



Umayyad Dynasty

by. Syed Muhammad Khan
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Cover Photo:

Four medals showing beautifully designed names of the first four Rashidun Caliphs [Abu Bakr](#) (r. 632 - 634 CE), [Umar](#) (634 - 644 CE), [Uthman](#) (644 - 656 CE) and [Ali](#) (656 - 661 CE). In the Dome of the New Mosque, in the [Hagia Sophia](#), Istanbul. The New Mosque was constructed between 1660 and 1665 CE, during the Ottoman Period.

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Biography

Syed Muhammad Khan

Muhammad is a biologist, history enthusiast, and a top-rated PLUS freelance writer at Upwork. His main areas of interest are the origin, expansion, and fragmentation of the Islamic Empire; Muslim response to the Middle East Crusades; and prominent epitomes of chivalry such as Saladin. He wishes to see a world where people live with mutual respect for each other.

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History Enthusiast

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Favorite Quote: Kings do not kill kings, but that man (Reynald) transgressed all limits and thus did I treat him so - Saladin

TIMELINE

- 656 - 661** The murder of Caliph Uthman causes the eruption of the *First Fitna* (civil war). *Muawiya* surfaces as a major opposer of the *Rashidun Caliphate*.
- 661** Muawiya, the governor of Syria, establishes the *Umayyad Dynasty*.
- 661 - 750** The *Umayyad Dynasty* rules the Islamic empire.
- 680** *Husayn's* death marks the start of the second civil war of Islamic history (*Second Fitna*).
- 680 - 692** The *Second Fitna* (second Islamic civil war).
- Oct 680** *Husayn ibn Ali*, *Shia* Islam's third imam, is beheaded by *Yazid I's* force at the Battle of Karbala in present-day Iraq.
- 685** *Al-Mukhtar* starts his revolt; he joins hands with *Abdullah ibn Zubayr*.
- 687** *Al-Mukhtar* has a falling out with *Abdullah*, owing to his support to the Alid faction - he is killed by *Zubayrid* forces.
- 711 - 714** Conquest of most of Spain by the *Umayyad Dynasty*.
- 712** Military conquests as far as the Beas river in parts of modern-day Pakistan by the *Umayyad* forces - under *Muhammad ibn Qasim*.
- 713** Successful annexation of modern-day Transoxiana by *Qutayba ibn Muslim*.
- 715** *Sulayman* rises to power; expansion of the *Umayyad Caliphate* is halted.
- 717 - 718** An unsuccessful attempt to take over *Constantinople*; after *Sulayman's* death, his successor *Umar II* calls back the forces.
- 743 - 747** The *Third Fitna* (civil war of the Islamic empire): *Marwan II* emerges as the victor.
- 750** Fall of the *Umayyad Caliphate*.
- 750** Start of the *Abbasid Caliphate*.
- 756** *Abd al-Rahman I* establishes the *Emirate of Cordoba*.
- 756 - 788** Reign of *Abd al-Rahman I* over the Emirate of Cordoba.

Definition

The **Umayyad Dynasty** (661-750 CE), the first dynasty to take the title of Caliphate, was established in 661 CE by **Muawiya** (l. c. 602-680 CE), who had served as the governor of Syria under the **Rashidun Caliphate**, after the death of the fourth caliph, **Ali** in 661 CE.

The **Umayyads** ruled effectively and firmly established the political authority of the Caliphate, rebellions were crushed with brute force, and no quarter was given to those who stirred uprisings.



Figure 1- Silver dirham from the reign of Umar II (r. 717 - 720 CE). Minted c. 718/719 CE. Basra, Iraq.

They ruled over a large empire, to which they added vast newly conquered areas such as that of North Africa (beyond Egypt), Spain, Transoxiana, parts of the Indian subcontinent, and multiple islands in the Mediterranean (but most of these were lost).

Although the empire was at its ever largest size during their reign, internal divisions and civil wars weakened their hold over it, and in 750 CE, they were overthrown by the **Abbasids** (r. 750-1258 CE, a rival Arab faction who claimed to be descended from the Prophet's uncle **Abbas**).

