8.9: The Umayyad Caliphate

In 661, 'Ali suffered the same fate as his predecessor when a Khariji stabbed him to death. And, just like with 'Uthman, the murder of 'Ali took place during prayers. 'Ali’s death represented a deep loss for his followers, who saw him as an advocate of an egalitarian version of Islam and a believer in a just and righteous government. His martyrdom came to be regarded as a sacrifice in the service of God and prompted his supporters to pattern themselves after their champion, who, they insisted, had developed spiritual gifts that remained virtually unattainable for others.

The 'Alids encouraged 'Ali’s oldest son, Hasan, to succeed his father; however, Mu'awiya threatened the Prophet's grandson with continued warfare and convinced him to renounce his claim to the caliphate. Mu'awiya promised Hasan that he would not appoint an heir so that election of future caliphs would return to the majlis. Handsomely compensated by Mu'awiya, Hassan subsequently retired to Mecca and took up religion. He remained there until his death in 669. With this major obstacle removed, Mu'awiya became the fifth caliph, ending the period of the four rightly guided caliphs, also known as the Rashidun Caliphate.
Mu'awiya (661 – 680) founded the Umayyad Caliphate; the tribal ‘asabiyah of his Umayyad Clan contributed to their ascendance. And once ensconced in power, the Umayyad Caliphate ended the election of caliphs by consensus and established instead a hereditary principle of succession. Mu'awiya established the caliphate to Damascus, where he previously served as 'Uthman’s governor. In Syria, Mu'awiya reformed the bureaucracy by eventually centralizing it. Unable to rely on the Arab tribal system or peninsula traditions to administer to an ever expanding empire, he depended on related Greek merchant families for administrators and adopted the existing administrative machinery of Byzantines, including their imperial customs and bureaucratic practices.

Mu'awiya had received much recognition for his unflinching determination to seek retribution for 'Uthman’s death; however, he had squandered much of that good will in harassing 'Ali. As anti-Umayyad sentiment increased, the rift that existed between the Sunnis and Shi’a continued to expand, for recalcitrant ‘Alids continued to harbor resentment against the Umayyads. They remembered when the ruling aristocracy of Mecca had opposed Muhammad and the Muslim community. In fact, Mu'awiya himself had fought against Muhammad until the Treaty of Hudaybiyyah, only to reverse course, convert to Islam, and become the Prophet’s secretary.

Unlike the two caliphs who preceded him, Mu’awiya died peacefully in bed. Prior to his death, he designated his son Yazid (680 – 683) as his successor, thus violating his agreement with Hasan. Most notable for his well-deserved reputation as a fierce fighter, Yazid was also known for generally dissolute behavior that offended the religious sensibilities of many pious Muslims. Once ensconced as caliph, Yazid failed to secure an oath of allegiance from Husayn, brother of Hasan, one of the most important of Muslim leaders. Their rivalry escalated into a full-scale civil war.
A direct descendant of the Prophet Muhammad and the younger son of the Caliph ‘Ali, Husayn rejected the deal that his brother had negotiated, instead pursuing his own claim to the rightful leadership of the Islamic community. His ‘Alid supporters loathed the Umayyads and believed that the caliph must be closely related to the Prophet. Husayn’s refusal to recognize Yazid as the next caliph and their subsequent conflict culminated in 680 at the Battle of Karbala, located to the west of present day Baghdad. Yazid dispatched a military detachment to Iraq and overwhelmed Husayn’s small band of armed followers so that many of Husayn’s own men deserted him in his hour of need. The Shi'a perceived this seminal event as a turning point in their history.

Much like the loss of ‘Ali, the death of Husayn shocked the incipient Shi'a community, many of whom suffered from intense guilt for failing to assist his little band. Increasing numbers of Shi'a became profoundly affected by his martyrdom, interpreting it as a sacrifice in the best interests of their community; over time, a passion narrative developed that commemorated his last hours. Through this commemoration of the Battle of Karbala on Ashura, the tenth day of the month of Muharram, they remember the terrible suffering and his untimely death and strive to experience an existential intimacy with their martyr.
Yazid had inherited an empire punctuated by civil war and rebellion. Another principle figure among those in revolt was ibn Zubayr, grandson of Caliph Abu Bakr. Following the death of Mu'awiyah, Ibn Zubayr had sworn allegiance to Husayn. He remained in Mecca, where he stood in opposition to the Umayyads. The general unpopularity of the Umayyads advanced his cause, and many Muslims considered him the rightful caliph. Indeed, much of his support came from Muslims who rejected the idea of hereditary succession and sought a return to the election of caliphs by consensus.

