

## **World History Encyclopedia, Era 4: Expanding Regional Civilizations, 300-1000**

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296

### **Islamic Rule in Iran and Central Asia, 650–1000 CE**

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The Islamic conquests define the sharpest periodization in Iranian history particularly and West Asia more generally. Although an underlying tenacious continuity is discernible in the Persian-Islamic ethos to the present, the acceptance of a new religion marked the start of a new order, and it became the basis of a new civilization whose identity, development, and efflorescence, subsequent to enslavement, slaughter, and destruction, were completely remolded. It merits reiteration that its articulation, despite pre-Islamic inspiration, was unassailably Islamic. The Sassanian-Zoroastrian legacy of art, attitude, statecraft, thought, and sophistication—neither fully assimilated nor rejected but always ambivalent—was bequeathed to the Islamic tradition. This became evident in Islam's treatment of Zoroastrians who were expediently, and never unanimously, recognized as *ahl al-kitab* (People of the Book).

Zoroastrianism or Mazdeism, the state religion of its Sassanian upholders (224–651 CE),

297

eclectically also flourished in Afghan and Transoxianian principalities, which completely collapsed with the Arab conquest of Iran and central Asia. It lacked any recuperative power and, of all religions that encountered Islam, suffered the most. Byzantine Christians could at least count on allies or adherents elsewhere, and Jews, unlike Zoroastrians, had honed bitter survival skills over generations. Islam was to leave Zoroastrianism a remarkable remnant surviving as an officially tolerated minority in both Islamic republics, Iran and Pakistan, where known as Parsis there and in secular India, they have dwindled but remain the most progressive and successful South Asians.

Expansion was enjoined by the injunction of the Quran (9:29). The fanatical fervor of a then-nascent proselytizing cult notwithstanding, the Arab attacks mirrored the Alexandrine invasion where poor but hardy Bedouins, like Macedonians seeking loot and land a millennium earlier, overwhelmed the Persians after two or three decisive battles to set the stage and scope of subsequent events.

Conquest was piecemeal and conversion gradual. During the Umayyad era (661–750 CE), an Iranian convert had to become a *mawla* ("client") of a tribe and assume a socially subordinate position to his Arab ruler. Thus, the inducement to accept Islam attracted the lower orders such as peasants or prisoners and urban traders, retainers, servants, and tenants who prudently ingratiated themselves with their new masters garrisoned in centers across lower Iraq, southern Fars, and Khurasan, especially the Merv oasis (modern southeastern Turkmenistan). Mass conversion was not actively encouraged, but it became plain to Persians that social mobility and prosperity lay in accepting the colonizer's creed and standards associated with its way of life. Backsliding was ruled out, for apostasy, then as now, invited death.

Ignorant of running an imperial system, the Arabs delegated the administration to former Sassanian secretaries (*dabiran*), thus establishing Islamic *divans* (chancelleries) whereby Pahlavi records were replaced by Arabic only after 700 CE, and tax collection was delegated to subdued magnates (*marzuban*) and landlords (*dahaqin*). Besides the land tax (*kharaj*),

**ISLAM BESIEGED—AL-MUQANNA, THE "VEILED ONE"** No challenge to early Islam was graver than that of Hashim bin Hakim or *al-Muqanna* during the third Abbasid caliph, al-Mahdi's reign (775–785 CE). Hailing from descendants connected to Abu Muslim, al-Muqanna came to regard himself as the rightful imam. Imprisoned in Baghdad, he escaped first to Merv and then Transoxiana, preaching that he embodied the incarnate spirit of Abu Muslim who had succeeded Jesus, Muhammad, and Abraham. His expressly anti-Islamic teachings attracted peasants and superficially Islamized inhabitants among rural fastnesses. Neo-Mazdakite and Manichean notions are discernable, though Muslim accounts are silent about his teachings except that he encouraged promiscuity, abolished property, and invited Qarluq Turks to appropriate Muslim lands and wealth. His revolt (774–779 CE) spread across Shahr-i Sabz, Samarkand, and as far as Termez. He retired to a fortress in the upper reaches of the Kashka Darya (southern Uzbekistan) and, when encircled by Khurasanian forces, committed suicide after instructing that his body be burned to vindicate his divine ascent. He was eulogized as the Veiled Prophet of Khorasan in Thomas Moore's poem, *Lalla Rookh* (1813), and fictionalized by Jorge Luis Borges in the short story *El tintorero enmascarado Hákim de Merv* (*Hakim, the Masked Dyer of Merv*), published in 1935.—*Burzine Waghmar*

non-Muslims or *dhimmis* (people of the covenant) paid a graded capitation tax deemed degrading and annulled upon conversion. Accounts of collection and treatment meted out vary temporally, demographically and provincially. But it affords interesting insights into Arab and early non-Arab Muslim interactions: Umayyads, when saddled with increasing official expenses, refused exemption even upon conversion. Other levies were then extracted from converts to shore up revenue losses, which provoked rebellion.

