

Umayyad and Abbasid Dynasties  
World History  
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When the Prophet Muhammad's cousin and son-in-law Ali was killed in 661, the Age of the *Rashidun*, or rightly-guided ones, came to an end. These “rightly guided” caliphs were all related to Muhammad and thus, “rightly guided.” Mu'awiyah, a member of the powerful Umayyad clan and governor of Syria, assumed the office of caliph in 661 and moved the capital of Islam from Medina to Damascus. This marked the beginning of the Umayyad Caliphate, which ruled the Islamic world until 750. By appointing his son Yazid as his successor, Mu'awiyah founded the tradition of family dynasties, which effectively ended the original Islamic practice of electing the caliph by a council of elders. Yazid is infamous for ordering the death of Husayn, Muhammad's grandson, in 680. Husayn decided to challenge the authority of the Umayyad and was killed in the process. This controversial act led to an eventual split in Islam between those who feel that Muhammad's descendants should rule the Islamic world and those who believe any Muslim can be an Islamic leader. These groups are called Shi'a and Sunni Muslims.

Throughout their reign, the Umayyad caliphs faced civil war and rebellion, but maintained their dominance and engaged in a spectacular campaign of territorial expansion. Before the founding of the Umayyad Caliphate, Muslim armies had already occupied what are today Syria, Egypt, Libya, Iraq, and Iran. In the first part of the 8th century, Umayyad forces completed the conquest of north Africa, Spain, and Portugal, and invaded territories as far east as central Asia, Afghanistan, and India. Arabic was the official language of the government and of religion, and Arab settlers traveled far and wide.

Islam was spread by the Caliphates in ways that are fairly typical. Islam was promoted by the Caliphates in order to rule a people through a singular religion in order to promote unity. Trade routes were used to spread the religion. Luckily, the Caliphates had plenty of trade routes: the Indian Ocean, Trans-Saharan, Mediterranean and Silk Roads. They also synthesized their religion with local cultures and religions, tapping into local Zoroastrianism in Persia and Judaism in the rest of the Mideast. One way that the spread of Islam differed from most religions was the use of war to spread the religion. In order to spread Islam quickly, the Umayyads briefly used war to spread the religion. The Caliphs justified this war by claiming that the war they fought was a “holy war” or *jihad* in Arabic.

The Umayyad dynasty fell over the issue of taxes. The small ruling class paid lower taxes, while the lower classes and minority non-Muslims paid higher taxes. For a short while, the Umayyads even discouraged conversion to Islam in order to maintain higher tax revenue. Resentment turned into rebellion, and descendants of al-Abbas, an uncle of the Prophet Muhammad, raised an army in northern Iran. The Abbasids defeated the Umayyad army and killed many of the Umayyad leaders, winning the caliphate for themselves.

The Abbasids moved the capital from Damascus to Baghdad, and ruled the Islamic world from 750-1258. The movement of the capital was purposeful. Persians were resistant to the spread of Islam, and it was felt that if the capital was moved to Baghdad, Persians would be more willing to accept the religion. The strategy worked. After a century or so of quelling uprisings and solidifying control, the Abbasid Caliphate oversaw an era of prosperity and cultural achievement.

Industry, agriculture, and commerce all flourished, while Baghdad became an international trade center with a population of nearly a half-million. This wealth funded research in math, science, medicine, architecture and art, poetry, literature, and philosophy. Muslim cities became important centers of learning where Greek and Latin works of science and philosophy were translated, interpreted, revised, and recast to fit an Islamic world view. Cross-cultural exchanges, particularly in science and art, enriched Islamic civilization and neighboring civilizations alike. Christian scholars in Europe studied the work of Muslim scholars, who brought sophisticated mathematics and science, and the translations of Greek and Latin scholarship, to the European cities and schools.

The Abbasids ruled directly over Mesopotamia, Iran, Egypt, and Syria, and collected taxes and tributes from the more distant provinces. In the late 9th century, Morocco, Tunisia, Syria, and Iran won autonomy from the Abbasid Caliphate. Changes in leadership in Egypt and Baghdad contributed to growing dissension, weakening the power of the central government. In the late 11th century, Abbasid armies were attacked in the west by invading Christian Crusaders and in the east by Mongol forces. The Mongols captured Baghdad in 1258, and executed the last Abbasid caliph. This event marked the end of the Islamic caliphates.

There were other Islamic empires after 1258, but no single empire after the Abbasids extended its influence throughout the whole Islamic world. The end of the Abbasid Caliphate was thus an important watershed in Islamic history, marking the end of the era of Muslim political unity. Some Muslims still look forward to a time when Muslim political unity could be restored.