Prelude

After the death of the *Islamic Prophet Muhammad* (l. 570-632 CE), *Abu Bakr* (r. 632-634 CE, a senior companion of the Prophet) took the title of the Caliph, hence forming the basis of the Islamic Caliphates (intermittently: 632-1924 CE). *Abu Bakr* was the first of the four initial caliphs referred collectively by the mainstream *Sunni* Muslims as the *Rashidun Caliphs*, while the *Shia* Muslims only consider the fourth one of these, *Ali* (a close companion and son-in-law of the Prophet), the sole legitimate candidate for the Caliphate.

In the *Rashidun* period, the armies of Islam launched full-scale invasions into Syria, the Levant, Egypt, parts of North Africa, the islands of the Greek archipelago, and the whole of the *Sassanian Empire*.

These conquests were initiated by *Abu Bakr* and successfully carried on by his successors *Umar* (r. 634-644 CE) and *Uthman* (r. 644-656 CE). *Uthman*, however, was not a strong ruler and was murdered in his own house by rebels in 656 CE. His death marked the breaking point in the history of the Islamic empire: his successor *Ali* (r. 656-661 CE) was pinned between handling a disintegrating realm and people insisting that justice be served to his dead predecessor.



Figure 2 - A map showing the Rashidun Caliphate (highlighted in green) by the end of *Abu Bakr's* (r. 632 - 634 CE) life in 634 CE.

Ali was faced with opposition, most notably from the governor of Syria, *Muawiya* (l. c. 602-680 CE). *Muawiya* was a cousin of *Uthman*; he refused to settle for anything less than the execution of his kinsman's assailants. Civil war erupted, the *First Fitna* (656-661 CE), which ended with *Ali's* murder at the hands of an extremist group called the *Kharjites*. These *zealots* had made an attempt on *Muawiya's* life as well, but the latter survived with only a minor injury.

Muawiya I

Muawiyya's (r. 661-680 CE) lineage is referred to as the *Sufyanids* (after his father *Abu Sufyan*), or sometimes as *Harbites* (after his grandfather *Harb*). He was a shrewd politician and a strong diplomat who preferred bribery to warfare. He convinced *Hassan* (l. 624-670 CE), the son of *Ali*, who had succeeded him in Kufa, to abdicate in his favor in exchange for a high pension. However, when he felt that someone posed a threat to his rule, he would take no risk and have them killed. The death of *Hassan* in 670 CE, who is said to have been poisoned by his wife, is often linked with him by Muslim historians, alongside that of many other supporters of *Ali*.

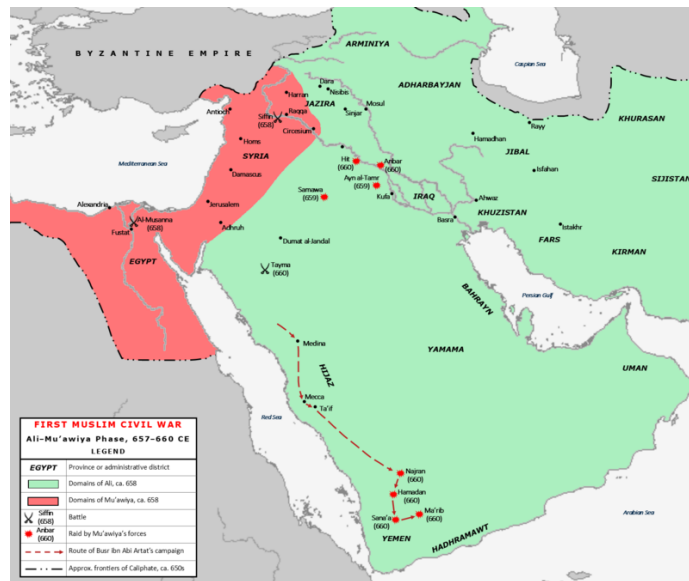


Figure 3 - Map of the conflict between Caliph Ali (r. 656-661 CE) and Muawiyah I (r. 661 – 680 CE) during the First Fitna (656 – 661 CE), a civil war within the Rashidun Caliphate. The area shaded in green represents the territories of the Caliphate under Ali's control c. 658; the area in shaded in pink represents Muawiyah I's domains. Major battles, raids, and campaign routes are shown.

His 20-year reign, from his capital at Damascus, was indeed the most stable one that the Arabs had seen since the death of *Umar*, and his administrative reforms were just as excellent, such as the use of a police network (*Shurta*), personal bodyguards for his safety, diwans (for local administration, just as *Umar* had established) among others. He initiated campaigns in parts of modern-day Pakistan and Afghanistan and, in the west, all the way to the Atlantic coast of Morocco. He managed to regain territories lost to the Byzantines, but most of his gains were reversed after his death, owing to internal unrest.

