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Dear reader,

This is a first draft of the chapter on the Muslim caliphates for the textbook on the history of international relations that I'm working on. Chapters on the Mongol empire, India, Africa and the Americas will follow. Since this is a draft I'm very keen to hear your comments. Get in touch: erik@ringmar.net

The book will be published by Open Book Publishers, out of Cambridge, hopefully next year. It will be freely downloadable as a pdf but you can also buy it as a regular book. All the material I have written so far is available at http://www.irhistory.info/

yours,

Erik

Lund, Sweden, February 2016.

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The Muslim caliphates

After the death of the prophet Muhammad in Medina in 632 CE, his followers on the Arabian peninsula expanded quickly in all directions, creating an empire which only one hundred years later came to include not only all of the Middle East and much of Central Asia, but also North Africa and the Iberian peninsula. This was known as the "caliphate," from *khilafa*, meaning "succession." Yet it was difficult to keep such a large political entity together and there were conflicts regarding who should be regarded as the rightful heir to the prophet. Thus the first caliphate was soon replaced by a second, a third and a fourth, each one controlled by rivaling factions. The first caliphate, the Rashidun Caliphate, 632-661 CE, was led by the *sahabah*, the "companions" who were the family and friends of the prophet and who all were drawn from Muhammad's own, Quraysh, tribe. The second caliphate, the Umayyads, 661-750 CE, moved the capital to Damascus in Syria, and while it did not last long, one of its offshoots established itself in today's Spain and Portugal, known as al-Andalus, and made Cordoba into a thriving, multicultural, center of arts and learning.

Yet it was during the third caliphate, the Abbasids, 750-1258 CE, that cultural and intellectual power was exercised to the greatest effect. Although this caliphate too began to fall into pieces almost as soon as it was established, it too was famous for its cultural achievements. The Abbasids presided over what is known as the "Islamic Golden Age," during which science, technology, philosophy and the arts made great advances, and their capital, Baghdad, became a center in which Islamic learning combined with influences from East Asia, Europe, Persia and the Middle East. These achievements came to an abrupt halt when the Mongols invaded Baghdad in 1258 and sacked the city. From now on it was instead Cairo that constituted the center of the Muslim world. Indeed, the fourth caliphate, the Fatimid Caliphate, 909–1171 CE, were the ones who in 969 built the city of Cairo to serve as its capital. Yet the Fatimids too were quickly undermined, in this

case by their own soldiers, an elite corps of warriors known as the Mamluks. The next Muslim empire to call itself a "caliphate" was instead the Ottoman empire, 1453-1923 CE. Although the Ottomans were Muslims, they were not Arabs but Turks, and they had their origin in Central Asia, not on the Arabian peninsula. The Ottoman empire was abolished in 1922 and the caliphate discontinued two years later.

Despite the continuing story of political infighting and fragmentation, the idea of the caliphate continues to exercise a strong rhetorical force in the Muslim world to this day. During the caliphates the Arab world experienced an unprecedented economic prosperity and a cultural and intellectual flourishing which made them powerful and admired, not least by European visitors. At a time when Europe itself was in serious economic and cultural decline, the caliphate represented the best hopes of mankind. The capitals of the caliphates were great centers of civilization. Not surprisingly perhaps the idea of restoring the caliphate is still alive today among radical Islamic groups who want to unite the Muslim world, restore Muslim self-confidence, and take a stand against European and North American imperialism. [*Read more:* Restoration of the caliphate]

The Arab expansion

After the death of the prophet Muhammad, the various families, clans and tribes which made up the population of the Arabian peninsula seemed prepared to return to their previous ways of life, which included perpetual rivalries and occasional cases of warfare. Yet a small but influential group of the prophet's followers, the *sahabah*, sought to preserve the teachings which he had left them and to keep the Arabs together. This, the *sahabah* believed, could best be achieved if their energies were directed towards external, non-Arab, targets. It was through expansion and conquest that the Arabs would become united amongst themselves. The new leader of the community must consequently, many felt, combine the very qualities which had characterized Muhammad himself – to be a religious leader but also a politician and military commander. In 632, it

was the prophet's father-in-law, Abu Bakr, who best exemplified these qualities and he was elected the first caliph of what later came to be known as the *rashidun*, or "rightly guided," caliphate. [*Read more*: Caliphs of the Rashidun Caliphate] During his short rule, 632-634 CE, Abu Bakr consolidated Muslim control over the Arabian peninsula, but he also attacked the Sasanian empire in Persia to the east and the Byzantine empire to the west. Or rather, he attacked the southern parts of Iraq, occupied by the Persians, and the southern parts of Syria, occupied by the Greeks.

The term *jihad*, "holy war," is often used to describe this military expansion, yet political control, not religious conversion, was always its main objective. The expansion is thus best explained not by a religious but by a military logic. Since the troops of the caliphate were paid by the spoils of war – by what they could lay their hands on in the lands they occupied – the army could only be maintained as long as it continued to conquer new resources. "Raids" is consequently a better term for many of these engagements than "battles," even if the raids, such as the ones conducted in Spain, eventually turned into permanent occupations. Thus when the advance of the Muslim forces throughout Europe eventually was stopped by Charles Martel at the Battle of Tours in 732 CE, this was regarded as a major triumph by European observers, but merely as a temporary setback by the Arabs themselves. Moreover, since the occupations in many cases were quite superficial, it was often easy enough for the local population to reassert their independence. As a result, in several cases the same territory had to be reconquered over and over again.

