and the caravan was rerouted to avoid it. In addition, the Meccans sent a force both to protect the caravan and to engage the Medina warriors. The clash of these forces was the March 13 Battle of Badr.

Muhammad was badly outnumbered. His 313 men faced at least 950 Meccans. Whereas Muhammad was equipped with 2 horses and 70 camels, the Meccans came with 100 horses and 170 camels. Yet Muhammad deftly outmaneuvered the Meccans and quickly managed to kill some 70 men—among them prominent Meccan leaders, including the celebrated Abu Jahl—while incurring the loss of just 14 of his warriors. In addition, Muhammad’s forces captured 70 of the enemy, ransoming many for large sums.

The Muslim victory stunned the Meccans, who had the advantages of surprise as well as numbers. Modern military historians see the triumph as testament to Muhammad’s natural, untutored skill as a small-force tactical leader. He and his followers, however, interpreted it as divine confirmation of the strength and righteousness of their beliefs. Muhammad specifically spoke of a host of angels who had aided him and his warriors.

A Strategic Truce

Victory at Badr greatly bolstered Muhammad’s prestige among his followers and diminished opposition to him in and around Medina. Muhammad now acted more boldly, expelling one of the three principal Jewish tribes from Medina and concluding defensive alliances with various Bedouin outside the city. The Meccans responded by making their own Bedouin alliances.

In the meantime, in March 628, Muhammad took advantage of the custom of general truce during the season of pilgrimage to visit Mecca, accompanied by 700 fellow “pilgrims.” Suspecting that Muhammad’s motivations were military rather than religious, the Meccans violated custom by sending a force to intercept Muhammad and his party. The Muslims, however, evaded the interception by traveling through the hills around Mecca and camping just outside the city at Hudaibiyyah. The two sides then exchanged emissaries, but when Muhammad sent Uthman ibn Affan into Mecca as his representative, he was seized, and the Meccans subsequently announced that they had killed Uthman. This brought the two sides to the brink of war—until it was revealed that Uthman was very much alive. The Meccans called for a parley, which produced the Treaty of Hudaibiyyah, in which the two sides agreed to a 10-year truce.

The Muslim Conquest of Mecca

For Muhammad, the truce was a brilliant stroke of strategy. It effectively sidelined his principal enemy, Mecca, allowing him an opportunity to expand Muslim control throughout the region, including conquest of the important oasis of Khaybar, which he used as a base from which to launch raiding parties. During this period, Muhammad sent messengers to the leaders of the Byzantine and Persian empires, the chief of Yemen, and others, asking for their conversion to Islam. He also did battle against the Arabs in Transjordan in 629, but was defeated at the Battle of Mu’tah.

Despite this defeat, in 630, following a Meccan-backed raid against the Muslims, Muhammad demanded either restitution, disavowal of Banu Bakr (the leader of the raid Mecca had backed), or abrogation of the Hudaibiyyah treaty. The Meccans chose the last of the three, whereupon Muhammad immediately marched against Mecca with a force of 10,000. Overwhelmed by the sheer numbers, the leaders of Mecca gave up with virtually no resistance.

For his part, Muhammad made a generous peace, including a broad amnesty. Impressed by this liberality, the majority of Meccans converted to Islam as three of Muhammad’s followers destroyed idols erected to the pantheon of Arab gods in the Kaaba. Some traditions claim that Muhammad personally intervened to spare depictions of Jesus and Mary, whereas other accounts declare that all iconography was obliterated.

Islam Spreads

Muhammad’s conquest of Mecca drew many tribes in the region to Islam. The prophet did not wait passively for conversion, however, but sent military parties to persuade holdouts, especially among the Bedouin nomads.

Muhammad was especially concerned with gaining the conversion of the confederated tribes of the Hawazin, who were concentrated in and around Ta’if, not far from Mecca. Muhammad engaged the Hawazin in battle at Hunayn, near Ta’if, sending just 12,000 men against some 20,000. Although only 70 of the enemy were killed, the rest quickly fled the field, thereby allowing the Muslims to take 6,000 women and children prisoner and acquire 24,000 camels.

In the same year as the fall of Mecca and the Battle of Hunayn, 630, Muhammad moved against Byzantine forces at Tabouk in northwestern Arabia. This time, the prophet mustered an army of 30,000. They were ready to fight, but the Byzantines apparently were not. They neither showed themselves in force nor offered battle. Despite this anticlimax, tribal chiefs throughout the region were profoundly impressed and readily submitted to Muhammad and Islam.

With his prestige as a warrior repeatedly confirmed, Muhammad was able to demand and secure the destruction of pagan idols throughout eastern Arabia, and in 631, the Banu Thaqif tribe, a powerful holdout against Islam, sent an embassy to Muhammad in Medina and offered their conversion. Muhammad accepted, yet he also exhibited a profound understanding of Bedouin traditions and culture. He did not insist on their total submission, but allowed them a significant degree of political independence in return for their formal agreement to acknowledge the suzerainty of Medina, to foreswear violence against Muslims and their allies, and to pay to Medina a Zakat, or religious tax.