Yazid I & the Second Fitna

Problems started when *Muawiya* appointed his son *Yazid* (r. 680-683 CE) as his successor. The Arabs were not accustomed to dynastic rule and so *Yazid's* accession was met with much resentment, most notably from *Husayn ibn Ali* (l. 626-680 CE), *Hasan's* younger brother, and *Abdullah ibn Zubayr* (l. 624-692 CE), who was the son of a close companion of Prophet *Muhammad*.

Today *Yazid* is remembered as perhaps the most negative figure in Islamic history.

In 680 CE, *Husayn*, convinced by the people of Kufa, marched to Iraq, intending to gather his forces and then attack Damascus. *Yazid*, however, put a lockdown on Kufa and sent his army, under the command of his cousin: *Ubaidullah ibn Ziyad* (d. 686 CE) to intercept *Husayn's* force. The two parties met in Karbala, near the Euphrates, where *Husayn's* army – some 70 combatants (mostly family members and close associates) made a heroic stand and were all brutally massacred and *Husayn* beheaded. This sparked the second civil war of Islamic history – the Second Fitna (680-692 CE).



Figure 4 - A painting of the Battle of Karbala in 680 CE Iran. Iranian painting, oil on canvas, 19th century. From the Tropenmuseum, Amsterdam

Yazid then ordered another army to attack the *Medinans*, who had rebelled due to their disgust over *Yazid's* character and actions; this culminated in the Battle of al-Harra (683 CE), where opposition was crushed. In the aftermath of the battle, according to some sources, Medina was subjected to plunder, pillage, rape, and murder.

The Syrian army then proceeded to Mecca, where *Abdullah* had established his own realm. The city was besieged for several weeks, during which the cover of the Ka'aba (Islamic holy site) caught on fire. Though *Yazid's* army retreated to Syria after their leader's sudden death (683 CE), the damage done by *Yazid's* army left an indelible mark in the hearts of the Muslims.

Abdullah continued his revolt for another decade, claiming the title of Caliph (r. 683-692 CE) for himself; he earned the fealty of Hejaz, Egypt, and Iraq – while his opponents were barely in control of Damascus after their sovereign's death.



Figure 5 - A map depicting the divisions of the Islamic Empire during the second Islamic civil war - the Second Fitna. The dominions of the Umayyads, Zubayrids, Kharjites, Al Mukhtar and those regained by the Byzantines are shaded in colors as indicated by the key.

Today *Yazid* is remembered as perhaps the most negative figure in Islamic history. His son *Muawiya II* (r. 683-684 CE) was proclaimed caliph after his death, but the sickly youngster wanted no share in his father's ill actions. He died just a few months later in 684 CE, bringing an end to the *Sufyanid* rulers. Apart from Damascus, the whole of the *Umayyad* realm had been tossed into chaos.

The Marwanids

Marwan ibn Hakam (r. 684-685 CE), a senior member of the *Umayyad* clan and a cousin of *Muawiya*, took over, with the promise that the throne would pass on to *Khalid* (*Yazid*'s younger son) upon his death. He had no intention of keeping this promise; now the empire was in the hands of the *Marwanids* (house of *Marwan*), also known as *Hakamites* (after *Marwan*'s father *Hakam*). *Marwan* recaptured Egypt – which had revolted and joined the Zubayrid faction. But he could not contain *Abdullah*'s revolt, as he died just nine months after assuming the office (685 CE). This task now fell upon the shoulders of his brilliant son, *Abd al-Malik* (r. 685-705 CE).

In 685 CE, *Al Mukhtar* (l. c. 622-687 CE), started a revolt in Kufa and joined hands with *Abdullah* against the *Umayyads*. *Al Mukhtar* systematically hunted down all those who were involved in *Husayn*'s murder. An army sent by *Abd al-Malik* under *Ubaidullah* (the general from Karbala) was crushed by the combined forces of the Kufans and Zubayrids; the defeated general was put to the sword.



