

# God's Battalions

The Case for the Crusades

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**O**N NOVEMBER 27, 1095, Pope Urban II mounted a platform set up in a meadow outside the French city of Clermont, surrounded in all directions by an immense crowd. A vigorous man of fifty-three, Urban was blessed with an unusually powerful and expressive voice that made it possible for him to be heard at a great distance. On this memorable occasion, addressing a multitude that included poor peasants as well as nobility and clergy, the pope gave a speech that changed history.

Urban had arranged the gathering in response to a letter from Alexius Comnenus, emperor of Byzantium, who had written from his embattled capital of Constantinople to the Count of Flanders requesting that he and his fellow Christians send forces to help the Byzantines repel the Seljuk Turks, recent converts to Islam who had invaded the Middle East, captured Jerusalem, and driven to within one hundred miles of Constantinople. In his letter, the emperor detailed gruesome tortures of Christian pilgrims to the Holy Land and vile desecrations of churches, altars, and baptismal fonts. Should Constantinople fall to the Turks, not only would thousands more Christians be murdered, tortured, and raped, but also “the most holy relics of the Saviour,” gathered over the centuries, would be lost. “Therefore in the name of God...we implore you to bring this city all the faithful soldiers of Christ...[I]n your coming you will find your reward in heaven, and if you do not come, God will condemn you.”<sup>1</sup>

There were many reasons that Europeans might have ignored any plea for help from Byzantium. For one thing, their cultural heritage as well as their Christianity was Roman, while the Byzantines were Greeks, whose lifestyle seemed decadent to

Europeans and whose “Orthodox” Christianity held Latin Catholicism in contempt—often persecuting its priests and practitioners. Nevertheless, when Pope Urban II read this letter he was determined that it be answered by worthy deeds, and he arranged for a church council at Clermont, which he followed with his famous speech.<sup>2</sup>

Speaking in French, the pope began by graphically detailing the torture, rape, and murder of Christian pilgrims and the defilement of churches and holy places committed by the Turks (he called them Persians) : “They destroy the altars, after having defiled them with their uncleanness. They circumcise the Christians, and the blood of the circumcision they either pour on the altars or pour into the vases of the baptismal font. When they wish to torture people by a base death, they perforate their navels, and dragging forth the extremity of the intestines, bind it to a stake; then with flogging they lead the victim around until the viscera having gushed forth the victim falls prostrate on the ground...What shall I say about the abominable rape of women? To speak of it is worse than to be silent. On whom therefore is the labor of avenging these wrongs and recovering this territory incumbent, if not upon you?”<sup>3</sup>

At this point Pope Urban raised a second issue to which he and his illustrious predecessor Gregory VII had devoted years of effort—the chronic warfare of medieval times. The popes had been attempting to achieve a “truce of God” among the feudal nobility, many of whom seemed inclined to make war, even on their friends, just for the sake of a good fight. After all, it was what they had trained to do every day since early childhood. Here was their chance! “Christian warriors, who continually and vainly seek pretexts for war, rejoice, for you have today found a true pretext...If you are conquered, you will have the glory of dying in the very same place as Jesus Christ, and God will never forget that he found you in the holy battalions...Soldiers of Hell, become soldiers of the living God!”<sup>4</sup>

Now, shouts of “*Dieu li volt!*” (God wills it!) began to spread

through the crowd, and men began to cut up cloaks and other pieces of cloth to make crosses and sew them against their chests. Everyone agreed that the next year they would set out for the Holy Land. And they did.

That is the traditional explanation of how and why the First Crusade began. But in recent times a far more cynical and sinister explanation of the Crusades has gained popularity. Thus, in the immediate aftermath of the destruction of the World Trade Center by Muslim terrorists, frequent mention was made of the Crusades as a basis for Islamic fury. It was argued that Muslim bitterness over their mistreatment by the Christian West can be dated back to the First Crusade. Far from being motivated by piety or by concern for the safety of pilgrims and the holy places in Jerusalem, the Crusades were but the first extremely bloody chapter in a long history of brutal European colonialism.<sup>5</sup>

More specifically, it is charged that the crusaders marched east not out of idealism, but in pursuit of lands and loot; that the Crusades were promoted by power-mad popes seeking to greatly expand Christianity through conversion of the Muslim masses;<sup>6</sup> and that the knights of Europe were barbarians who brutalized everyone in their path, leaving “the enlightened Muslim culture...in ruins.”<sup>7</sup> As Akbar Ahmed, chair of Islamic studies at American University in Washington, D.C., has suggested, “the Crusades created a historical memory which is with us today—the memory of a long European onslaught.”<sup>8</sup>

Two months after the attack of September 11, 2001, on New York City, former president Bill Clinton informed an audience at Georgetown University that “[t]hose of us who come from various European lineages are not blameless” vis-à-vis the Crusades as a crime against Islam, and then summarized a medieval account about all the blood that was shed when Godfrey of Bouillon and his forces conquered Jerusalem in 1099.