The secret behind this astounding military success was a lightly armed and highly mobile fighting force. Although Muhammad and his immediate followers were merchants and city-dwellers, most of the population of the Arabian peninsula were Bedouins. The Bedouins were nomads who followed their animals, predominantly goats and sheep, in search of pasture. Mobility was key to survival in the harsh environment of the desert, and thanks to horses and camels, they could cover large distances with great speed.

Once the Bedouins were formed into an army, their horses were used for swift attacks and their camels for transporting supplies. The neighboring empires – Byzantium to the west and the Sasanian empire to the east – were both stationary by comparison, bent on protecting their cities, their trade routes and their agricultural land. Yet as soon as the Arabs had mastered the basics of siege warfare, these sedentary societies were quite easily defeated. Moreover, the Arabs were able to benefit from the fact that Byzantines and Sasanians already for centuries had been each other's worst enemies. After decades of relative peace, the wars between the two super-powers flared up again in the beginning of the seventh-century, with devastating effects on both parties. When the Arab forces began their incursions from the south, both Byzantines and Sasanians were already considerably weakened. Not surprisingly, the expansion went far more badly for the Arabs wherever they encountered people who resembled themselves. This was for example the case in northern Africa where the Berbers, after some costly engagements, were not defeated as much as bought off and incorporated into the ruling elite. [*Read more:* The Berbers and independence for Azawad] This was also the case in Central Asia where the Arabs came up against armies made up of Turkic nomads and Mongols on horseback.

During Umar, who succeeded Abu Bakr in 634 and ruled for ten years, these military campaigns were dramatically extended and the caliphate suddenly became an imperial power. The Arabs occupied the eastern parts of the Byzantine empire, including Syria, Anatolia and Egypt, in the 630s, and then all of the Sasanian empire in the 640s, including present-day Afghanistan, Azerbaijan, Armenia and Georgia. Umar's greatest achievement, however, was to give an administrative structure to the new state. Clearly, the institutions once appropriate for the cities of Mecca and Medina on the Arabian peninsula were no longer appropriate for the vast empire which the caliphate now had become. Umar's answer was the *diwan*, a state bureaucracy with a treasury and separate departments responsible for tax collection, public safety, and the exercise of

sharia law. Coins were minted by the state and welfare institutions were established which looked after the poor and needy – including the stockpiling of grain to be distributed to the people at times of famine. The caliphate engaged in several large-scale projects – constructed new cities, built canals and irrigation systems. Roads and bridges were constructed too and guests houses were set up for the benefit of merchants or for pilgrims going to Mecca for the *hajj.* Umar, the second "rightly guided" caliph, has always been highly respected by Muslims for these achievements and for his personal modesty and sense of justice. [*Read more*: Omar, the TV series]

Although the occupation of lands outside of the Arabian peninsula happened exceedingly quickly, conversion to the new faith took centuries to accomplish, and in many cases it never happened at all. As a result of its military victories, Islam became a minority religion everywhere except in the Arabian peninsula itself, and forced conversions were for that reason alone unlikely to prove successful. Moreover, conversions were financially disadvantageous to the authorities. Since non-Muslims were required to pay a tax, *jizya*, which was higher than the tax for Muslims, a change of religion meant a loss of tax revenue. Instead the *dhimmi*, the various non-Muslim communities, were allowed to practice their religion much as before. As Muslims would have it, monotheistic religions such as Christianity, Judaism and Zoroastrianism should be regarded as precursors of Islam which the teachings of the prophet had made redundant. The military success of his followers, in their own eyes, had proven the viability of the new faith. Other religions were thus best understood the colorful remnants of an older order, but not as threats to Islam. Indulging them, the Arab rulers allowed them to govern their respective communities in accordance with their own customs, which included rules for marriage and inheritance but also the right to maintain customs such as the drinking alcohol and the eating of pork. Although the *dhimmi* lacked certain political rights which came with membership in the *ummah*, the community of Muslim believers, they were not expected to become soldiers in the caliphate's armies and they

were regarded equal with Muslims before the law. The caliphate, in other words, was a classical empire, ruled by a small, isolated, elite which imposed peace and taxes on its multi-ethnic population but which did little to interfere in their daily lives.

In 644 Umar was assassinated by a Persian slave during a *hajj* to Mecca, apparently as a revenge for the wars which the Arabs had made on the Sasanian empire. This time the problem of who should succeed him as caliph became acute. There were still very few converts to the new religion at this point, and the question of succession concerned therefore how power should be distributed among the small elite of the prophet's Arabian followers. The most obvious choice for a successor was Ali, Muhammad's son-in-law, who had married Fatimah, the only one of the prophet's children who survived him. Yet it was instead Uthman ibn Affan who became the third caliph. Uthman too was an early convert to Islam and one of the prophet's closest companions but -- and perhaps more importantly as far as the question of succession was concerned -- he was a member of the Umayyads, one of Mecca's oldest and best established families. Once elected, Uthman dispatched military expeditions to recapture regions in the Caucasus, Central Asia and Persia which had rebelled against Arab rule. He also made war on the Byzantine empire, occupying most of present-day Turkey and coming close to besieging Constantinople itself. Rather more surprisingly for a military force made up of Bedouins, Uthman constructed an impressive navy which occupied the Mediterranean islands of Crete, Rhodes and Cyprus, and made raids on Sicily. At the end of the 640s, when the Byzantine attempt to recapture Egypt failed, all of North Africa came under the caliphate's control. Present-day Sudan was invaded too, but here Uthman's armies had eventually to withdraw and negotiate a settlement. **[***Read more:* The kingdom of Makuria]