Figure 6 - A gold dinar of Abd al-Malik (r. 685-705 CE) minted in Damascus in 697/98 CE. Abd al-Malik introduced an independent Islamic currency in 693 CE, which initially bore depictions of the caliph before being abandoned for coins solely containing inscriptions.

He then declared his wish to establish an *Alid Caliphate*, using one of *Ali*'s sons (although not from *Fatima*), *Muhammad ibn al-Hanaffiya* (l. 637-700 CE). This led to his parting ways with *Abdullah* who had claimed the Caliphate for himself from Mecca. *Abd al-Malik* then waited as his rivals weakened each other. In 687 CE *Al Mukhtar* was killed by Zubayrid forces during the siege of Kufa. Although *Al Mukhtar* died there and then, his revolt ultimately led to the evolution of *Shi'ism* from a political group to a religious sect.

With the threat in Kufa neutralized, *Abd al-Malik* shifted his attention towards Mecca: he sent his most loyal and ruthless general, the governor of rebellious Iraq, *Hajjaj ibn Yusuf* (l. 661-714 CE) to subjugate his rival. Although *Abdullah* stood no chance against *Hajjaj*'s mighty army, he refused to surrender and died sword in hand in 692 CE; the war was over.

Although he has not escaped the criticism for *Hajjaj*'s cruel deeds, *Abd al-Malik* is credited for bringing stability and centralization to the empire, Most notably he Arabized the whole of his dominion, which in time helped the propagation of Islam; he also established official coins for his empire.



Figure 7 - Dome of the Rock in Jerusalem, originally constructed in 691-692 CE in the reign of Caliph Abd al-Malik.

The construction of the *Dome of Rock* in Jerusalem took place under his canopy (691-692 CE); it is conceivable that this was to balance his position against *Abdullah*, who at that time was in control of the Ka'aba. It was also during his reign that all of North Africa, including Tunis, was conquered (by 693 CE) for good. The local Berbers, who accepted Islam, would become vital in carrying it all the way to Spain during the reign of his son.

Al Walid & Conquest of Spain

After *Abd al-Malik*'s death, his son *Al Walid I* (r. 705-715 CE) assumed the office who pushed the boundaries of his empire even farther. *Hajjaj* continued to extend his influence over his sovereign; two of his protégés – *Muhammad ibn Qasim* (l. c. 695-715 CE) and *Qutayba ibn Muslim* (l. c. 669-715 CE) were successful in subjugating parts of modern-day Pakistan and Transoxiana, respectively.

Muslim conquest of Spain started in 711 CE when a Berber named *Tariq ibn Ziyad* landed on the *Iberian Peninsula* on a mount that bears his name today: *Gibral-Tar*. He defeated a numerically superior army led by Gothic king *Roderic* (r. 710-712 CE) at the battle of Guadalete (711 CE), after which, the land simply lay still for him to take.

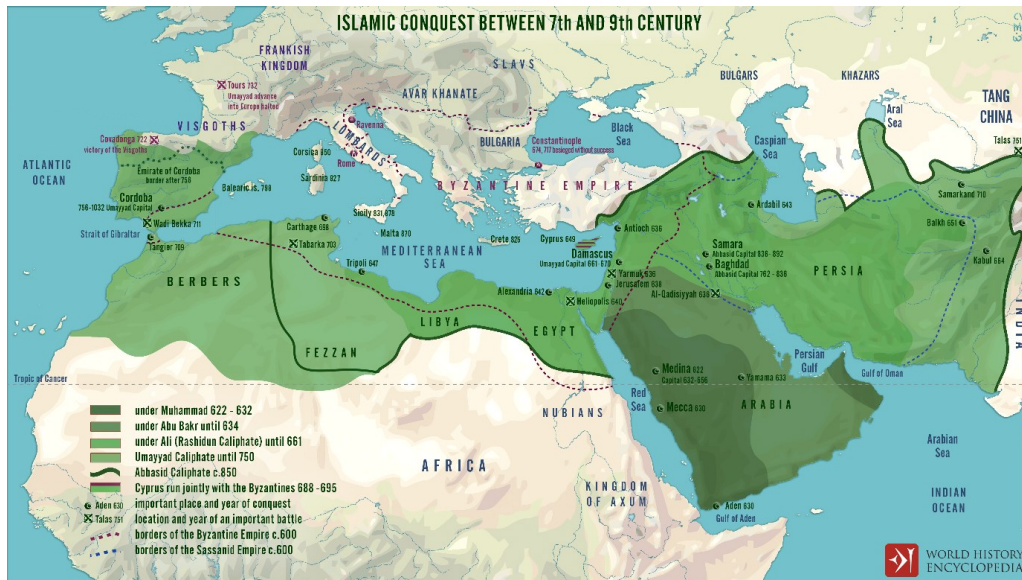


Figure 8 - A map illustrating the rise and expansion of early Islamic caliphates from the Prophet Muhammad until the 9th century.