Yazid invaded the Hijaz in order to put an end to ibn Zubayr’s rebellion, but the caliph’s abrupt death in 683 halted the campaign. Marwan (684 – 685) followed his cousin Yazid but was not universally recognized as caliph, for many considered ibn Zubayr the legitimate successor. To garner support, Marwan exploited latent tribal animosities that existed between his Kalb Tribe, also known as the Yemen, and the Qays Tribe, who supported ibn Zubayr. At the Battle of Marj Rahit in 684, Marwan’s Kalb forces defeated the Qays, allowing him to consolidate Umayyad control over Syria and Egypt, thus shrinking ibn Zubayr’s rule down to Iraq and the Hijaz. Not until 691 did Abdul Malik (685 – 705), heir to Marwan, recover Iraq from ibn Zubayr. In the process, he also had to pacify Khariji and Shi’a areas. Abdul Malik then dispatched General Hajjaj to the Hijaz. A brutal military leader, Hajjaj laid siege to the holy city of Mecca in 692 in order to secure the submission of ibn Zubayr’s men. He then beheaded ibn Zubayr and crucified his body. Abdul Malik rewarded the brutal general for his loyal service with the governorship of Iraq, where his ruthless reputation persisted.
Once he had assumed the throne, Abdul Malik promoted the Arabization of the caliphate. He rejected the use of Greek, Persian, Coptic, or Aramaic in government, decreeing that all bureaucracy had to be only in Arabic. Non-Arab administrators had to learn Arabic in order to keep their government jobs. Their integration did not lead to the complete Arabization of Umayyad society that Abdul Malik envisioned, however, and the spread of Arabic was not as great as the spread of Islam. Many Muslims continued to speak Berber, Turkish, Kurdish, and Persian. Although a separate process, Arabization only accompanied Islamization.
Abdul Malik also sought to Islamize the caliphate. First, he discontinued the earlier Byzantine coinage and created the first Islamic currency. Then he instituted a tax code based on the principles of Islam. Caliphs levied an additional tax on non-Muslims, known as the *jizya*, as was customary in Islam. Christians and Jews in conquered lands also paid a property tax called *kharaj*. By converting to Islam, one could avoid paying the *jizya* and *kharaj* altogether. Most important for ordinary citizens was the fact that Muslims bore lower tax rates than non-Muslims. As one could imagine, the thrust for conversion became primarily economic. Although the process of Islamization was relatively peaceful and gradual, Islam did become the dominant religion of the region. And the parallel processes of Arabization and Islamization helped to reestablish centralized rule after the second civil war.

Not all of Abdul Malik’s reforms adhered to the egalitarian principles set forth in Islam. Arab tribal elites did not want to recognize the *mawali*, non-Arab Muslims, as social equals, so did not afford them the same rights as Arab Muslims. However, the emerging power and influence of the *mawali* was apparent. They had become the intellectual elite of society and were the bureaucrats and commercial leaders of the *umma*. Nevertheless, they faced social discrimination. For example, Umayyad caliphs taxed the *mawali* as if they were non-Muslims. This inequitable practice became a social problem for the Umayyads, for it stood in stark relief against the values of justice and equality that had originally compelled them to convert.

An extremely devout and pious man, the Caliph ‘Umar II (r. 717 – 720) upended the Umayyad moral order. He considered it immoral to show prejudice against the *mawali* and to favor the Arabs, so he attempted to resolve the
lingering hostilities of the *mawali* by advocating the equality of all Muslims. ‘Umar II declared an end to the practice of taxing the *mawali* like the Christians and Jews. His advisors warned him against this change because it precipitated numerous conversions of non-Muslims, so he decreased military expenditures to compensate for an expected drop in revenue. His reforms might have ended the official discrimination against the *mawali*, but they alienated the Umayyad privileged class, who paid a servant to poison ‘Umar II to death in 720.