

The Rightly Guided Caliphs: Umar ibn Al-Khattab (part 2 of 2)

Description: A short biography of Prophet Muhammad's companion, friend and the second Rightly Guided Caliph of Islam.

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Objective:

- To learn about the life of Umar ibn Al-Khattab and understand his importance in the history of Islam.

Arabic Terms:

- *Qadi* - a Muslim judge who renders legal decisions according to the *Shariah*.
- *Shariah* - Islamic Law.
- *Shura* - the principle of consultation, in particular as applied to government.
- *Khalifah* (plural: *Khulafa'*) " Caliph. Sometimes spelled Khalif. He is the chief Muslim religious and civil ruler, regarded as the successor of Prophet Muhammad. A Caliph is not a monarch.
- *Ummah* - Refers to the whole Muslim community, irrespective of color, race, language or nationality
- *Diwan* - In Islamic societies this is a central finance department, chief administrative office, or regional governing body.
- *Hijrah* - the act of migration from one place to another. In Islam, the *Hijrah* refers to the Muslims migrating from Mecca to Medina and also marks the beginning of the Islamic calendar.
- *Sunnah* - The word *Sunnah* has several meanings depending on the area of study however the meaning is generally accepted to be, whatever was reported that the Prophet said, did, or approved.
- *Hadith* - (plural " *ahadith*) is a piece of information or a story. In Islam it is a narrative record of the sayings and actions of Prophet Muhammad and his companions.

It was Abu Bakr who chose Umar to be the second *khalifah* (caliph) of Islam. On his death bed Abu Bakr gathered his friends and advisors together and asked them to choose his successor from among themselves, however they were unable to do so and went back to Abu Bakr and insisted that he make that decision himself. He chose Umar Ibn Al-Khattab. Umar took on the leadership of the *Ummah* in 634 CE at the death of Abu Bakr.



Umar himself was aware of his reputation for toughness and his first act was to address the people and outline his expectations particularly his expectations for himself. His speech leaves us in no doubt that Umar did not seek accolades, nor was he searching for greatness. He did however want to uphold the legacy of Prophet Muhammad. He began by saying, "O people, know that I have been appointed to govern your affairs, so recognise that my toughness is now weakened, but I will continue to be tough and harsh on the people of oppression and transgression..." It was during Umar's caliphate that Islamically ideal religious and political infrastructure was formed and consolidated. He gave meaning to and demonstrated these words from the Quran:

oeO you who believe, stand out firmly for justice as witnesses to Allah..." (Quran 4:135)

Umar ibn Al-Khattab's reign saw the small Islamic nation based at Medina turn into a world power. Military strongholds were formed and they later transformed into some of the great cities of the Islamic Caliphate such as Basra, Damascus, Kufa and Fustat the city now known as Cairo. Umar divided this widespread Caliphate into provinces and he appointed governors whose responsibilities and authority were clearly defined. Any corrupt administrators were severely punished. The executive and the judiciary were separated and *qadis* were appointed to administer justice according to Islamic principles.

Caliph Umar insisted that his appointed governors live simple lives and be accessible to the people at all times, and he set this example himself. He could often be found amongst the people or in the mosque where his clothing and demeanour meant he was indistinguishable from the ordinary man. Umar also spent many a watchful night seeking anyone who needed help or assistance. There are a number of *ahadith* that attest to Umar's almost nightly vigils, walking the streets of Medina. There were poor people and hungry travellers whom Umar cooked for and babies born with the help of Umar ibn Al-Khattab's wife. Umar was able to discover what the common people thought and could make or change rules accordingly. For instance, the children's stipend usually paid at weaning was changed to being paid at birth thus encouraging mothers not to hasten the time of weaning.

One particular story is of the milk maid encouraged by her mother to adulterate the milk in order to make more money. Umar ibn Al-Khattab heard the conversation where the milk maid defied her mother and said that although they may trick the Caliph and the people, they could never hide the deception from Allah. Umar encouraged his son to

marry this girl because of her Islamic values and principles. At one time a woman brought a claim against the Caliph himself. When Umar ibn Al-Khattab appeared before the *qadi*, the *qadi* stood up as a sign of respect towards the Caliph. Umar reprimanded him, saying, "This is the first act of injustice you did to this woman!"

Throughout this significant expansion of the *Ummah* Umar ibn Al-Khattab closely controlled general policy and laid down the principles for administering the conquered lands. The structure of Islamic legal practice is due to him. Umar was an outstanding administrator. He established a *Shura* council where he sought and took advice on matters of state, important decisions were made only after thorough debate.

Umar established the institution known as the *Diwan* by which annual stipends from the public treasury were paid to all members of the *Ummah*. Fully accountable finance, accounting, taxation and treasury departments were organized. Police, prisons and postal units were established and soldiers in the vast Muslim armies were paid. Teachers were also paid as education was encouraged. The study of Islamic sciences, language, literature, writing and calligraphy all received patronage and over 4,000 mosques were built. The standardisation of the text of the Quran was completed during Umar's caliphate.

Umar ibn Al-Khattab was eager to advance the Muslim *Ummah* by utilising technology and construction techniques known in the lands they conquered. The building of windmills such as were used in Persia was encouraged throughout the Caliphate. Old bridges and roads were repaired and new ones built. It is said that a traveller could move with ease from Egypt to Khorasan in central Asia. The vast territories of West Asia and North Africa were linked together into a free trade zone. A population census was taken and Umar established the Islamic calendar beginning at the *Hijrah* of Prophet Muhammad.

Sadly and ironically, Umar, a man that stood for justice for all was assassinated because of a verdict he had given in a civil case. One of the Companions, Mugheera bin Sho'ba, rented a house to a Persian carpenter named Abu Lulu for two dirhams a day, a sum Abu Lulu felt was too high. He complained to the Caliph Umar ibn Al-Khattab who gathered all the facts, and determined the rent was fair. This minor incident precipitated the end of Umar's 10 year reign as the 2nd Caliph of the *Ummah*. Abu Lulu vowed to take the life of the Caliph. The next morning, Umar went to the mosque and as he was leading the prayer, reciting the Quran, Abu Lulu thrust his double-edged sword into the Caliph's stomach. The internal bleeding could not be stopped and Umar ibn Al-Khattab the leader of the faithful passed away the following day. The year was 644 CE.

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