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# The Pious Caliphate Consolidated: Umar's Role in Shaping Islamic Civilization

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***Abstract:*** *Caliph Umar bin al-Khattab, born in Mecca in 584 C.E., was the second Caliph of the Pious caliphate. Scholars often celebrate him for his unmatchable military conquest, commendable leadership, and the establishment of a robust administrative and justice system. Umar converted to Islam in 616 C.E. and became a close companion of the Prophet Muhammad. He was well known for his strength, wisdom, and unwavering commitment to Islam.*
*Under his rule, Umar expanded the caliphate up to Syria, Persia, and Egypt, and laid the foundation of a solid Islamic legacy. His governance was marked by justice and equity, epitomized by establishing a structured judiciary and welfare system, something unknown at that time.*

***Keywords:*** *Umar, Caliphate, Governance, Justice.*

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Umar bin al-Khattab was born three years after the 'Year of the Elephant' and belonged to *the Adi* clan of the prominent tribe of *Quraysh*, and the ancestral line of the Prophet by the eighth generation. Umar was a master in genealogy, horse riding, wrestling, and swordsmanship. In the days of his youth, he took trade as his profession.[1] He, along with his tribe, arbitrated tribal disputes, earning a reputation for fairness and eloquence. He was always the tribe's ambassador, speaking for them and protecting their rights. "Umar Ibn al-Khattab was the invaluable gem Quraysh prided itself on."[2]

Before embracing Islam, Umar led a life of recklessness, frequently indulging in wine and women. Umar was a man of unmatchable prowess, and frequently fought with the newly converted, torturing and inflicting harm on them.[3]

Initially a fierce opponent of Islam, Umar, after conversion, became a confidant of the Prophet and assisted as a devoted companion. Umar's embracing of Islam marked a significant shift in history as the Muslims who were being persecuted in Mecca now had a strong personality on their side. Caliph Umar took up the cause of fighting battles and supported the *Ummah* as the second Caliph of the pious caliphate.
Prophet awarded him the title of **'Al-Farooq'**, meaning "the distinguisher between right and wrong". This was because "Umar got Islam to see the bright light of the day and managed to set right and wrong apart."[4] Their relations became so strong that Prophet Muhammad married Hafsa, the widow daughter of Umar.

## 2. RISE TO LEADERSHIP

It is said that before his death, Abu Bakr designated Umar bin al-Khattab as the next Caliph. During Abu Bakr's last fifteen days of illness, Umar led the *salat* (worship), and during this time, he nominated Umar as the next Caliph.[5] Although this was an unusual act, it was subject to the community's approval. The selection of Umar as Caliph, however,

[1] Akbar Shah Najeebabadi, *History of Islam*, Vol. I, (New York: Darussalam, 2000), p. 318.
[2] Tamir Abu As-Su'ood Muhammad, *Biographies of the Rightly Guided Caliphs,* (El Mansoura: Dar Al-Manarah, 2001), p. 142.
[3] Muhammad, *Biographies of Rightly Guided Caliphs,* p. 142.
[4] *Ibid.*, p. 149.
[5] *Ibid.*, p. 177.

went unopposed. No historian mentions anything that may denote opposition or convincing of the masses.[6] Umar thus became the second Caliph or *Amirul Mu'mineen* (the commander of the faithful).[7]
As the second Caliph, Umar approached governance with humility and responsibility. He declared, "If I deviate from the truth, correct me," emphasizing his accountability and collective governance for the benefit of the caliphate.[8]

Umar's caliphate is an example of separation from the tribal way of life, as he arranged a governing structure that was first and foremost concerned with the well-being of the entire Ummah. After inheriting the caliphate, Caliph Umar is said to have reversed Abu Bakr's policy regarding the "ex-rebels of the *ridda*."[9] Owing to Khalid bin Walid's excellent martial abilities, Abu Bakr appointed him as the chief of military command. Umar, the advisor of the then-Caliph Abu Bakr, did not disapprove of his military abilities but found him a little careless. Even though during Umar's time as Caliph, Khalid bin Walid continued to remain in the same position.[10]

## 3. JUSTICE SYSTEM OF UMAR

Caliph Umar ibn al-Khattab established a justice system where fairness, transparency, and accountability were manifested. Caliph Umar is distinct as he practiced creating institutions that support Islamic jurisprudence's principles with administrative efficiency towards implementing justice. His reforms and practices were intended to ensure equality before the law irrespective of social or religious differences. In his eyes, "all were equal, whether rich or poor, powerful or weak, related or distant."[11] Umar's remarkable sense of justice compelled Abu Bakr to make him the first judge of the Muslims.[12]

Umar chose his governors from among the people of piety, scruples, and asceticism. It is also mentioned that every time a governor was appointed, Umar made him write a pledge, which was witnessed by the host of *Ansars* and *Muhajiruns*. He also laid down instructions for their code of conduct regarding food, clothing, etc., that ensured transparency and accessibility.[13]