That the Crusades were a terrible crime in great need of atonement was a popular theme even before the Islamic terrorists crashed their hijacked airliners. In 1999, the *New York Times* had solemnly proposed that the Crusades were comparable to Hitler's atrocities or to the ethnic cleansing in Kosovo.<sup>9</sup> That same year, to mark the nine hundredth anniversary of the crusader conquest of Jerusalem, hundreds of devout Protestants took part in a "reconciliation walk" that began in Germany and ended in the Holy Land. Along the way the walkers wore T-shirts bearing the message "I apologize" in Arabic. Their official statement explained the need for a Christian apology:

*Nine hundred years ago, our forefathers carried the name of Jesus Christ in battle across the Middle East. Fueled by fear, greed, and hatred...the Crusaders lifted the banner of the Cross above your people...On the anniversary of the First Crusade...we wish to retrace the footsteps of the Crusaders in apology for their deeds...We deeply regret the atrocities committed in the name of Christ by our predecessors. We renounce greed, hatred and fear, and condemn all violence done in the name of Jesus Christ.*<sup>10</sup>

Also in 1999, Karen Armstrong, a former nun and a popular writer on religious themes, proposed that "crusading answered a deep need in the Christians of Europe. Yet today most of us would unhesitatingly condemn the Crusades as unchristian. After all, Jesus told his followers to love their enemies, not to exterminate them. He was a pacifist and had more in common with Gandhi, perhaps, than with Pope Urban." Armstrong went on to propose that, in fact, "holy war is a deeply Christian act," since Christianity has "an inherent leaning toward violence, despite the pacifism of Jesus."<sup>11</sup> And a

prominent former priest, James Carroll, agreed, charging that the Crusades left a “trail of violence [that] scars the earth and human memory even to this day.”<sup>12</sup>

These are not new charges. Western condemnations of the Crusades were widespread during the “Enlightenment,” that utterly misnamed era during which French and British intellectuals invented the “Dark Ages” in order to glorify themselves and vilify the Catholic Church (see chapter 3). Hence, Voltaire (1694–1778) called the Crusades an “epidemic of fury which lasted for two hundred years and which was always marked by every cruelty, every perfidy, every debauchery, and every folly of which human nature is capable.”<sup>13</sup> According to David Hume (1711–1776), the Crusades were “the most signal and most durable monument to human folly that has yet appeared in any age or nation.”<sup>14</sup> Denis Diderot (1713–1784) characterized the Crusades as “a time of the deepest darkness and of the greatest folly...to drag a significant part of the world into an unhappy little country in order to cut the inhabitants’ throats and seize a rocky peak which was not worth one drop of blood.”<sup>15</sup> These attacks also reinforced the widespread “Protestant conviction that crusading was yet another expression of Catholic bigotry and cruelty.”<sup>16</sup> Thus the English historian Thomas Fuller (1608–1661) claimed that the Crusades were all the pope’s doing and that this “war would be the sewer of Christendom” in that it attempted to deprive the Muslims of their lawful possession of Palestine.<sup>17</sup>

However, the notion that the crusaders were early Western imperialists who used a religious excuse to seek land and loot probably was originated by the German Lutheran church historian Johann Lorenz von Mosheim (1693–1755), who wrote: “The Roman pontiffs and the European princes were engaged at first in these crusades by a principle of superstition only, but when in the process of time they learnt by experience that these holy wars contributed much to increase their opulence and to extend their authority...[then]

ambition and avarice seconded and enforced the dictates of fanaticism and superstition.”<sup>18</sup> Mosheim’s views were echoed by Edward Gibbon (1737–1794), who claimed that the crusaders really went in pursuit of “mines of treasures, of gold and diamonds, of palaces of marble and jasper, and of odoriferous groves of cinnamon and frankincense.”<sup>19</sup>

During the twentieth century, this self-interest thesis was developed into an elaborate “materialist” account of why the Crusades took place.<sup>20</sup> The prolific Geoffrey Barraclough (1908–1984) wrote: “[O]ur verdict on the Crusades [is that it amounted to] colonial exploitation.”<sup>21</sup> Or, as Karen Armstrong confided, these “were our first colonies.”<sup>22</sup> A more extensive and sophisticated material explanation of why the knights went east was formulated by Hans Eberhard Mayer, who proposed that the Crusades alleviated a severe financial squeeze on Europe’s “knightly class.” According to Mayer and others who share his views, at this time there was a substantial and rapidly growing number of “surplus” sons, members of noble families who would not inherit and whom the heirs found it increasingly difficult to provide with even modest incomes. Hence, as Mayer put it, “the Crusade acted as a kind of safety valve for the knightly class...a class which looked upon the Crusade as a way of solving its material problems.”<sup>23</sup> Indeed, a group of American economists recently proposed that the crusaders hoped to get rich from the flow of pilgrims (comparing the shrines in Jerusalem with modern amusement parks) and that the pope sent the crusaders east in pursuit of “new markets” for the church, presumably to be gained by converting people away from Islam.<sup>24</sup> It is thus no surprise that a leading college textbook on Western civilization informs students: “From the perspective of the pope and European monarchs, the crusades offered a way to rid Europe of contentious young nobles...[who] saw an opportunity to gain territory, riches,



status, possibly a title, and even salvation.”<sup>25</sup>

To sum up the prevailing wisdom: *during the Crusades, an expansionist, imperialistic Christendom brutalized, looted, and colonized a tolerant and peaceful Islam.*

Not so. As will be seen, the Crusades were precipitated by Islamic provocations: by centuries of bloody attempts to colonize the West and by sudden new attacks on Christian pilgrims and holy places. Although the Crusades were initiated by a plea from the pope, this had nothing to do with hopes of converting Islam. Nor were the Crusades organized and led by surplus sons, but by the heads of great families who were fully aware that the costs of crusading would far exceed the very modest material rewards that could be expected; most went at immense personal cost, some of them knowingly bankrupting themselves to go. Moreover, the crusader kingdoms that they established in the Holy Land, and that stood for nearly two centuries, were not colonies sustained by local exactions; rather, they required immense subsidies from Europe.

In addition, it is utterly unreasonable to impose modern notions about proper military conduct on medieval warfare; both Christians and Muslims observed quite different rules of war. Unfortunately, even many of the most sympathetic and otherwise sensible historians of the Crusades are unable to accept that fact and are given to agonizing over the very idea that war can ever be “just,” revealing the pacifism that has become so widespread among academics. Finally, claims that Muslims have been harboring bitter resentments about the Crusades for a millennium are nonsense: Muslim antagonism about the Crusades did not appear until about 1900, in reaction against the decline of the Ottoman Empire and the onset of actual European colonialism in the Middle East. And anti-crusader feelings did not become intense until after the founding of the state of Israel. These are principal themes of the chapters that follow.