Despite these military successes, it was difficult to maintain peace between the various factions of the caliphate's elite. Indeed, the rich spoils which the Arab armies encountered in countries such as Egypt, Syria and Iraq constituted a new source of

conflict. During Umar the soldiers had been paid a stipend, been quartered in garrisons well away from traditional urban areas, and been banned from taking, or investing in, agricultural land. But during Uthman these policies were reversed, and while the creation of a market in land served as a spur to economic growth, it led to new resentment as a new land-owning, Arab, elite came to develop and replace the traditional leaders. Uthman was also accused of favoring members of his own family when it came to appointing governors to the new provinces, and of allowing them to enrich themselves at the expense of the locals. Another source of conflict was that Uthman standardized the text of the Quran, taking away the right of people to interpret the text in their own fashion, thus strengthening the power of the central religious authorities. Resentment against these policies was channeled into support for Ali, Muhammad's son-in-law, and before long an uprising against Uthman was under way. In 656, three separate armies marched on Medina where Uthman's house was besieged and the caliph himself assassinated. Now it was finally time for Ali to become the new leader, and although he remained in power for five years, 656-661 CE, his rule was undermined by continuous conflicts. Despite the fact that Ali had not been directly incriminated in Uthman's murder, his followers wanted revenge, and Uthman's relatives and associates in the provinces wanted to protect their assets. The result was the First Fitna, the first civil war between Muslims, which broke out in 657. As a result, the caliphate fell apart, and in 661 Ali himself was assassinated – ironically, by one of his former allies who had become disillusioned by his rule. [*Read more:* Sunni and Shia split]

The Umayyads and the Abbasids

It was the Umayyad family, the family of Uthman, who took over after Ali's death. The Umayyad Caliphate, 661–750 CE, was a time of military consolidation rather than expansion, but it was above all a time when the caliphate established itself as a proper empire, ruled by institutions and bureaucratic routines. The first leader of the Umayyads,

Muawiya, who was governor of Syria, moved the capital to Damascus. It was here that the caliphate's own coins first were minted – instead of copies of Byzantine originals – and now that a regular postal service was set up, a requirement for the empire-wide disseminating of information, instructions and decrees. And crucially, Arabic was made into the official language of the state, replacing Greek and assorted other languages. Greek had been spoken by administrators throughout the Middle East since the days of Alexander the Great – for close to a thousand years – but from the Umayyad Caliphate onwards it was Arabic you had to know if you aspired to an administrative career. As a result, territories in which no Arabic speakers previously had existed – such as Egypt – were Arabicized for the first time. And with Arabization, in many cases, came conversion to Islam.

Yet no amount of administrative reorganization could stop political conflicts from tearing also this caliphate apart. In the middle of the eighth-century, the Umayyads were challenged by new regional elites, in particular by the governors of Iraq, a particularly fertile and rich part of the empire. Before long a new civil war, the Second Fitna, broke out. In 750 the Umayyads were decisively defeated and the Abbasid Caliphate, 750-1258 CE – claiming a descent from Abbas, Muhammad's youngest uncle – took their place. Their first capital was Kufa, in southern Iraq, but in 762 they constructed a new capital for themselves in Baghdad. Baghdad was to become the largest and richest city in the world, and a great center of culture and learning. In Baghdad many cultures mixed freely and, much as elsewhere in the Muslim world, the *dhimmi* – the monotheistic religions of Judaism, Christianity and Zoroastrianism – were given the right to run their own affairs according to their own customs. [*Read more:* Zarathustra and Zoroastrianism] During the Abassid caliphate the influences from Persia were particularly strong. Persians, or rather Arabized Persians, were employed in the administration of the caliphate, as advisors and judges, and Persian scholars and artists populated the caliph's court. The highest positions in the caliphate were no longer

reserved for Arabs only and Islam became a religion not just for Arabs but for anyone, regardless of their ethnic affiliation.

Cultural influences did not only come from Persia, however, but also from far further afield – including India and China. From the Indians the Arabs learned about the latest advances in mathematics, such as use of the decimal system and the number "zero." But they also began telling Arabized versions of Indian folktales and stories of magic and suspense – eventually famous as the "Tales of a Thousand and One Nights." [*Read more:* Arabian nights] With the Chinese there were military confrontations – such as the Battle of Talas, 751 – where the Abbasids defeated the armies of the Tang dynasty, but soon afterwards the Arabs helped the Chinese defend themselves against uprisings in northern China. As a result of these exchanges, the Arabs came to master the secrets of paper-making and soon afterwards a paper mill was founded in Baghdad which came to have a profound impact on cultural developments. [*Read more:* China and the Arab world] Since paper is far cheaper to produce than alternatives such as parchment or papyrus, it was suddenly possible to amass far larger collections of books. Large libraries were established throughout the caliphate which contained hundreds of thousands of volumes. The most celebrated example was the Bayt al-Hikma, the "House of Wisdom," a research library founded by Caliph Harun al-Rashid, 786–809 CE, and developed under his son al-Mamun, 813–833 CE. The Bayt al-Hikma in Baghdad had the largest collection of books in the world and it was an important center of scholarship.

