



The Caliphate

By Eman M. Elshaikh

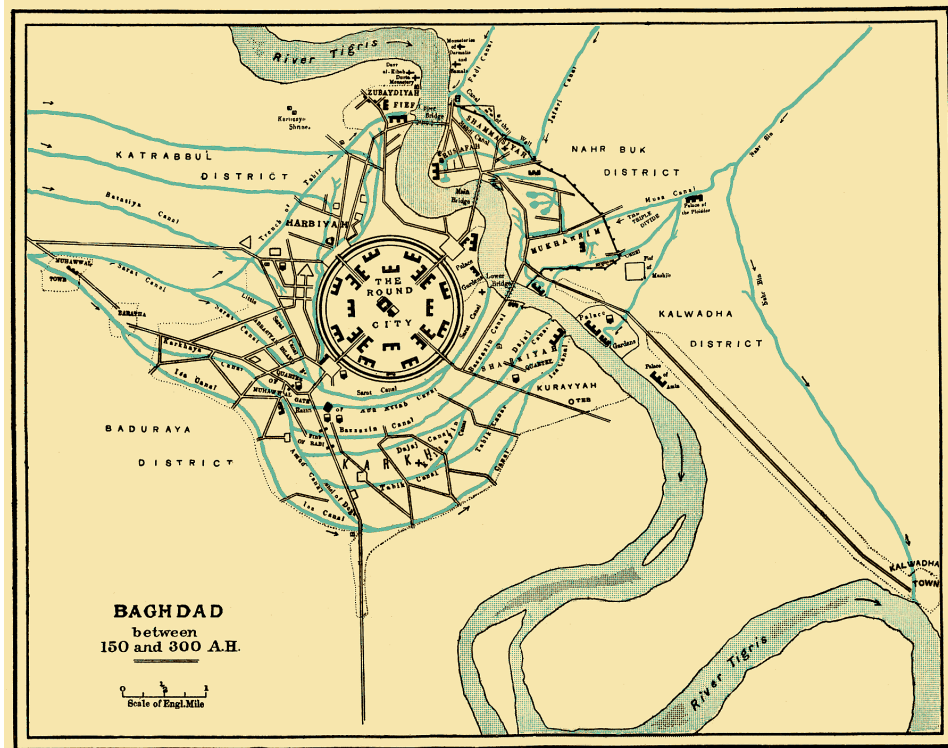
The Muslim world, whether governed by one or several powerful caliphates, was at the center of Afro-Eurasia.

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The center of the world

Around 1000 CE, Baghdad felt like the center of the world. During Era 4, Baghdad *was* one of the greatest cities on the planet. About a million people lived there. It was rich. It was home to many kinds of people. They excelled in trade, sciences, and arts.



The city of Baghdad between 150 and 300 AH (767 and 912 CE). By William Muir, public domain.

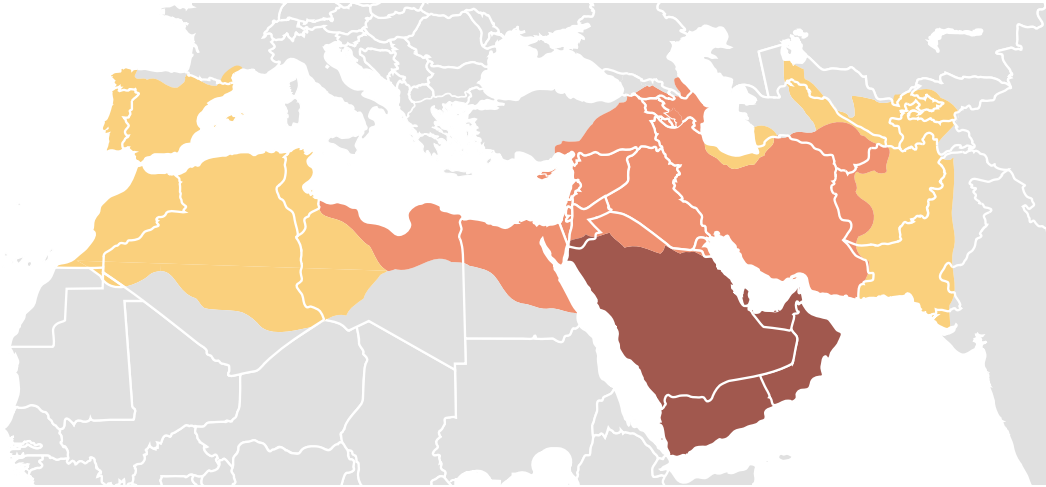
The city was the seat of the Abbasid Caliphate. It was a strong, large Muslim empire. It lasted from 750 CE to 1258 CE. From about the eighth century until well into Era 5, Muslim empires spread out across Afro-Eurasia. It all started in the middle of the seventh century. A new political form began. It was called the caliphate.

The institution of the caliphate

The Muslim prophet Muhammad died in 632 CE. Afterward, the Muslim community of Arabia was led by a caliph.¹ The caliph was to be a spiritual and political leader. He was elected by his fellow Muslims. The Rashidun Caliphate lasted from 632 to 661. During this time, the Muslim community elected caliphs who were related to Muhammad or his close friends.

Under the Rashidun, the state grew quickly. It spread out from Arabia. The neighboring Byzantines and Persians were at risk. Sickness and wars had made them weak. They were not able to put up much of a fight. Many Arab soldiers once fought in the Byzantine and Persian armies. They knew their weaknesses so they could conquer them quickly.

¹ A caliph was the leader of the caliphate. The word comes from the Arabic word khalifa, basically meaning a deputy or successor to the Prophet Muhammad.