Historians disagree about which events were Crusades and therefore about when they occurred.<sup>26</sup> I exclude the “crusades” against heretics in Europe and accept the conventional definition: that the Crusades involved conflicts between Christendom and Islam for control of the Holy Land, campaigns that occurred between 1095 and 1291. However, unlike most conventional Crusade historians, I shall not begin with the pope’s appeal at Clermont, but with the rise of Islam and the onset of the Muslim invasions of Christendom. That’s when it all started—in the seventh century, when Islamic armies swept over the larger portion of what was then Christian territory: the Middle East, Egypt and all of North Africa, and then Spain and southern Italy, as well as many major Mediterranean islands including Sicily, Corsica, Cyprus, Rhodes, Crete, Malta, and Sardinia. It also is important to examine the Christian counterattacks that began in the eighth century and soon “liberated” many of the occupied areas, for these were previews of the military confrontations that eventually took place in the Holy Land. Nor shall I merely recount the crusader battles, for they are comprehensible only in light of the superior culture and technology that made it possible for European knights to march more than twenty-five hundred miles, to suffer great losses along the way, and then to rout far larger Muslim forces.

Many superb historians have devoted their careers to studying aspects of the Crusades.<sup>27</sup> I am not one of them. What I have done is synthesize the work of these specialists into a more comprehensive perspective, written in prose that is accessible to the general reader. However, I have been careful to fully acknowledge the contributions of the many experts on whom I have depended, some in the text and the rest in the endnotes.

## MUSLIM INVADERS



**The history of the Crusades really began in the seventh century when armies of Arabs, newly converted to Islam, seized huge areas that had been Christian.**

**© Werner Forman / Art Resource, NY**

**I**N WHAT CAME TO BE KNOWN as his farewell address, Muhammad is said to have told his followers: "I was ordered to fight all men until they say 'There is no god but Allah.'"<sup>1</sup> This is entirely consistent with the Qur'an (9:5) : "[S]lay the idolaters wherever ye find them, and take them [captive], and besiege them, and prepare for them each ambush." In this spirit, Muhammad's heirs set out to conquer the world.

In 570, when Muhammad was born, Christendom stretched from the Middle East all along North Africa, and embraced much of Europe (see map 1.1). But only eighty years after Muhammad's death in 632, a new Muslim empire had displaced Christians from most of the Middle East, all of North Africa, Cyprus, and most of Spain (see map 1.2).

In another century Sicily, Sardinia, Corsica, Crete, and southern Italy also came under Muslim rule. How was this accomplished? How were the conquered societies ruled? What happened to the millions of Christians and Jews?

## **THE CONQUESTS**

Before he died, Muhammad had gathered a military force sufficient for him to contemplate expansion beyond Arabia. Foreign incursions had become increasingly attractive because Muhammad's uniting the desert Bedouin tribes into an Arab state eliminated their long tradition of imposing protection payments on the Arab towns and villages as well as ending their freedom to rob caravans. So, attention turned to the north and east, where "rich spoils were to be won, and warriors could find glory and profit without risk to the peace

and internal security of Arabia.”<sup>2</sup> Raids by Muhammad’s forces into Byzantine Syria and Persia began during the last several years of the Prophet’s life, and serious efforts ensued soon after his death.

In typical fashion, many historians have urged entirely material, secular explanations for the early Muslim conquests. Thus, the prominent Carl Heinrich Becker (1876–1933) explained that the “bursting of the Arabs beyond their native peninsula was...[entirely] due to economic necessities.”<sup>3</sup> Specifically, it is said that a population explosion in Arabia and a sudden decline in caravan trade were the principal forces that drove the Arabs to suddenly begin a series of invasions and conquests at this time. But the population explosion never happened; it was invented by authors who assumed that it would have taken barbarian “Arab hordes”<sup>4</sup> to overwhelm the civilized Byzantines and Persians. The truth is quite the contrary. As will be seen, the Muslim invasions were accomplished by remarkably small, very well led and well organized Arab armies. As for the caravan trade, if anything it increased in the early days of the Arab state, probably because the caravans were now far more secure.



MAP 1.1



MAP 1.2

A fundamental reason that the Arabs attacked their neighbors at this particular time was that they finally had the power to do so. For one thing, both Byzantium and Persia were exhausted by many

decades of fighting one another, during which each side had suffered many bloody defeats. Equally important is that, having become a unified state rather than a collection of uncooperative tribes, the Arabs now had the ability to sustain military campaigns rather than the hit-and-run raids they had conducted for centuries. As for more specific motivations, Muhammad had seen expansion as a means to sustain Arab unity by providing new opportunities, in the form of booty and tributes, for the desert tribes. But most important of all, the Arab invasions were planned and led by those committed to the spread of Islam. As Hugh Kennedy summed up, Muslims “fought for their religion, the prospect of booty and because their friends and fellow tribesmen were doing it.”<sup>5</sup>

All attempts to reconstruct the Muslim invasions are limited by the unreliability of the sources. As the authoritative Fred Donner explained, early Muslim chroniclers “assembled fragmentary accounts in different ways, resulting in several contradictory sequential schemes,” and it is impossible to determine which, if any, is more accurate.<sup>6</sup> Furthermore, both Christian and Muslim chronicles often make absurdly exaggerated claims about the size of armies—often inflating the numbers involved by a factor of ten or more. Fortunately, generations of resourceful scholars have provided more plausible statistics and an adequate overall view of the major campaigns. The following survey of Muslim conquests is, of course, limited to those prior to the First Crusade.