Resistance and revolts were frequent, especially in central Asia, which Arabs pillaged after crossing the Oxus in 653–654 CE. Balkh (ancient Bactria's capital) was reconquered in 663 CE. Bukhara was overtaken in 674 CE, and Samarkand

298

was overtaken in 676 CE. A total Arab hold was only established under Qutayba bin Muslim's governorship of Khurasan and the East (705–715 CE). By then, 50,000 Arab colonists were settled in Khurasan, albeit after reannexation. Qutayba had to reassert control over Bukhara in 706–709 CE. Its inhabitants were reported to have recanted thrice after being converted under his order. He next decreed the manumission of slaves upon becoming Muslims, demolition of fire-temples and religious sanctuaries, and the compulsory domiciling of Arabs within Bukharan homes to check them from lapsing. Alienation and civil wars were not restricted to infidels. Disgruntled, marginalized, Muslim malcontents, both converts and Arabs, began unravelling the Umayyad caliphate by the mid-740s.

Anti-Umayyad strands including Kharijis, Alids, *mawali* (clients), *dahaqin*, and slaves, collectively flagged under the Abbasid revolt, ousted the Umayyads and orientated the caliphate from Syria to Iraq. Led by Abu Muslim, the Abbasids (749–1258 CE), temporarily amalgamated heterogeneous factions by propagating the prophetic ideal of an egalitarian, universal community. Changes in the social and military structure of the caliphate occurred when Persian consciousness manifested itself through revived Sassanian precepts of kingship and governance: the caliph presided over a hierarchical social order as the Shadow of God.

Social antagonisms resurfaced when disappointed elements, particularly the Shia and Khariji, rapidly realized that promised prosperity and justice were mere Abbasid sloganeering. Reprisals did not even spare allies. Abu Muslim, suspected as a powerful gubernatorial threat, was executed by the second caliph, al Mansur, in 755 CE. Abu Muslim's death instigated a rash of revolts among peasants and extremist sectarians saturated with messianic syncretism. Five uprisings flared between 755 and 780 CE linked to Abu Muslim's memory and seriously tested the Abbasids and Islamic orthodoxy. Such social unrest was not restricted to eastern Khurasan and Transoxiana but also extended to metropolitan Iraq, where the *zandaka* (dualist heretics) and *shuubiya* ("people") were alleged to call for Islam's downfall or belittle its Arab component, respectively. By the time of Harun al-Rashid's accession (786 CE), all Persian provinces were in turmoil.

Several statelets challenged the caliphate in and around the borderlands. Within the hinterlands of Gilan, Tabaristan, Azerbaijan, and Daylam were isolated, independent, princely enclaves practicing heterodox beliefs such as the Bawandids (665–1349) and Musafarids (ca. 916–ca. 1090). Only with the arrival of Zaydi Shia preaching was Islam established around the Caspian littoral in the ninth and tenth centuries CE. The Buyids (932–1062) were Twelver

Shia and one of the most powerful dynasties of the Iranian *intermezzo* (821–1055). They conspicuously imitated Sassanian court etiquette including addressing themselves as *shahanshah* (king of kings). Three minor Iranian dynasts—the Tahirids of Khurasan (821–873), the Samanids of Transoxiana (819–1005), and the Saffarids of Sistan (867–ca. 1003)—mark the Iranian resurgence and drift from caliphal authority. While the Saffarids were the first indigenous Persian rulers, it was the Samanids who ushered the New Persian renaissance in Bukhara to rival Baghdad as Islam's cultural capital. But Arabic poets and scholars were at home in its court, as was Ferdowsi whose lyrical verses crystallized the national legend, *Shahnameh* (*Book of Kings*), in 1009–1010. As Greek civilization was to Christianity, Persian became the cultural vehicle that internationalized Islam from Bosnia to Bengal during the next 18 centuries.

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