Muslim Conquests

The Muslim Conquests of 624-982 were wars that transformed a religion into an empire. Islam's enemies, particularly the Byzantine Empire and Persia, which had been engaged in a protracted war, were weak and exhausted and thus ripe for conquest. Islam brought a new vitality into loosely organized regions in North Africa, the Near East, and Spain, although one that built on late Roman achievements in most cases.

Muslim armies under Khalid ibn al-Walid, and others, invaded Syria in 636 and took Damascus. In preliminary probes of Byzantine defenses, the Muslims had victories at al-Aqaba (633) and Ajnadayn (634), the first battle in which Muslim invaders fought as an army rather than a band of raiders. The Muslims were temporarily forced back by a Byzantine counterattack, but the Byzantine disaster at the Battle of the Yarmuk River in 636 signaled the permanent loss of Syria and adjacent areas. Jerusalem, left behind and isolated, like many Byzantine fortified cities, surrendered in 638, not to be recovered by Christians until the First Crusade.

Moving in several directions simultaneously, the Muslims, who had already taken much of Iraq in their initial raids, began a serious invasion of Persia proper in 636. In 637, they decisively defeated the Sassanid Empire in the Battle of Qadisiya, seized the capital of Ctesiphon, and forced the last Sassanian emperor to flee to Central Asia. Most of Persia was under their control by 649, although the conquest of Khorasan was completed only in 654. From Khorasan and eastern Persia, Muslim armies slowly advanced into what is now western Turkistan and then India, laying the foundation of modern-day Pakistan and Bangladesh.

Other Muslim forces moved into Byzantine Egypt, which was largely captured by 643. Alexandria, isolated from its hinterland, was able to hold out a few years longer. Even before the final subjugation of Egypt, Muslim armies began moving down the African coast, where Tripoli was captured in 643. Armenia was invaded in 642. Cyprus was invaded for the first time in 650 and again, along with Crete and Rhodes, in 654.

The victorious Muslim advance was temporarily interrupted by the Muslim Civil War of 656-661, during which Umayyad forces defeated Ali ibn Abi Talib, whose supporters became known as Shiites. The Umayyad dynasty then moved the Muslim capital to Damascus.

Resuming the advance, Umayyad naval forces appeared in the Sea of Marmora in 670. There, the Byzantines heavily defeated the Muslims in a naval battle in 677. Elsewhere, other Muslim armies completed the conquest of Byzantine Africa, taking Carthage in 698. From Africa, they crossed the Straits of Gibraltar, whose name ("rock of Tariq") recalls their general, Tariq ibn Ziyad, whose overwhelmingly outnumbered army crushed the Visigoth king Roderic at the week-long Battle of Rio Barbate in 711. Although a number of Christian princes fled to refuge in the Pyrenees and held out against Islam, most of Spain now came under Muslim control.

From Spain, Muslim forces invaded the Merovingian kingdom of the Franks but were halted by Charles Martel at the Battle of Tours in 732. The importance of the Christian victory has been overstated, since Muslim armies were operating well beyond their safe range during their invasions of France. In addition, it did not end the direct threat to Europe since Muslims were able to invade and seize Sicily from the Byzantines in the early ninth century and retain their position there for some time.
The same year that the Muslims entered Spain, 711, they also began serious raids and advances into Asia Minor, which the Byzantines had defended successfully. This move inaugurated a struggle that went on well into the 10th century. The Muslims suffered a decisive repulse by land and sea in the failure of the 717-718 siege of Constantinople. Although the Byzantines were attacked on two sides, by Muslim armies below the Long Walls and by Muslim ships operating in the Sea of Mamora, the experienced Byzantine emperor Leo III was able both to defeat and to rout the depleted Muslim armies.

The Umayyads, some of whom took refuge in Spain, were overthrown by the Abbasid dynasty in the mid-eighth century. The Abbasids moved the capital to Baghdad, which became a great trading city, and continued the war against Byzantium. It was under their rule that the advance against Sicily took place, and they won the Battle of Talas River in 751 against a weakening Chinese Tang dynasty. The reign of Harun al-Rashid was, in every way, the high watermark of Muslim military power. Centralized authority declined sharply after his time, particularly during the Muslim Civil War of 861-870, which permanently lamed the caliphate as a central, Muslim authority.

The period also saw an increasingly powerful Byzantine reconquest, as Byzantine armies recovered Crete, major parts of northern Mesopotamia, and Syria and even threatened Jerusalem. Among the emperors taking the lead were Constantine V Copronymus and his son, Leo IV, who gradually extended Byzantine power in Asia Minor.

Later, under Leo VI, the Byzantines were able to successfully invade the emirate of Tarsus and then Armenia, which also came under Byzantine control, and continued the process of recovering frontier territory. Subsequently, Emperor Romanus Lecapenus attacked and sacked Melitene, a Muslim base, and in 928, formally restored it to the empire. Although local Muslim forces counterattacked, the area was brought definitely under Byzantine control by 936.

The culmination of these efforts came during the reigns of Constantine VII, his son Romanus II, Nicephorus II Phocas, and John I Tzimisces. The Byzantines expanded their control in northern Mesopotamia, Armenia, and Cyprus. In 961, Nicephorus II Phocas, then the general of Romanus II, recaptured Crete. Meanwhile, Tzimisces, then still a general, took Aleppo and as emperor, advanced into northern Palestine. The following century, the Byzantines even sought to reconquer Sicily, although it was the Normans who were the ultimate beneficiaries.

Only in Spain did an era of Muslim conquest persist, despite what was by and large a stalemate between Muslims and Christians, thanks to the infusions of raw Berber energy from North Africa that reinvigorated the Muslim advance. Elsewhere, it was the Turks who took over the role of expanding the frontiers of Islam.

Further Reading


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