A map showing the expansion of Muslim-ruled states from 622-750 CE. Dark red shows expansion under Muhammad, 622-623. Orange shows expansion under the Rashidun Caliphate, 632-661. Yellow shows expansion under the Umayyad Caliphate, 661-750. Public domain.

The state itself was a loose group of Arab tribes, though. They were not united. They were settled in garrison cities² protected by troops. Then came the Umayyads, who ruled from 661 to 750. Under the Umayyads, the caliphate developed a system to rule over its large stretch of land. The empire went all the way from Spain to Central Asia. That's a lot of territory! State officials began translating Persian and Byzantine sources into Arabic. Many of these sources were about how to manage an empire this large.

As the caliphates grew, they began to use Persian and Byzantine political ideas. The caliph became a ruler with complete power. That power was passed down to his children. The caliph ruled over subjects much as a Persian king did. He was less like an elected leader of a community of fellow Muslims than caliphs of the past. Muslim scholars disagreed with their use of religion to gain power.

From an Arab empire to a Muslim empire

Soon, the caliphs were more interested in ruling than in religion. We often think of the political spread of the Islamic state and the spread of the Islamic religion as the same thing. Caliphs did not often make people become Muslims, though. Non-Muslims could often keep their religions. They had to pay a special tax, though. It was called a *jizya*. It paid for things the state needed.

Arabs were not willing to share their power. They remained the ruling class. Many questioned and disagreed with the Umayyads. People questioned why they should lead. After all, they were not elected. They were not members of Muhammad's family. People thought they did not follow Islamic beliefs. Including equality for all Muslims, not just Arabs.

The Umayyads were kicked out of power. They were replaced by the Abbasids, who were also Arabs. They ruled from 750 to 1258. They were related to Muhammad through his uncle.

² A garrison city is one that is protected by troops.



Depiction of the first Abbasid caliph As-Saffah as he receives pledges of allegiance in Kufa, the site of Umayyad opposition. From a work by Persian historian Muhammad Bal'ami, public domain.

The Abbasids were strong rulers, just as the Umayyads had been. They were not fairer or more Islamic, either. They did create more space for non-Arabs, though. Also, many Central Asian people were brought by the Abbasids to the area at this time. The Abbasids used them as enslaved soldiers, called *mamluks*. Since they were captured as young boys and raised by the Abbasids, it was thought they would make loyal soldiers.

Society under the caliphate

Most people living in the empires were not Muslims. It's easy to forget that. The Muslim leaders ruled over many Christians, Jews, Zoroastrians, and Hindus. People were generally not forced to change their religion.

Many non-Muslim people moved into the empire as enslaved people, often as prisoners of war or through trade. Enslaved men were often soldiers. Enslaved women were often concubines,³ a practice that became more common during Abbasid rule. This affected the structure of families and the status of women. Slavery was not passed down to children. Also, enslaved people could gain freedom and sometimes eventually gain considerable power.

Islam gave women rights. They included property rights and the choice to marry. Women could have mosques and schools built using their own money. They could buy and sell products in their homes.

3 A concubine is a live-in companion, usually sexual, in a polygamous relationship. Concubines are treated as having lower status than wives.



Rabi'a al-Basri (717-801 CE), a female Sufi saint who was revered for her intense devotion. Public domain.

Women's rights differed by region and social class, though. Over time, men took more control over women's lives in some areas. Former Byzantine and Persian areas limited women's rights. Women there covered their bodies in loose outer garments. In other places, Muslim women were not as limited. These areas include coastal East Africa and Southeast Asia.

From one empire to many

The Abbasids lasted until the thirteenth century. The Mongols then took over Baghdad. By then the Abbasids were already quite weak, though. They had been since the tenth century. The empire became too big. It was hard to control. Some governors started taking taxes and money for themselves.

And remember those mamluks? It turns out that enslaved soldiers do not always want to follow orders. Over time they got political power of their own. They started their own dynasties in places such as Egypt.

Over time, the Abbasid land basically split up. It was controlled by a number of independent Muslim dynasties, including mamluk-ruled ones. Mongols came to the area and destroyed some of them. The Mongols did not end the era of Muslim empires, though. Some Mongols even became Muslims. They started their own Muslim dynasties.

The Muslim empire split in many pieces. The Muslim community was still united in some ways, though. Trade networks crisscrossed the Muslim world. Many Muslims in this era lived in rich, highly developed societies. They went from west Africa to north India to Baghdad. Muslims continued to feel that they were at the center of the world.



Gold dinar coin from the Berber Muslim Almoravid dynasty (1040-147), Seville, Spain, 1116, CC BY-SA 3.0. By PHGCOM, CC BY-SA 3.0.

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Image credits

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The city of Baghdad between 150 and 300 AH (767 and 912 CE). By William Muir, public domain. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/History_of_Baghdad#/media/File:Baghdad_150_to_300_AH.png

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Depiction of the first Abbasid caliph As-Saffah as he receives pledges of allegiance in Kufa, the site of Umayyad opposition. From a work by Persian historian Muhammad Bal'ami, public domain. [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Balami_-_Tarikhnama_-_Abu%27l-%27Abbas_al-Saffah_is_proclaimed_the_first_%27Abbasid_Caliph_\(cropped\).jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Balami_-_Tarikhnama_-_Abu%27l-%27Abbas_al-Saffah_is_proclaimed_the_first_%27Abbasid_Caliph_(cropped).jpg)

Rabi'a al-Basri (717-801 CE), a female Sufi saint who was revered for her intense devotion. Public domain. https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Rabia_al-Adawiyya.jpg

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