Musa ibn Nusayr (l. 640-716 CE), the governor of Ifriqiya (North Africa beyond Egypt) reinforced Tariq with more men and the duo had conquered most of *Al Andalus* (Arabic for Spain – the land of the Vandals) by 714 CE. *Musa* was on the verge of invading Europe through the Pyrenees, but at that fateful moment, for reasons not clear to historians, the Caliph ordered both of them to return to Damascus.

Expansion Halted

Walid had tried to nominate his own son as his successor, instead of his brother *Sulayman*, who was his successor by their father's covenant; naturally, *Sulayman* refused to let go of his claim. *Walid* died before he could force his brother into submission, and *Sulayman* (r. 715-717 CE) assumed the office; his brief reign was an abject failure. *Sulayman* had nothing but contempt for the late *Hajjaj* and released many people who had been held captive in *Hajjaj*'s prisons.

However, the dead governor's subordinates faced the full wrath of the new Caliph; *Sulayman* had many of the empire's dauntless generals and talented governors killed, as most of them had been handpicked by the aforementioned. *Sulayman* then turned his attention towards Constantinople and sent a massive force to conquer the Byzantine capital in 717 CE. This venture was a costly and humiliating defeat, the damage was permanent and irreversible, halted expansion, moreover, it was the first major setback against the Byzantines. Nearing his death, *Sulayman* realized that his own sons were too young to succeed him, he nominated his pious cousin *Umar ibn Abd al-Aziz*.

Umar II (r. 717-720 CE) managed to rule for only three years as he was poisoned by his own family because of his unwavering stance on justice and on Islamic principles. This quality of his, supplemented by many of his admirable actions such as stopping public cursing of *Ali*, facilitating conversion and halting attacks on peaceful neighboring empires, has earned him much posthumous fame as he has often been dubbed as the fifth *Rashidun Caliph*.



Figure 9 - The Siege of Constantinople by the Umayyad Caliphate in 717 – 718 CE, as depicted in the 14th-century Bulgarian translation of the Constantine Manasses Chronicle. The image has been digitally retouched.

He stopped all military expeditions, knowing that the internal state of the empire needed to be improved before anything else. He had also entered negotiations with the non-Arab Muslims (*Mawali* – in Arabic), who had opposed and resented *Umayyad* rule (since they had been violently repressed). Had he been given enough time, there was a fair enough chance that he might have succeeded, and the *Abbasids* might have never gained enough support against the *Umayyads* from *Mawalis* and *Shia* Muslims (of the Eastern Provinces).

Umar's successor, *Yazid II* (r. 720-724 CE), another son of *Abd al-Malik*, proved to be no better a ruler than the first one to bear his name. Whilst he was busy fondling with his favorite concubines in his harem, his ineffective governors had lost all control of the empire. Fortunately for the *Umayyads*, he died just four years after assuming control.

Restoration of Order

Yazid's brother and successor, *Hisham* (r. 724-743 CE) had inherited an empire torn apart by civil wars and he would use all of his energies and resources to bring the kingdom out of this tumult. A strong and inflexible ruler, *Hisham* reinstated many reforms that had been introduced by *Umar II* but discontinued by *Yazid II*.

Some of his military expeditions were successful, others not so much: a *Hindu* revolt in *Sindh* (a province in modern-day Pakistan) was crushed, but a Berber revolt broke out in the western parts of North Africa (modern-day Morocco) in 739 CE. The Berbers had been stirred up by the fanatical teachings of *Kharijite* zealots (a radical and rebellious sect of Islam) and caused a great deal of damage, most notably, the deaths of most of the Arab elites of *Ifriqiya* at the Battle of Nobles (c. 740 CE) near Tangier. Attempts to crush the rebellion did not even come close to complete the objective, but the disunited Berbers soon disintegrated (743 CE) after they failed to take the core of *Ifriqiya*, the capital city of Qairouwan, but Morocco was lost for the *Umayyads*.