During the Abbasid caliphate, the Arab world received influences from Byzantium too. Indeed, since Byzantium remained the caliphate's greatest military enemy, competition with this remnant of the Roman empire was the most intense. One cultural expression of their rivalry was the great translation movement which began already during the reign of the founder of the Abbasid caliphate, al-Mansur, 754–775 CE. Compared to the Greeks, the Arabs were *nouveaux riches* upstarts and although their sponsorship of culture and scholarship was paying off handsomely, they had none of the

historical prestige of the Greeks. Indeed, the Arabic language had until recently been spoken mainly by Bedouins in the desert and it lacked much of technical terminology required to express philosophical and scientific ideas. No amount of Bedouin wisdom was going to be enough to defend the Muslim faith, and as they came to realize the caliphs needed access to more sophisticated techniques of argumentation. Very conscious of these deficiencies, the Abbasid caliphs embarked on a vast project of translating Greek books into Arabic.

They began with the most useful texts – works on mathematics, optics, geography, astronomy and medicine, and then moving on to philosophy, history and the arts. Indeed, by the time they were done – some two hundred years later – the entire classical Greek cannon had been translated into Arabic (apart from Greek works of drama in which the Arabs took no interest). The translations were often carried out by Syrian Christians, who spoke both Greek and Arabic, and often they used Syriac as an intermediary language. The translators would send for manuscripts from Byzantium, or they would go there themselves to look for books. And they were handsomely rewarded by the caliphs for their work – a translator might be paid some 500 golden dinars a month for his work, an astronomical sum of money. The fact that Byzantium was the caliphate's enemy was not an obstacle to this project but instead its spur. It was important to the caliphs to show that they had mastered the Greek tradition and that they had developed it even further than the Greeks themselves. And, according to some Persian scholars in the caliph's court, what the Greeks called "their tradition" was originally a Persian tradition anyway, stolen from them by Alexander the Great.

Despite its glories and successes, Baghdad was not the only center of the caliphate. Indeed in Iraq itself, Basra was an important intellectual hub and Samarra, 125 kilometers north of Baghdad, became its political center once the caliphs moved their capital here in 836. In addition, various provincial cities became prominent since they made themselves independent of the caliphate and since they all wanted not only

political power but also the reputation of running an intellectually and culturally sophisticated court. Thus the library of the Buyid rulers of Shiraz, in Persia, was reputed to have a copy of every book in the world, and the library of the Samanids of Bukhara, in today's Uzbekistan, had a catalog which itself ran into thousands of volumes – besides, the library provided free paper on which its users could take notes. Bukhara was the hometown of Ibn Sina, 980-1037 CE, a scholar celebrated not only for his philosophical thought experiments but also for books such as *The Canon of Medicine* and *The Book of Healing*. Meanwhile, the local rulers of Afghanistan made that part of the Abbasid caliphate into a thriving intellectual center. Following their armies on their campaign into the Indian subcontinent, Abu Rayhan al-Bīrūnī founded the study of Indology and brought back Indian books on astronomy and mathematics which he synthesized and expanded.

The increasing independence of regional centers soon greatly reduced the relative power of the Abbasid rulers. They lost power over North Africa, including Egypt, already in the eighth-century, and in the tenth-century they controlled little more than the heartlands of Iraq. Even in Baghdad itself, the caliphs lost power to the viziers, the prime ministers, and to the Mamluks, soldiers of Turkic origin who had started out as slaves. Despite its political decline, Baghdad continued to be a prominent center of scholarship and the arts. Indeed, the city seemed to benefit culturally from the political fragmentation of the caliphate and the new influences it provided, and the tenth- and eleventh-centuries in Baghdad are often referred to as the "golden age" of Arabic culture. The *majlis*, or salon*,* was a particularly thriving institution. In the drawing-rooms of the members of the elite, scientists, philosophers and artists would meet to gossip, debate and exchange ideas. In the *majlis,* Muslims, Jews and Christians could mingle quite freely and often the political elites, including the caliphs themselves, would participate in the proceedings. The *majlis* provided a free intellectual atmosphere in which many different opinions on matters of philosophy, religion and science could thrive. This is how Muhammad al-Razi's chemical discoveries – including the discovery of alcohol – became

known, together with al-Farabi's synthesis of the philosophies of Plato and Aristotle.

The glories of Baghdad, together with the Abbasid caliphate itself, came to an abrupt end with the Mongol invasion of 1258. What the Mongols did to Baghdad counts as one of the greatest acts of barbarism of all time. A large proportion of the inhabitants were killed – estimates run into several 100,000's – and all the cultural institutions were destroyed together with their content. Survivors said that the water of the river Tigris running through the city was colored black from the ink of the books the Mongols had thrown into it, and red from the blood of the scholars they had killed. The caliph himself was rolled up in a carpet and trampled to death by horses. Baghdad never recovered.

The Arabs in Spain

Although the Umayyads were decisively defeated by the Abassids already in 750, they onbtained a surprising lease on life – in the Iberian peninsula, on the western-most frontier of the Arabic world. As the caliphate in Damascus was about to fall, a branch of the Umayyad family fled across North Africa and established itself in the city of Cordoba, in present-day Spain, or in what the Arabs referred to as "al-Andalus." The Arabic incursion into Spain had started already in 711, with a small party of raiders, predominantly Berbers, making their way from Morocco to Gibraltar – or *Jabal Ṭariq* as they called it, "the mountain of Tariq," named after their commander. Quickly overrunning the Iberian peninsula much as they previously had overrun the Middle East and North Africa, the forces of the caliphate made it as far as the Loire Valley, in the heart of France, before they met serious resistance. In the end all of present-day Spain and Portugal were occupied, except for a few provinces close to the Pyrenees in the north. In 756, the Umayyads established an emirate at Cordoba. The Umayyads brought the authority and expertise of the caliphate's court to these provincial outposts and connected the Iberian peninsula to the centers of civilization. They were greeted as saviors by the Jewish community who had suffered from persecution under the Visigoths,

the previous rulers, and by many ordinary people too who had suffered under heavy taxation.