Last Pilgrimage

Ten years after the Hijra, with Islam in the process of very rapid expansion, Muhammad led the first *Islamic* pilgrimage to Mecca. That city, with its Black Stone in the Kaaba, had long been the object of pilgrimage—but that had been in the days of a polytheist Arabia. The “Great Pilgrimage” of 632 was the first in monotheist submission to Allah. As the Hajj, it is still observed as the duty of all faithful Muslims—at least one pilgrimage to Mecca in a lifetime.

During the 632 event, Muhammad ascended Mount Arafat, east of Mecca, from which he delivered what came to be known as the Farewell Sermon. In it, the prophet counseled the abandonment of certain pre-Islamic customs, and he effectively elevated Islam as a faith above class, ethnicity, and race, declaring all of the faithful to be equal, except for how they might distinguish themselves in terms of faithfulness, piety, and good works. Muhammad sought to create a clean slate for Islamic society, declaring void the old blood feuds based on centuries of tribal dispute. Although Muhammad did not assert women’s rights in what was then, as now, a male-dominated, patriarchal Arab society, he did enjoin men to be good and kind to women, whom he called “powerless captives” in their households. Furthermore, he forbade female infanticide, allowed women to be represented in Islamic courts (albeit with half the “voice” of a man), and granted women inheritance rights on the death of a husband.



VOICES

All mankind is from Adam and Eve, an Arab has no superiority over a non-Arab nor a non-Arab has any superiority over an Arab; also a white has no superiority over black nor a black has any superiority over white except by piety and good action. You know that every Muslim is the brother of another Muslim. Remember, one day you will appear before Allah and answer for your deeds. So beware, do not stray from the path of righteousness after I am gone.

—from Muhammad’s Farewell Sermon, delivered on Mount Arafat, 632

The Prophet's Death

The two principal branches of Islam, Shia and Sunni, interpret one key Quranic verse, delivered during the Farewell Sermon, very differently. Muhammad told his followers that, on this day, he had “perfected your religion,” Islam, which he had “chosen ... as a religion for you.” (Quran 5:3) The Shia interpret the verse as a reference to the appointment of Ali ibn Abi Talib—Muhammad’s cousin and son-in-law as well as the first male to accept Islam—as his successor. The Sunni, in contrast, make no such interpretation.

In this difference is a crucial dispute within Islam, a dispute that is the enduring source of social and political upheaval and violence to this day. For Muhammad did not definitively proclaim a successor—a *caliph*, or leader of the Islamic community—before his death, from an illness, on June 8, 632. Had Muhammad a son, the choice of successor would have been clear. But he had only daughters, and no male successor could be identified in his immediate bloodline.



DEFINITION

Caliph is the ruler of the Islamic community—called the “Ummah”—as well as the head of state of a caliphate. A caliphate is any Islamic state led by a caliph—that is, by one supreme religious and political leader. The *Caliphate* is often used to refer to the equivalent of a single great and extensive Islamic empire or state.

A council of tribal leaders of Medina was convened to select a new caliph. Although Islam was without question on the rise, it would be highly vulnerable without a leader. Ali ibn Abi Talib seemed to many an obvious choice, but he was a young man at 34 and therefore widely considered insufficiently experienced to follow the great man. There was no shortage of individuals offering themselves as candidates, but most were from outside the Quraysh tribe and were therefore rejected by the Muslim elders of that tribe so central to the religion.

At length, in a close vote, the council settled on the prophet’s father-in-law, Abu Bakr—the sobriquet of Abdullah ibn Abi Quhafa—who, at 60, possessed the gravitas of age deemed appropriate for succession to leadership. He was also not only a very early convert to Islam, but had been a *Sababi*, a senior companion to Muhammad, and he had accompanied the prophet on the flight from Mecca to Medina in 622. Even so, the credentials of the new caliph were not universally accepted, and with the passing of Muhammad, the seed of crisis was planted.

The Least You Need to Know

- Muhammad, a merchant from Mecca, founded Islam, the worship of Allah as the one and only God, thereby creating the world’s third major monotheist religion.
- In response to resistance from the polytheist majority of Meccans, Muhammad led his small band of converts to Medina (then called Yathrib), where Islam took strong hold.
- With the Constitution of Medina, drawn up between Muhammad and the major tribes of Medina in 622 or shortly thereafter, history’s first Islamic state was created.

The Rise of Islam

- After achieving the largely bloodless conquest of Mecca, Muhammad began a military campaign to establish Islam far and wide.
- Because Muhammad lacked a son and did not explicitly name a successor, Islam was thrown into religious and political crisis following his death in 623.