## ***Syria***

The first conquest was Syria, then a province of the Byzantine Empire (Eastern Roman Empire). Syria presented many attractions. Not only was it close; it was the most familiar foreign land. Arab merchants had regularly dealt with Syrian merchants, some of whom came to the regular trade fairs that had been held in Mecca for

generations. Then, too, Syria was a far more fertile region than Arabia and had larger, more impressive cities, including Damascus. Syria also presented a target of opportunity because of its unsettled political situation and the presence of many somewhat disaffected groups. After centuries of Byzantine rule, Syria had fallen to the Persians in about 611, only to be retaken by Byzantium in about 630 (two years before Muhammad's death). During their rule the Persians destroyed the institutional basis of Byzantine rule, and when they were driven out a leadership vacuum developed. Moreover, Arabs had been migrating into Syria for centuries and had long been a primary source of recruits for the Byzantine forces. In addition, some Arab border tribes had long served as mercenaries to guard against their raiding kinsmen from the south. However, when Byzantium regained control of Syria, the emperor Heraclius, burdened with enormous debts, refused to reinstate the subsidies paid to these border tribes—an action that alienated them at this strategic moment.<sup>7</sup> The many Arab residents of Syria had little love for their Roman rulers, either. Hence, when the Islamic Arab invaders came, many Arab defenders switched sides during the fighting. Worse yet, even among the non-Arabs in Syria, “the Byzantine rule was so deeply hated that the Arabs were welcomed as deliverers.”<sup>8</sup> And no one hated and feared the Greeks more than the many large Christian groups such as the Nestorians, who had long been persecuted as heretics by the Orthodox bishops of Byzantium.

The first Muslim forces entered Syria in 633 and took an area in the south without a major encounter with Byzantine forces. A second phase began the next year and met more determined resistance, but the Muslims won a series of battles, taking Damascus and some other cities in 635. This set the stage for the epic Battle of Yarmūk, which took place in August 636 and lasted for six days. The two sides seem to have possessed about equal numbers, which favored the Muslim forces since they were drawn up in a defensive position,



forcing the Greeks to attack. Eventually the Byzantine heavy cavalry did manage to breach the Arab front line, but they were unable to exploit their advantage because the Muslims withdrew behind barriers composed of hobbled camels. When the Byzantines attacked this new line of defense they left their flanks exposed to a lethal attack by Muslim cavalry. At this point, instead of holding fast, the Greek infantry mutinied and then panicked and fled toward a ravine, whereupon thousands fell to their deaths below. Shortly thereafter, the shattered Byzantine army abandoned Syria.<sup>9</sup> Soon the Muslim caliph established Damascus as the capital of the growing Islamic empire (the word *caliph* means “successor,” and the title *caliph* meant “successor to Muhammad”).

## ***Persia***

Meanwhile, other Arab forces had moved against the Persian area of Mesopotamia, known today as Iraq. The problem of unreliable Arab troops also beset the Persians just as it had the Byzantines: in several key battles whole units of Persian cavalry, which consisted exclusively of Arab mercenaries, joined the Muslim side, leading to an overwhelming defeat of the Persians in the Battle of al-Qādisyah in 636.

The Persians had assembled an army of perhaps thirty thousand, including a number of war elephants. The Muslim force was smaller and not as well armed but had a distinct positional advantage: a branch of the Euphrates River across their front, a swamp on their right, and a lake on their left. Behind them was the desert. The fighting on the first day was quite exploratory, although a probing advance by the war elephants was repulsed by Arab archers. The second day was more of the same. But on the third day the Persians mounted an all-out offensive behind their elephant combat teams. Again they were met with a shower of arrows, and the two leading

elephants were wounded. As a result, they stampeded back through the other elephants, which followed suit, and the whole herd stomped their way back through the Persian ranks. As chaos broke out, the Arab cavalry charged and the battle was won—with immense Persian losses.<sup>10</sup>

Subsequently, after a brief siege the Muslim forces took the capital city of Ctesiphon. Thus was the area that today constitutes Iraq conquered by the Muslims, reducing Persia to what now is known as Iran. Soon it, too, was conquered by Muslim invaders, but not without fierce resistance, and Persians continued to erupt in rebellion against Muslim rule for the next century. Once Persia was sufficiently pacified, Caliph al-Mansūr moved the capital of the Muslim empire from Damascus to a new city he built on the Tigris River in Iraq. Its official name was Madina al-Salam (“City of Peace”), but everyone called it Baghdad (“Gift of God”).

Having conquered Persia, Muslim forces ventured north to conquer Armenia and also moved east, eventually occupying the Indus Valley (modern Pakistan). From this base, over many centuries the Muslims eventually expanded far into India.

### ***The Holy Land***

Palestine was part of Byzantine Syria, and the crushing defeat of Greek forces at the Battle of Yarmūk left the Holy Land protected only by local forces. At this time, even though Palestine was administered by Greek Christians, the population was mostly Jewish. Apparently, the Muslim victories over the Byzantines had been interpreted by many Jews as signs that the Messiah was about to appear, and this may account for the reports that Jews welcomed invading Muslim forces.<sup>11</sup> Muslim units entered Palestine in 636, and after a long siege, Jerusalem surrendered in 638 to the caliph ‘Umar, who rode into the city on a splendid horse, leading a camel.

'Umar allowed Byzantine Christians to continue to live in Jerusalem but prohibited all Jews from doing so,<sup>12</sup> continuing the policy Byzantine governors had imposed for centuries.<sup>13</sup> However, several years later the prohibition against Jews was lifted.