The Caliphate of Cordoba, 929-1031 CE, was the highpoint of Arabic rule in Spain. This was first of all a period of great economic prosperity. The Arabs connected Europe with trade routes going to North Africa, the Middle East and beyond, and industries such as textiles, ceramics, glassware and metalwork were developed. Agriculture was thriving too. The Arabs introduced crops such as rice, watermelons, bananas, eggplant and wheat, and the fields were irrigated according to new methods, which included use of the waterwheel. Cordoba became a large and rich city, one of the largest and richest in the world. It was a cosmopolitan city too with a large multi-ethnic population of Spaniards, Arabs, Berbers, Christians, and a flourishing community of Jews. In Cordoba, much as in the rest of the Arab world, the *dhimmi* were allowed to rule themselves as long as they stayed obedient to the rulers and paid their taxes. The caliphs were patrons of the arts and fashions and their courtiers took up civilized habits such as the use of deodorants and toothpaste. [*Read more:* Ziryab, deodorants and the origin of the flamenco] But Cordoba was an intellectual center too. The great mosque, completed in 987 and modeled on the Great Mosque of Damascus, was not only a place of religious worship but also an educational institution with a library which contained some 400,000 books. The scholars who gathered here did cutting-edge research in the medical sciences, including surgery and pharmaceutics, and they reacted quickly to intellectual developments which simultaneously were taking place in Baghdad and elsewhere in the Arab world.

Since the Umayyads were the sworn enemies of the Abbasids, Arab Spain established itself as an independent political entity, yet here as elsewhere it proved difficult to keep the state together. In the first part of the eleventh-century, the caliphate fell apart as rivalries, a coup, and a full-fledged civil war – the *fitna* of al-Andalus -- pitted various factions against each other. In 1031, the Cordoba caliphate disintegrated completely and political power in the Iberian peninsula was transferred to the *taifa* – the

small, thirty-plus, kingdoms which all called themselves "emirates" and all were in varying degrees of conflict with one another. This was when the Christian kingdoms in the north of the peninsula began to make military gains. Christian forces captured Toledo in 1085, and the city soon established itself as the cultural and intellectual center of Christian Spain. [*Read more:* The Toledo school of translators] This is not to say that the various Christian kingdoms had a common goal and a common strategy. Rather, each Christian state, much as each Muslim state, was looking after its own interests, making wars with other kingdoms quite irrespective of religious affiliations. Thus some emirs were allied with Christian kings, while kings paid tribute to emirs, and they all employed knights in their respective armies who killed on behalf of whoever paid them the best. Quite apart from the military insecurity of the taifa period, this competition had positive side-effects. In order to bring glory to their courts and to outdo each other, the taifa kings encouraged the sciences and arts. This is how small provincial hubs such as Zaragoza, Sevilla and Granada came to establish themselves as cultural centers in their own right.

Enter the Almoravids. The Almoravids were a Berber tribe, originally nomads from the deserts of North Africa, who had established themselves as rulers of Morocco, with Marrakesh as their capital, in 1040. After the fall of Toledo, they invaded al-Andalus and already a year later, in 1086, they had defeated the Christian princes and successfully occupied the southern half of the Iberian peninsula. However, they never managed to take back Toledo. In 1147, at the height of their power, the Almoravids were toppled and their king killed by a rivaling coalition of Berber tribes known as the Almohads. The Almohads were a religious movement as well as a military force, started by Ibn Tumart, a spiritual leader who considered himself a *mahdi*, the "guided one," who would rid the world of evil and prepare the way for the return of the Messiah. Ibn Tumart was opposed to all literal readings of the Quran; in particular he insisted that God was a unity entirely devoid human attributes. As such God could not really be described but was instead best

contemplated through the tools of philosophy. [*Read more:* Ibn Rushd and the challenge of reason] The rule of the Almohads followed strict Islamic principles: they banned the sale of pork and wine and the mixing of men and women in public, and they burned books – including Islamic tracts – which did not agree with their views. By 1159 the Almohads had conquered all of North Africa and by 1172 all of al-Andalus. Their rule in Spain was short but it was to have a profound impact. Uniquely, the Almohads refused to give the *dhimmi* a protected status, and instead they insisted that Christians and Jews convert to Islam on the pain of death. Since the converts made in this way were unlikely to be genuine, the Almohads forced non-Muslims to wear special clothes – robes in black and dark blue – which made them easy to identify and thereby easy to keep under surveillance. Under these circumstances many Christians and Jews preferred to flee – the Christians to the north, to Toledo in particular, while the Jews generally fled east – to Cairo and the Abbasid Caliphate, where rules were far more accepting of the members of other religions. [*Read more:* Mosheh ben Maimon and the Judeo-Arab tradition]

Yet Almohad rule in al-Andalus did not last long. in 1212, at the Battle of Las Navas de Tolosa, the Christian princes managed, for the first time, to put up a united front against them. Cordoba fell to the invaders in 1236 and Sevilla in 1248. From this time onward it was only the Emirate of Granada, together with associated smaller cities such Malaga, that remained in Muslim hands. Here, however, the multicultural and dynamic spirit of al-Andalus continued to thrive, under the Nasrid rulers, for another 250 years. Wisely, after Navas de Tolosa, the Nasrids had allied themselves with the Christian state of Castile, and when Cordoba and Sevilla were captured, Granada provided military assistance to the Christian alliance. Although this friendship occasionally broke down, the Emirate of Granada as it came to be known continued to pay tribute to Castile in the form of gold from as far away as Mali. Today the most visible remnant of Nasrid rule is the Alhambra, the fortress and palace complex famous for its court-yards, its fountains and its roses, which served as the emir's residence. Yet in 1492, Granada too finally fell.