Umar adopted Quranic principles as the source of law and, in addition, the *Sunnah* of the Prophet Muhammad. He would practice *Ijtihad* (independent reasoning) in cases where precedents were not forthcoming. He found a balance between divine ordinances and pragmatic approaches to societal problems. His judicial policies laid the foundation for later Islamic governance. He codified the rules governing commercial transactions, criminal justice, and civil disputes to ensure uniformity and fairness. He codified civil, criminal, and commercial law rules, aiming for uniformity and fairness. His administration emphasized social justice, creating mechanisms like the *Bayt al-Mal* (public treasury) to support welfare and accountability systems to investigate and address corruption and abuses of power. These reforms formed the basis of Islamic governance and inspired later rulers.[14]

One of the central tenets of Umar's justice system was accessibility. In his eyes, all, including the Caliph himself, were equal, and no one was above the law. The most well-known case is actually proof of this behavior: a Jewish gentleman approached him with an appeal against Umar's son. Without partiality, the case was heard, and judgment was given against Umar's son. Such instances promoted him towards fairness irrespective of social status or faith.[15] Umar adopted accountability to the point of auditing government officials for misconduct. He introduced the declaration of assets before assuming office, which discourages corrupt practices and the misuse of public funds.

Umar established an organized judiciary with *Qadis* nominated in provinces. It was an important requirement that *Qadis* have profound knowledge about Islamic law and moral integrity. There should be no interference of governors in the court. Umar opted for a high court of appeal, from which it became evident that he was prepared for accountability over decisions made during his tenure. The most notable aspect is that Umar's instruction to *Qadis* emphasized the notion of neutrality and intense consideration before judicial decrees. He is said to have proclaimed: "Judges must exercise

[6] Najeebabadi, *History of Islam,* p. 322.
[7] Muhammad, *Biographies of Rightly Guided Caliphs,* p. 177.
[8] Najeebabadi, *History of Islam,* p. 322.
[9] M.A. Shaban, *Islamic History: A New Interpretation,* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1971), p. 28.
[10] Najeebabadi, *History of Islam,* p. 323.
[11] Muhammad, *Biographies of Rightly Guided Caliphs,* p. 181.
[12] *Ibid.,* p. 181.
[13] *Ibid.,* p. 183.
[14] Sunnism.com, "Umar ibn Al Khattab – The Second Caliph of Islam," https://www.sunnism.com
[15] Hugh Kennedy, *The Prophet and the Age of the Caliphates*, 2nd ed. (London: Longman, 2004), pp. 135-138

patience, avoid anger, and fairly judge the evidence before judgment." In so doing, he showed what the just adjudicator must possess as essentials.[16]

## 4. CONQUESTS OF UMAR

Caliph Umar's conquests are said to have spread over 22.5 million square miles. This was made possible by Muslims' victories, especially against the mighty empires of Persia and Rome. The Roman Empire included the Balkan Peninsula, Asia Minor, Syria, Palestine, Egypt, and Sudan within its rule. The Persians had no less territory under their rule than the Romans. There existed no other force capable of challenging their rule. The historians of the time record that both these empires were in a state of decay that gave Muslims an opportunity to conquer them.[17] Both empires had vast old powers, well-disciplined armies, and advanced weapons. Hence, both of them had larger armies to fight the outnumbered Muslims.[18]

## 5. IMPORTANT BATTLES

- **The Battle of *Namaraq*** was one of the early battles fought in 634 CE in the early Islamic conquests, between the Muslim forces under the command of Khalid ibn al-Walid and the Sasanian Empire. It was held near *Namaraq* in present-day Iraq as part of the greater *Rashidun* campaign to extend Islamic rule to Persian territories. The Muslim forces, although fewer in number, utilized better tactics and coordination on the battlefield to overcome the Sasanian army. The victory at *Namaraq* illustrated the potential of Khalid's leadership and the Rashidun army's tactical flexibility as they continued their advances deep into Mesopotamia, a region strategic to the heartland of the Sasanian Empire.[19] The battle pointed out the weakening grip of the Sasanian Empire in the face of rising Islamic power.

- In 634 CE, the *Rashidun* Caliphate forces clashed with a significant part of the Sasanian army in the **Battle of *Saqatiah***. Al-Muthanna ibn Haritha was the Muslim commander; the area of contention was the region of *Saqatiah*, Mesopotamia. Although initially inferior in numbers, the Muslims could outmaneuver the Sasanian army through superior tactics and discipline, followed by quick maneuvering that won the battle decisively. The Sasanian forces, led by a local Persian general, suffered significant losses, demonstrating the empire's diminished military strength as it moved towards its internal turmoil and previous setbacks.[20] This victory weakened the Sasanian Empire's grip on the region and strengthened Muslim moves further into the heartland of Persia.