## ***Egypt***

Egypt was also a Byzantine province; hence its security was undermined by the defeats suffered by Greek forces to the northeast. In 639 Caliph 'Umar sent a small invasion force of about four thousand men to the Nile Delta area. In response, the Byzantine defensive forces withdrew into the walled towns, where they were quite secure against the small force of invaders. So, in 640 another twelve thousand Muslim troops arrived, and the two groups established themselves at Heliopolis. Having failed to attack either Muslim body when they were still separated, a Byzantine force now decided to march out and give battle. During the night the Arab commander managed to hide two detachments, one on each flank of the battlefield. After the main Arab force engaged the Greeks, these flanking units emerged from ambush, whereupon the Byzantine lines broke and "great numbers were cut down and slaughtered by the exultant Muslims."<sup>14</sup>

Next, in an effort to lure other Byzantine garrisons into coming out to engage in battle, the Muslims stormed the undefended city of Nikiou and massacred the inhabitants, and then did the same to a number of the surrounding villages.<sup>15</sup> At this point, most of the remaining Byzantine garrisons withdrew "in good order into the defences of Alexandria."<sup>16</sup> The Arabs followed and made an ill-advised assault against the walls, suffering a very bloody defeat. Withdrawing out of range of arrows and of catapult shots from the defensive walls, the Arabs set up camp.

What followed ought to have been a hopeless siege, since

Alexandria was a port and the Byzantine navy, which then had complete control of the seas, could easily supply and reinforce the city for as long as necessary. Being the second largest city in the whole Christian world,<sup>17</sup> Alexandria “was surrounded by massive walls and towers, against which such missiles as the Arabs possessed were utterly ineffectual. . . Such a city could have held out for years.”<sup>18</sup> But, for reasons that will never be known, in 641, a month after he had arrived by sea to become the new governor of Egypt, Cyrus went out to meet the Muslim commander and surrendered Alexandria and all of Egypt.

But this wasn't the end. Four years later a Byzantine fleet of about three hundred vessels suddenly arrived in the harbor at Alexandria and disembarked a substantial army that quickly dispatched the Muslim garrison of about one thousand. Once again the Greeks had an impregnable position behind the great walls of the city, but their arrogant and foolish commander led his forces out to meet the Arabs and was routed. Even so, enough Byzantine troops made it back to Alexandria to adequately man the fortifications, and once again they were secure against attack—but for the treachery of an officer who opened a gate to the Arabs. Some reports say he was bribed; others claim he was a Coptic Christian who was getting even with the Greeks for having persecuted people of his faith. In any event, having burst into the city, the Muslims engaged in “massacre, plunder, and arson. . . [until] half the city was destroyed.”<sup>19</sup> They also tore down the city walls to prevent any repetition of the problem.

The need to take Alexandria twice made the Muslims fully aware of the need to offset Byzantine sea power. Turning to the still-functioning Egyptian shipyards, they commissioned the construction of a fleet and then hired Coptic and Greek mercenaries to do the navigation and sailing. In 649 this new fleet was adequate to sustain an invasion of Cypress; Sicily and Rhodes were pillaged soon after. A major Muslim empire now ruled most of the Middle East and was

free to continue spreading along the North African coast.

But at this moment the Muslim conquests halted because a brutal civil war broke out within Islam and lasted for years. At issue were conflicting claims to be the true successor to Muhammad, which pitted Muhammad's cousin and son-in-law Ali against Muawiyah, cousin of the murdered caliph Uthman. After much bloodshed, Ali was also murdered and Muawiyah became caliph, with the result that Islam was forever divided into the Sunnis and the Shiites (who had backed Ali). It was not until 670 that a Muslim army advanced further along the North African coast.

### ***North Africa***

As Egypt had been, the entire north coast of Africa also was under Byzantine rule. Since all the major cities were ports and well garrisoned, the Arab commander moved west over desert routes, established an inland base, and built a huge mosque in what became the city of Kairouan—now regarded as the third holiest Muslim city (after Mecca and Medina).<sup>20</sup> From this base in the Maghreb (as the Arabs called North Africa), the Muslim force first made war on the desert-dwelling Berbers, many of whom had long ago converted to Judaism.<sup>21</sup> Despite bitter resistance, especially by tribes from the Atlas Mountain area led by a charismatic Jewish woman named Kahina, the Muslims eventually prevailed and then succeeded in enlisting the Berbers as allies.<sup>22</sup> Meanwhile, a new Muslim army of perhaps forty thousand swept over the coastal cities, taking Carthage in 698. But, as had happened with Alexandria, the Greeks managed to land troops in the Carthage harbor and retake the city. In response, the Muslims assembled a fleet and another army, including large numbers of Berbers, and in 705 Carthage was “razed to the ground and most of its inhabitants killed.”<sup>23</sup> Possession of an adequate fleet by the Muslims sealed the fate of

all the remaining Byzantine coastal towns.<sup>24</sup>

## ***Spain***

In 711 an army of seven to ten thousand Muslims from Morocco crossed the Mediterranean at its narrowest western point and landed on the coast of Spain at the foot of a mountain jutting out into the sea. Later this mountain was named after the Muslim commander, the Berber Tariq ibn-Ziyad, as the Rock of Tariq, hence *Jabal Tariq* or Gibraltar.<sup>25</sup> The Muslim landing took everyone in Spain by surprise. King Rodrigo hastily assembled an army and marched south from his capital in Toledo, only to be routed in a battle at the river Guadalete; Rodrigo drowned while fleeing the carnage. This was the first time that Muslim forces engaged Christians who were not Byzantines, but were, in this instance, Visigoths who had conquered Roman Spain in about 500. As usual, contemporary figures as to the numbers involved and the extent of casualties are useless. Gibbon cited them to assign Rodrigo an army of one hundred thousand men and claimed that although the Muslims won, they suffered sixteen thousand killed in action. Rodrigo's force probably numbered fewer than ten thousand. What is certain is that Rodrigo lost and that Tariq sent what he believed to be Rodrigo's head (soaked in brine) to the caliph in Damascus.<sup>26</sup>

Then followed a seven-year campaign that brought the rest of Al-Andalus, as the Muslims called Spain, under their control, except for a small area in the north from which the Christians could never be ousted. Almost nothing is known of this campaign to conquer most of Spain except for the fact that there was no popular resistance to the Muslims because the corrupt and rather brutal Visigoth regime was widely hated by the indigenous population. This same population called the Muslim invaders Moors, or people from Morocco, and the name stuck. Immediately upon having located their capital in the city

of Córdoba, the Moors built a great mosque on the site of a former Christian cathedral. Initially, Al-Andalus was part of the Muslim empire, but in 756 it was established as an independent emirate.