Already in 1469, when the two Christian kingdoms of Castile and Aragon were united into one, Ferdinand and Isabella, the couple who together ruled kingdom, had set their sight on Granada. The war started in 1482, and the Christians were greatly aided by internal conflicts among the Nasrid elite. Ten years later the last emir of al-Andalus – Muhammad XII, known as "Boabdil" to the Spaniards – was forced out of Spain. The Christians, much as the Almohads, were on a mission from God, and they ruled the territories they had conquered in a similarly draconian manner. As a result of the Alhambra Decree, issued three months after Ferdinand and Isabella's victory, some 200,000 Muslims left for North Africa, while an equal number of Jews preferred to settle in the Ottoman empire to the east.

A caliphal international system

The Fatimid Caliphate, 909-1171 CE, is usually considered as the last of the four original caliphates which succeeded the prophet Muhammad. The Fatimids were originally Berbers from Tunisia but claimed their descent from Fatimah, the prophet's daughter, and they were Shia Muslims, which make them unique among caliphs. Yet the Fatimid Caliphate was not the successor to the Abbasid Caliphate as much as its contemporary to the west. While the Abbasids were based in Baghdad and ruled Iraq and the lands north and east of that country, the Fatimids were based in Cairo and ruled everything west of Syria, including the western part of the Arabian peninsula, Sicily, and all of North Africa. In 969 they moved their capital to Cairo, a new city at the time which they had built for the purpose. Fatimid Cairo displayed much the same multi-cultural mix and intellectual vigor as the capitals of the other caliphates. The Fatimids founded the al-Azhar mosque here in 970, and also the al-Azhar university, associated with the mosque, where students studied the Quran together with the sciences, mathematics and philosophy. Al-Azhar university is still the chief center of Islamic learning in the world and a main source of *fatwas*, religious rulings and opinions.

Yet neither the Fatimid nor the Abbasid caliphate was an empire, if we by that term refer to a united political entity which imposes its authority on every part of the territory it claims to control. In fact, ever single one of the caliphates had barely become established before they started to fall apart. The Abbasids lost power over North Africa, including Egypt, already in the eighth-century, and this is where the Fatimids came to establish themselves. Yet the Fatimids soon lost power too, including power over their Berber heartlands where the Almoravids and Almohads took over. Sicily was next to break off, first establishing its own independent emirate and then, in 1072, the island was occupied by the Normans, Vikings from France. [*Read more: Kita Rudjdjar* and the Emirate of Sicily] In the end the caliphs were really only in control of their respective heartlands – the river valleys of Tigris and Euphrates in the case of the Abbasids and the valley of the Nile in the case of the Fatimids. Meanwhile, the center itself did not hold. The caliphs relied on advisors to execute their orders, on viziers in particular, but the advisors soon acquired enough power to challenge their employers, and before long many caliphs were reduced to figureheads with responsibility mainly for matters of religion. Soon military leaders reasserted themselves too, staging palace coups, organizing uprisings, or playing a part in the constant struggles over succession. Few members of the caliph's court slept comfortably at night.

The result was an international system with unique characteristics – perhaps we could talk about a "caliphal international system." Instead of being an empire, each caliphate was more like a federation where the constituent parts had a considerable amount of independence from the center and from each other. The system as a whole was held together by institutional rather than by military means – by its language, its administrative prowess, and by an abiding loyalty to the idea of the caliphate itself. And then there was religion. The caliphs were religious leaders of enormous cultural authority, and this applied in particular to the caliph with responsibility for the holy sites at Mecca and Medina. The result was an international system with occasional conflicts

over the boundaries and jurisdictions of its various constituent units but with no wars of conquest. Political entities beyond the caliphate's borders would occasionally make trouble of course, and military expeditions would be dispatched to punish them, yet the caliphs much preferred to control the foreigners by cultural means. Thus Baghdad would for example dispatch missions to the Bulgars, people living on the river Volga in present-day Russia, in order to instruct them how to properly practice the Muslim faith. [*Read more:* A Viking funeral on the Volga] Rulers such as the Bulgars paid tribute to the caliphs, and as a result the caliphates controlled far larger areas than their armies had occupied.

There were two main exceptions to these arrangements – the *Faranj* and the Mongols. Both had come to Muslim lands from very far away indeed, and they had no respect whatsoever for Islamic civilization or for the idea of the caliphate. Both were bent on territorial conquest rather than accommodation. With people such as these no negotiated settlements were possible and the wars which followed were indeed horrific. The *Faranj* – the "Franks" or, more generally, the "Crusaders" – first arrived in the eastern Mediterranean in the final years of the eleventh-century and proceeded to capture Jerusalem and what they regarded as the "Holy Land." They then returned again and again as the First Crusade, 1095-1099, was followed by major subsequent campaigns in 1145, 1189, 1202, 1213, 1248 and 1270, as well as by several less extensive engagements. The *Faranj* established small kingdoms on the territory of the Fatimid caliphate, and they made war in a barbarian fashion – the capture of Jerusalem in 1099, and the subsequent massacre on civilians, is perhaps the most notorious example. In 1291, with the fall of the last Crusader state, the Europeans were eventually defeated. As far as the Mongols are concerned, they captured Baghdad in 1258, and in one of the most spectacular acts of destruction of all time, they completely demolished the city. Yet only two years later, at the Battle of Ain Jalut, the Mongol armies were defeated and their advance stopped. Although the Mongols had been

beaten before, they would always come back to exact a terrible revenge. This did not happen this time, and it signaled the beginning of the end of the Mongol empire. [*Read more*: The Mongol khanates]