Figure 10 - An Umayyad silver coin (dirham) issued by Hisham ibn Abd al-Malik (r. 724-743 CE). Made in Damascus, c. 724-743 CE.

Al Andalus had also descended to anarchy, but *Hisham* was successful there. Under an able general named *Abd al-Rahman al-Ghafiqi*, the province was restored to order but further expansion into Europe was checked after the defeat at the Battle of Tours (732 CE) against the Franks under Charles Martel (r. 718-741 CE).

Third Fitna

After *Hisham's* death in 743 CE, the empire was brought to a civil war. *Walid II* – a son of *Yazid II* ruled from 743-744 CE, before being overthrown and killed by *Yazid III* (d. 744 CE) – a son of *Walid I*. This sparked the Third Fitna (743-747 CE), the third civil war in Islamic history as many tribes had also started revolting against the establishment amidst the chaos.

Yazid III died just six months later and was succeeded by his brother *Ibrahim* who only managed to rule for two months before being overthrown by the elderly *Marwan II* (r. 744-750 CE) – a grandson of *Marwan I*.

Marwan II was a strong military commander but lacked diplomatic skills, instead he crushed the uprisings with brute force and brought an end to the Third Fitna in 747 CE. However, the *Abbasids* (an Arabian faction that claimed to be descendants of the Prophet's uncle: *Abbas*), had gained the support of the people of *Khurasan* (in Iran). His empire was not in a state to face a large scale uprising; his army was exhausted after years of warfare, the failing economy did not allow him to recruit more troops, and ineffective governors failed to realize the gravity of the *Abbasid* threat until it was simply too late.

By the end of 749 CE, most of the eastern states had displayed the black standards of the *Abbasids* and the resentful tribes that he had subjugated with force were also allying with them. He faced the bulk of the *Abbasid* army near the Zab River (750 CE), where his army was routed and he was forced to flee. He escaped to Egypt, intending to muster up his forces from western provinces, but the *Abbasids* caught up with him and killed him. *Umayyad* rule was over, and the first *Abbasid* ruler *Abu Abbas* (r. 750-754 CE) was declared the new Caliph in Kufa.

End of the Umayyads

The *Abbasids* showed no mercy to the *Umayyads*; all male members were slain, a surviving few retreated to their hideouts. *Umayyad* graves in Damascus were dug out and their remains torn apart and burnt – except for *Umar II*, whose grave was spared because of his reputation. Then the *Abbasids* invited all of the surviving members to dinner on the pretext of reconciliation but, when they were seated at the table, at the signal of the new Caliph, assassins entered the room and clubbed them to death. *Abd al-Rahman I*, a grandson of the able *Hisham*, survived the horrible fate of his kinsmen, he managed to escape the *Abbasids* and made a perilous journey across the empire and landed in Al Andalus, where he formed the Emirate of Cordoba in 756 CE, which rivaled the *Abbasid* realm in elegance and grandeur.



Figure 11 - A modern statue of Abd al-Rahman I, founder of the Emirate of Cordoba, r. 756-788 CE. Almuñécar, Spain.

Conclusion

The *Umayyads* were the first dynasty to take over the institute of Caliphate, transforming it into an inheritable title. They were responsible for bringing centralization and stability to the realm, and they also continued the swift military expansion of the empire. However, the *Umayyads* also had their fair share of wrongdoings and flaws that cost them their reputation. *Yazid I* committed horrendous crimes against the house of *Ali* and the people of Medina and Mecca – to this day, he remains the most hated person in Islamic history. This hatred is especially well pronounced among *Shia* Muslims because of the massacre of *Husayn* and his forces at Karbala in 680 CE (this event is commemorated annually through the festival of *Ashura* by the *Shias*).

Yazid's actions have been extended over to the whole dynasty, and since most of the *Umayyad* caliphs were more or less secular and led luxurious lives (save a few such as *Umar II* and *Hisham*), they were viewed as being godless by pious Muslims of their time. Contemporary historians tend to glorify them while many Muslim historians (but not all) tend to demonize them. Despite their many flaws, the *Umayyads* were effective rulers and made notable contributions not only to the empire but - perhaps unintentionally, with the Arabization of the empire - to Islam itself.

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