### ***Sicily and Southern Italy***

The first Muslim invasion of Sicily took place in 652 and failed. So did attacks in 667 and 720. Further attempts were delayed by civil wars in North Africa involving the Berbers and Arabs. The Muslims came again in 827 and landed about ten thousand troops. The local Byzantine commanders fought back furiously, and it took more than seventy years for the Muslims to succeed, only after "much fighting and many massacres."<sup>27</sup> Thus, although Palermo fell after a long siege in 831, Syracuse did not fall until 878, and Taormina, the last Byzantine stronghold, held out until 902.

From their initial foothold in Sicily the Muslims crossed into southern Italy, and in 840 Taranto and Bari were taken, Capua was razed, and Benevento was occupied. Rome was pillaged in 843 and again in 846, when all the famous churches were looted and the pope was forced to pay a huge tribute. Withdrawing to the south, the Muslim commanders divided portions of southern Italy into independent emirates.

The occupation of Sicily and southern Italy lasted for more than two centuries.

### ***Major Islands***

Little has been written about the Muslim conquests of major Mediterranean islands; perhaps historians have considered them too insignificant to matter much. However, possession of islands such as Crete and Sardinia were of considerable strategic importance to Muslim fleets. Hence, the fall of Cyprus (653), Rhodes (672), Sardinia (809), Majorca (818), Crete (824), and Malta (835)

were significant losses for the West.

## MUSLIM WARFARE

How did the Arabs triumph so quickly and seemingly so easily? Many historians unfamiliar with military arts have found this inexplicable. They ask: how could a bunch of desert barbarians roll over the large, trained armies of the “civilized” empires?

As noted, many have attributed the Muslim conquests to an immense superiority of numbers, to hordes of Arabs riding out of the desert to overwhelm far smaller Byzantine and Persian forces. But desert tribes are never very large, and, in fact, the conquering Muslim armies usually were substantially smaller than the “civilized” armies they defeated. Consequently, many historians have fallen back on the thesis that the Muslims won because “the Byzantines failed to appreciate the new power that Muslim religious fervor gave to Arab armies.”<sup>28</sup> This suggests onslaughts by wave after wave of fanatics charging the enemy, screaming, “Death to the unbelievers.” Finally, some historians have blamed the Byzantine and Persian losses on their being too civilized in contrast to fearless Islamic savages. Indeed, this explanation even was proposed by the famous Muslim thinker Ibn Khaldūn (1332–1406), who wrote, “It should be known that...savage people are undoubtedly braver than others.”<sup>29</sup>

In truth, Muslim troops were as apt as Byzantines or Persians to break and run when the tide of battle went against them. Their victories are easily comprehended on the basis of ordinary military techniques and technology.

The first thing to recognize is that the more “civilized” empires did not possess any superior military hardware, with the exception of siege engines, which were of no use in repelling attacks. *Everyone* depended on swords, lances, axes, and bows; everyone carried a shield, and those who could afford it wore some armor, albeit the



“civilized” forces wore more.<sup>30</sup> However, by this era there no longer were dedicated and highly disciplined “citizen soldiers” in the imperial forces of either Byzantium or Persia. Instead, these forces were recruited from hither and yon, and mostly drew “foreigners” who served mainly for pay, which placed limits on their loyalty and their mettle. Indeed, as mentioned earlier, many of the rank and file in the Byzantine and Persian forces were Arabs, large numbers of whom ended up deserting to the Muslim side.

Nor were the “professional” armies of Persia and Byzantium better trained. To the contrary, they mainly were “fortress” troops used primarily for static defense of strong points such as walled garrisons or cities, and they were poorly suited to battles of maneuver.<sup>31</sup> Worse yet, a chronic shortage of troops resulted in an inability to maintain a network of garrisons sufficiently dense to prevent an enemy from mounting surprise attacks. Nor did either the Persians or the Byzantines possess sufficient cavalry to make up for this lack of density by scouting enemy routes and strength; indeed, as noted earlier, what cavalry units they had consisted mostly of hired Arabs, who tended to desert at critical moments. Moreover, in contrast to the Persian and Greek soldiers, who came mostly from peasant backgrounds, the desert Arabs devoted themselves to arms from an early age, and when they went into battle, the individual Muslim fighters were part of a close-knit, small unit of men from the same tribe, who fought alongside their relatives and lifelong friends—a situation that placed each individual under extreme social pressure to be brave and aggressive.