The question of the rise and fall of empires was a major preoccupation of the historian and philosopher Ibn Khaldun, working in Tunis, then Cairo, at the turn of the fifteenth-century. [*Read more:* Ibn Khaldun and the role of *asabiyyah*] What makes a state powerful, Ibn Khaldun insisted – basing his conclusions on what he knew about the Berbers above all – is the communal spirit that animates its people, and the way people work together even under the harshest of circumstances. A state loses power, by contrast, once the leaders are separated from the led and begin to live a life of luxury and ease in the big cities. The Fatimids and Abbasids were clearly separated from the people they led, and they certainly lived the good life in their respective capitals, but as a way of avoiding the fate which Ibn Khaldun had identified, they sought to rely on foreign soldiers. Mercenaries were going to compensate for their own lack of martial spirit. These soldiers were known as *mamluk*, meaning "possessions" or "slaves," and slaves were indeed what they were, having been bought from, or captured in, the Caucasus or in Turkish-speaking parts of Central Asia. Taken to the capitals as children, the Mamluks were brought up in the Muslim faith, housed in garrisons together with other Mamluks, and taught martial arts – archery and cavalry in particular. [*Read more: Furusiyya* and Arabic horses] Their unique personal background provided them with a strong communal spirit. With no families to protect them, and with no loyalties except to the rulers themselves, they constituted an elite guard which could be relied on to faithfully carry out the caliphs' orders. The Mamluks served as soldiers and military leaders but also as scribes, courtiers, advisers and administrators. It was a Mamluk army that defeated first the *Faranj* in 1250 and then the Mongols in 1260.

Yet before long the Mamluks established themselves as rulers in their own right. In practice they were never as loyal to the caliphs as they were to their own group, and

as the caliphs should have realized, slaves with weapons in their hands are impossible for their masters to control. Ousting the Fatimids and all other dynastic families, the Mamluks took power in Egypt in 1250 and ruled the country until 1517, when the Ottomans invaded. Yet the Mamluks did not go away, but continued to play a role in Egyptian politics well until the nineteenth-century. They ran a meritocratic regime, rewarding the talented and the hardworking rather than the well-connected, but since succession did not follow a family line, the infighting at the Mamluk court was intense. Whoever managed to kill the existing sultan had tehreby proven himself worthy of becoming the next sultan, and some rulers ruled for days rather than years.

During the Mamluk period, Egypt was thriving economically, in particular from proceeds from the trade in spices and other goods coming from the east. Once the menace posed by Crusaders and Mongols had been repelled, there was, apart from the perpetual struggles over succession, peace throughout the land. The Mamluks embarked on ambitious architectural projects, constructing mosques and other public buildings in a distinct architectural style of their own – the most celebrated remnant of which is perhaps the al-Hussein Mosque. Cairo, as the historian Ibn Khaldun concluded, is "the center of the universe and the garden of the world."

The Ottoman empire

The empire which rose to replace the Abbasids were the Ottomans, but the Ottomans were Turks with their origin in Central Asia, and they spoke Turkish, not Arabic. Although the Turks too were Muslim and called themselves a "caliphate" – the Ottoman Caliphate, 1517-1924 CE – their capital was the former Greek city of Constantinople, and while they ruled much of North Africa and the Middle East, they ruled much of Europe too – the Balkans in particular and large parts of Eastern and Central Europe. First founded by Osman I in 1299, the Ottoman empire began as one of many small states on the territory of what today is Turkey. After having conquered most of their neighbors, the Ottomans

moved across the Bosporus and into Europe in the early fifteenth-century, where they before long came to completely surround the Byzantines – now reduced to the size of little more than the city of Constantinople itself.

The Byzantine empire claimed a legacy which went right back to the Roman era, well over a thousand years. In the year 330 CE, emperor Constantine had moved the capital of Rome to the eastern city that came to carry his name, and when the western section of the empire fell apart in the fifth- and sixth-centuries, the eastern section survived. Over the years Constantinople was besieged by Arabs, Persians and Russians, and in 1204 the city was sacked and destroyed by members of the Fourth Crusade, but despite these setbacks the Byzantine Empire managed to thrive both culturally and economically. "Byzantine," in English, is an adjective meaning "excessively complicated" or "devious," and the word is often used in relation to the operations of a bureaucracy. Yet the bureaucracy of the Byzantine Empire itself was both efficient and surprisingly non-bureaucratic. Under Justinian in the sixth-century the army successfully reclaimed lost lands in Italy, the Balkans and North Africa, but the emperor also agreed to pay a large annual tribute to the Sasanian empire in Persia. In the seventh-century the wars in the east erupted with new force and Persians and Byzantines fought to an exhausting standstill. From this time onward Constantinople relied more on its diplomats than its armies. [*Read more:* The Byzantine diplomatic service] But not even its skillful diplomats were able to avoid the final disaster. In May 1453, after a seven week long siege, Constantinople fell to the Ottomans, led by sultan Mehmed II, henceforth known as "Mehmed the Conqueror." The city was renamed "Istanbul," and the famous cathedral, Hagia Sophia, was turned into a mosque. The defeat was met with fear and trepidation by Christians all over Europe and it is mournfully remembered by Greek people to this day.