- The **Battle of *Buwaib*** was one of the decisive battles of the early Islamic conquests, taking place in 634 CE (13 AH) along the Euphrates River. The Muslim forces, led by Khalid ibn al-Walid, defeated a bigger Sasanian army despite being a minority. The victory shook down the stronghold of the Sasanian defense and strengthened the position of the Muslims over strategic districts, thus advancing the expansion of Islam into Sassanid territory.[21]

- One of the decisive battles between the *Rashidun* Caliphate and the Sassanian Empire was the **Battle of *Qadisiyyah***, fought in 636 CE, near the Euphrates River. Commanded by the Muslim general Sa'd ibn Abi Waqqas, it involved the Muslim forces facing the elite Sassanian army led by the general Rustam Farrokhzad. The battle also played a key role in the conquest of Persia by the Muslims because it resulted in the defeat of the forces of the Sassanian Empire, which led to the collapse of the Sassanian Empire.[22] The victory at Qadisiyyah opened the door for the Muslims to capture the Sassanian capital of Ctesiphon and contributed to the final blow of the Persian Empire.

- A key battle in this respect was the **Battle of *Jalulah***, fought in 637 CE. It pitted the army of the *Rashidun* Caliphate headed by Sa'd ibn Abi Waqqas against the Sassanian army under the command of Narsi. Although the Persians were much better placed to put up a defensive fight, Muslims used their strategic approach to win handily. This

[16] Ira M. Lapidus, *A History of Islamic Societies*, 3rd ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), pp. 185-186.
[17] Najeebabadi, *History of Islam*, p. 375.
[18] *Ibid.*, p. 376.
[19] Nicholas Munns, *"The Fall of the Sassanid Empire: The Arab Conquest of Persia,"* The Collector, last modified February 21, 2022, https://www.thecollector.com/fall-of-the-sassanid-empire-arab-conquest-persia/
[20] *"Muslim Conquest of Persia,"* Infogalactic: The Planetary Knowledge Core, https://infogalactic.com/wiki/Muslim_conquest_of_Persia
[21] Brittanica Encyclopedia, "*Khalid ibn al-Walid"*, https://www.britannica.com/biography/Khalid-ibn-al-Walid
[22] Najeebabadi, *History of Islam*, pp. 343-347.

victory further crippled the Sassanian Empire and contributed to the eventual downfall of the empire, making the Muslim advance easier toward the Sassanian capital of Ctesiphon.[23]

- One of the most decisive battles in Islamic history was near the Yarmouk River, the **Battle of *Yarmouk***. The Muslims' forces were led by Khalid ibn al-Walid, but they came against the Byzantine army, under the generals of Emperor Heraclius. The Muslims, who were vastly outnumbered, defeated the Byzantine forces decisively with strategic tactics and superior mobility. It was this victory that ended Byzantine rule in Syria, paving the way for Muslim expansion into the Levant.[24]

- The **Battle of *Fahl*** was between the Rashidun Caliphate forces and the Byzantine Empire forces in Jordan. Under the leadership of Abu Ubaidah ibn al-Jarrah, Muslims defeated the Byzantine forces, which was seen as critical in weakening the Byzantine defenses in the region.[25]

- The **Battle of *Heliopolis*** was the most significant battle the Muslims took during the conquest of Egypt. The *Rashidun* Caliphate army, led by Amr ibn al-As, encountered the Byzantine soldiers near Heliopolis, some miles northeast of modern-day Cairo. The local general commanding the Byzantines decisively defeated Heliopolis.[26] This defeat paved the way for the victory of the Muslims, who then took the strategic city of Alexandria.

- There was a very crucial battle, the **Battle of the Nile**, fought near the Nile River. In it, Amr ibn al-As led the *Rashidun* Caliphate against the Byzantine forces defending Egypt. The Muslim army decisively defeated the Byzantines, ensuring the final collapse of Byzantine control in Egypt.[27] This battle was instrumental in opening Egypt to Muslim rule because the Byzantines could not stop the Islamic advance, particularly after this loss. The fall of Alexandria soon followed and marked the total surrender of Byzantine Egypt.

## 6. CONCLUSION

Umar ibn al-Khattab's reign (634-644 CE) is characterized by deep judicial reforms and the monumental military conquests that will mold the course of the early Islamic empire. His justice system, based on Quranic principles and the practice of Prophet Muhammad, was a paragon of impartiality and transparency. Umar's emphasis on consultation (Shura), the appointment of capable judges, and allowing for Ijtihad in cases not covered by the Qur'an or Hadith ensured that his legal system was dynamic and responsive to the needs of society. His stringent stance against corruption, whereby he too would not excuse even his close family from it, befits his ideological position to uphold equity and justice.

Umar's military success, particularly in Syria, Iraq, and Egypt, turned the tide of decisive victories for Muslims, securing domination of large land areas against seemingly insurmountable odds. Key battles include the Battle of *Yarmouk* (636 CE) and the Siege of Damascus (636 CE), in which the Byzantine powers were dismantled, and the Battle of Heliopolis in 640 CE, and then the capture of Egypt, which became one of the most crucial provinces of the Byzantine Empire. Through the military campaigns, Umar not only expanded the territorial reach of Islam but also laid the foundation for governance in moderation, balancing military force with a robust ethical and legal framework.
His leadership, which represented the synthesis of divine guidance and practical governance, was one of the most influential and respected caliphs in Islamic history. Umar's judicial policies and military achievements have thus remained a benchmark for Islamic governance.

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[23] *Ibid*., pp. 350-351.
[24] M. J. L. Young, *The Early Islamic Empire* (London: Macmillan, 1992), pp. 145-148.
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