Perhaps the most important advantage of the Muslim invaders was that they all traveled by camel; even the cavalry rode from place to place on camels, leading their horses. The use of camels made the Arabs the equivalent of a “mechanized force,” in that they so greatly outpaced the Persian and Byzantine armies traveling on foot.<sup>32</sup> This superior mobility allowed the Arabs to find and attack the

most weakly held places and avoid the main Persian and Byzantine forces until they had them at a great disadvantage. In addition, the “only means of locomotion across the desert was the camel, of which the Arabs held a monopoly. Thus neither the Byzantine nor Persian armies could cross the desert.”<sup>33</sup> Hence, given the geography of the area, the Muslims could always outflank the imperial forces by using desert routes, and, should it be necessary, they could always withdraw into the desert to avoid battle. This ability not only gave the Arabs an immense edge in the Middle East, but was equally significant in the conquest of North Africa. Just as Erwin Rommel, Germany’s “Desert Fox,” frequently sent his tanks looping into the desert and thereby outflanked British forces attempting to prevent him from invading Egypt, so the Arabs used their camels to go around Byzantine forces attempting to defend the coastal settlements.

Contrary to what many would suppose, a very significant Arab advantage lay in the *small* size of their field armies; they seldom gathered more than ten thousand men and often campaigned with armies of two to four thousand.<sup>34</sup> Their successes against the far larger imperial forces were similar to those often enjoyed by small, well-led, aggressive forces in the face of lumbering enemy hosts; consider how often in ancient history tiny Greek armies routed immense Persian forces. Ironically, due to their smaller numbers the Arab invading forces often were able to far outnumber their opponents on a given battlefield because their much greater mobility allowed them to attack an inferior enemy force and destroy it before reinforcements could arrive. The imperial forces either wore themselves out marching in fruitless pursuit of a battle or made themselves vulnerable by spreading out and trying to defend everywhere at once. Nor was this merely a tactical problem facing Byzantine forces in a specific area; it was a more general strategic problem, in that the Byzantine forces were stretched very thin by the

immensity of their empire. As a result, while the Arabs concentrated their forces to attack a specific area such as Syria or Egypt, tens of thousands of Greek troops sat idle, far from the battlefield, serving as garrisons in such places as southern Italy or Armenia.<sup>35</sup>

As should be clear, the Arab forces also were very well led. Not by their tribal leaders, but by officers selected from “the new Islamic ruling elite of settled people from Mecca, Medina or al-Tā’if.”<sup>36</sup> All of the middle to higher ranks were staffed from the elite by men who clearly understood administration, including the chain of command, and who were able to keep the larger strategic goals in mind while embroiled in tactical engagements. Finally, promotion and appointment of officers in the early Muslim armies was based primarily on merit, while the Byzantine and Persian commanders often were unqualified other than by their bloodlines.

## GOVERNANCE

Initially, the conquered societies were considered provinces of the Muslim state and were ruled by governors appointed by the caliph. Eventually, central control broke down, and, as already noted, many provinces became independent Muslim states “whose rulers commonly recognized the Caliph as Imam or chief of Islam but allowed him no power in their dominions.”<sup>37</sup> Hence, when the West began its counterattacks, their opposition was limited to the troops available to a particular ruler; reinforcements usually were not sent from other Muslim states.

In the beginning, the conquering Arabs constituted a small elite who ruled over large populations of non-Muslims, most of whom remained unconverted for centuries, as will be seen. Indeed, the ruling Muslim elites were required by the caliphs to settle in their own garrison cities. “This would enable them to maintain their military control and discourage them from becoming assimilated and losing

their religious and ethnic identity.”<sup>38</sup> This was, of course, a two-way street, and Muslim isolation put a damper on conversion. Thus, relations with the subject people were limited to imposing restrictions on such activities as, for example, building churches or riding horses, and to collecting the substantial taxes always imposed on non-Muslims.

## CONQUERED SUBJECTS

A great deal of nonsense has been written about Muslim tolerance—that, in contrast to Christian brutality against Jews and heretics, Islam showed remarkable tolerance for conquered people, treated them with respect, and allowed them to pursue their faiths without interference. This claim probably began with Voltaire, Gibbon, and other eighteenth-century writers who used it to cast the Catholic Church in the worst possible light. The truth about life under Muslim rule is quite different.

It is true that the Qur’an forbids forced conversions. However, that recedes to an empty legalism given that many subject peoples were “free to choose” conversion as an alternative to death or enslavement. That was the usual choice presented to pagans, and often Jews and Christians also were faced with that option or with one only somewhat less extreme.<sup>39</sup> In principle, as “People of the Book,” Jews and Christians were supposed to be tolerated and permitted to follow their faiths. But only under quite repressive conditions: death was (and remains) the fate of anyone who converted to either faith. Nor could any new churches or synagogues be built. Jews and Christians also were prohibited from praying or reading their scriptures aloud—not even in their homes or in churches or synagogues—lest Muslims accidentally hear them. And, as the remarkable historian of Islam Marshall G. S. Hodgson (1922–1968) pointed out, from very early times Muslim authorities often

went to great lengths to humiliate and punish *dhimmis*—Jews and Christians who refused to convert to Islam. It was official policy that *dhimmis* should “feel inferior and...know ‘their place’...[imposing laws such as] that Christians and Jews should not ride horses, for instance, but at most mules, or even that they should wear certain marks of their religion on their costume when among Muslims.”<sup>40</sup> In some places non-Muslims were prohibited from wearing clothing similar to that of Muslims, nor could they be armed.<sup>41</sup> In addition, non-Muslims were invariably severely taxed compared with Muslims.<sup>42</sup>

These were the normal circumstances of Jewish and Christian subjects of Muslim states, but conditions often were far worse. In 705 the Muslim conquerors of Armenia assembled all the Christian nobles in a church and burned them to death.<sup>43</sup> There were many similar episodes in addition to the indiscriminate slaughters of Christians noted earlier in discussions of the Muslim conquests. The first Muslim massacre of Jews occurred in Medina when Muhammad had all the local adult Jewish males (about seven hundred of them) beheaded after forcing them to dig their own graves.<sup>44</sup> Unfortunately, massacres of Jews and Christians became increasingly common with the passage of time. For example, in the eleventh century there were many mass killings of Jews—more than six thousand in Morocco in 1032–1033, and at least that many murdered during two outbursts in Grenada.<sup>45</sup> In 1570 Muslim invaders murdered tens of thousands of Christian civilians on Cyprus.<sup>46</sup>

This is *not* to say that the Muslims were more brutal or less tolerant than were Christians or Jews, for it was a brutal and intolerant age. It *is* to say that efforts to portray Muslims as enlightened supporters of multiculturalism are at best ignorant.