Many of these fears were clearly exaggerated. In the Ottoman Empire, much as the Arab caliphates which preceded it, the *dhimmi* enjoyed a protected status. Known as

the *millet* system in Turkish, the Ottoman empire gave each minority group the right to maintain its traditions and to be judged by its own legal code. Indeed, Jews – like the Jews forced to leave Spain once the Christians conclusively had conquered it – were officially encouraged to settle in Ottoman territories since the sultan needed the knowledge and the contacts they could bring. In the fifteenth- and sixteenth-centuries, Constantinople was thriving. The city's strategic location at the intersection of Europe and Asia was as beneficial to Ottoman traders as it had been to Byzantine, and the expanding Ottoman empire guaranteed that trade could proceed peacefully over an ever-widening area. The state manipulated the economy to serve its own goals – to strengthen the army and to enrich the rulers – yet the administrators employed for these purposes were highly trained and competent and the state-sponsored projects which they embarked on, such as the construction of roads, canals and mosques, helped spur economic growth. The empire was prosperous and in the cities markets were established for both consumer items and fashion. [*Read more:* Tulipmanias]

The first generations of sultans were successful as military commanders. Selim I, 1512-1520 CE, dramatically expanded the empire's eastern and southern frontiers by defeating Persia, the Mamluks in Egypt, and by establishing an Ottoman navy which operated both in the Red Sea and the Persian Gulf. The holy cities of Mecca and Medina were now in Turkish hands and the sultans began calling themselves "caliphs," implying that they were the rulers of all Muslim believers. Suleiman I, known as "the Magnificent," 1520-1566 CE, continued the expansion into Europe. He captured Belgrade in 1521 and Hungary in 1526, laid two sieges on Vienna, one in 1529 and the other in 1532, but failed to take the city. The Ottoman army responsible for these military successes was quite different from European armies of the time. Like other armies with roots in a nomadic tradition, the Ottomans relied on speed and mobility to overtake their enemies, fighting with bows and arrows on fast horses. But the Ottomans were also one of the first armies in the world to use muskets, and during the siege of Constantinople they

used falconets – short, light, cannons – to great effect. More surprisingly perhaps, the Ottomans had a powerful navy which helped them keep their possessions, on all sides of the Mediterranean, together. When they eventually were defeated by a joint navy of Christian states at the Battle of Lepanto in 1571, it only took the Ottomans a few years to completely rebuilt their fleet. The Ottoman army, much as armies elsewhere in the Muslim world, relied heavily on foreign-born soldiers. [*Read more:* Janissaries and Turkish military music] In the case of the Ottomans too, these former slaves soon established themselves as rulers in their own right and in this way the Ottoman provinces of Egypt, Iraq and Syria came to assume an increasingly independent position.

The Ottomans were active in diplomacy too, and despite the official Christian fear of the Turks, the Ottoman empire was after 1453 a European power and as such an obvious partner in both alliances and wars. This was particularly the case for any European power that opposed the countries that also were the main enemies of the Turks – the Habsburg empire and Russia. The French, for example, quickly realized that the Ottomans constituted a force which could be convinced to attack the Habsburgs from the back, as it were, and during the Thirty Years War in the seventeenth-century, the king of Sweden realized the same thing. Sweden was also eager to conclude an alliance with Turkey during its wars with Russia in the early eighteenth-century. And much later, in the 1850s, Great Britain and France relied on Turkey as an ally in making war against Russia in the Crimea. At the Congress of Paris, 1856, which concluded the Crimean War, the Ottoman empire was officially included as a member of the European international system of states.

Remarkably, the same dynasty, the Osmans, were in charge of the empire from Osman I in the thirteenth-century until the last sultan, Mehmed VI, in the twentieth. There were two attempts to unseat the dynasty but both failed, and although altogether eleven sultans were deposed, they were in each case replaced by another member of the same family. The Ottoman empire was flexible enough to deal with changes and

powerful enough both economically and militarily to deal with challenges. Yet for much of the last two centuries, the empire was in decline. Economically they suffered when international trade routes, from the sixteenth-century onward, were directed away from the Mediterranean, and together with the rest of Eastern Europe, they suffered when, from the end of the eighteenth-century, the western parts of Europe began to industrialize. The sultans of the last two centuries were not as capable as their predecessors and power moved to the viziers, the ministers of state, who not always had the best interests of the Ottomans at heart. In retrospect, the siege of Vienna in 1683 can be seen as the symbolic start of the decline. The Ottomans had amassed their troops and their cannons in July 1683, and they managed to hold the city ransom for some two months, during which time food was becoming exceedingly scarce and the Austrians increasingly desperate. [*Read more:* Coffee and croissants] Yet in the end the siege of Vienna failed and the Ottomans were decisively defeated, losing perhaps 40,000 men. Before the end of the seventeenth-century they had lost both Hungary and Transylvania too to the Austrians. In the nineteenth-century, the Ottoman Empire became known as the "the sick man of Europe," and a place which Europeans never visited without remarking on the "backwardness" and "stagnation" they witnessed. A number of administrative reforms were tried during this period, and after the revolt of the so called "Young Turks" in 1908 – a secret society of university students – the Ottoman Empire became a constitutional monarchy in which the sultan no longer enjoyed executive powers. The Ottoman empire was replaced by the state of Turkey in 1922.