## CONVERSION

It was a very long time before the conquered areas were truly Muslim in anything but name. The reality was that very small Muslim elites long ruled over non-Muslim (mostly Christian) populations in the conquered areas. This runs contrary to the widespread belief that Muslim conquests were quickly followed by mass conversions to Islam.

In part this belief in rapid mass conversions is rooted in the failure to distinguish “conversions by treaty” from changes in individual beliefs and practices. Tribes that took arms for Muhammad often did so on the basis of a treaty that expressed acceptance of Muhammad’s religious claims, but these pacts had no individual religious implications—as demonstrated by the many defections of these tribes following the prophet’s death. Similar conversions by treaty continued during the Muslim conquests, the Berbers being a notable case. When attacked by the Muslim invaders of North Africa, some of the Berber tribes were pagans, some were Jews, and some were Christians. But after the defeat of Kahina and her forces, the Berbers signed a treaty declaring themselves to be Muslim. Perhaps some of them were. But even though Marshall Hodgson wrote that the Berbers “converted en masse,”<sup>47</sup> theirs was mainly a conversion by treaty that qualified them to participate in subsequent campaigns of conquest and share in the booty and tribute that resulted. The actual conversion of the Berbers in terms of individual beliefs was a slow process that took many centuries.

Aside from confusing conversion by treaty with the real thing, historians also have erred by assuming that once a people came under Muslim occupation, mass conversions “must have” occurred. But *must have* is one of the most untrustworthy phrases in the scholarly vocabulary. In this case, social scientists who have studied conversion would respond that there “must not” have been mass

conversions, since it is very doubtful that a mass conversion has ever occurred anywhere! All observed instances of conversion have revealed them to be individual acts that occurred relatively gradually as people were drawn to a particular faith by a network of family and friends who already had converted.<sup>48</sup> In the instances at hand, the network model gains credibility from the fact that it took centuries for as many as half of the population of conquered societies to become Muslims.

Richard W. Bulliet has provided superb data on conversion to Islam in the various conquered regions.<sup>49</sup> For whatever reason, from earliest times Muslims produced large numbers of very extensive biographical dictionaries listing all of the better-known people in a specific area, and new editions appeared for centuries. Eventually Bulliet was able to assemble data on more than a million people. The value of these data lies in the fact that Bulliet was able to distinguish Muslims from non-Muslims on the basis of their names. Then, by merging many dictionaries for a given area and sorting the tens of thousands of people listed by their year of birth, Bulliet was able to calculate the proportion of Muslims in the population at various dates and thus create curves of the progress of conversion in five major areas. Because only somewhat prominent people were included in the dictionaries, these results overestimate both the extent and the speed of conversions vis-à-vis the general populations in that elites began with a higher proportion of Muslims and Muslims would have continued to dominate. Consequently, Bulliet devised a very convincing procedure to convert these data into conversion curves for whole populations.

Table 1.1 shows the number of years required to convert 50 percent of the population to Islam in five major areas. In Iran it took 200 years from the date of the initial conquest by Muslim forces to the time when half of Iranians were Muslims. In the other four areas it took from 252 years in Syria to 264 years in Egypt and North Africa.

As to why things happened somewhat more rapidly in Iran, two things set it apart from the other areas. Probably the most important is that for more than a century after falling to Islamic invaders, the Iranians frequently revolted against Muslim rule and did so with sufficient success so that many very bloody battles ensued, as did brutal repressions. These conflicts would have resulted in substantial declines in the non-Muslim population, having nothing to do with conversion. Second, the climate of fear that must have accompanied the defeats of these rebellions likely would have prompted some Iranians to convert for safety's sake and probably caused others to flee.

In any event, despite the onerous conditions of dhimmitude imposed upon them, the conquered peoples only slowly converted to Islam. Even as late as the thirteenth century, very substantial segments of the populations of the Muslim empire outside of Arabia (where non-Muslims were not permitted) were Christians or Jews. Moreover, most of what has been regarded as Muslim culture and said to have been superior to that of Christian Europe was in fact the persistence of pre-conquest Judeo-Christian-Greek culture that Muslim elites only slowly assimilated, and very imperfectly (see chapter 3).

## **CONCLUSION**

Many critics of the Crusades would seem to suppose that after the Muslims had overrun a major portion of Christendom, they should have been ignored or forgiven; suggestions have been made about turning the other cheek.<sup>50</sup> This outlook is certainly unrealistic and probably insincere. Not only had the Byzantines lost most of their empire; the enemy was at their gates. And the loss of Spain, Sicily, and southern Italy, as well as a host of Mediterranean islands, was bitterly resented in Europe. Hence, as British historian Derek Lomax



(1933–1992) explained, “The popes, like most Christians, believed war against the Muslims to be justified partly because the latter had usurped by force lands which once belonged to Christians and partly because they abused the Christians over whom they ruled and such Christian lands as they could raid for slaves, plunder and the joys of destruction.”<sup>51</sup> It was time to strike back.

TABLE 1.1 *Number of Years Required to Convert 50 Percent of the Population to Islam in Five Major Areas*

AREA	YEARS REQUIRED FOR CONVERSION
Syria	252
Western Persia (Iraq)	253
Eastern Persia (Iran)	200
Egypt and North Africa	264
Spain	247

Source: Calculated from Bulliet, 1979a, 1979b.