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Reasons for the Success of Early Islamic Conquests

During and after the life of Muhammad, Muslims successfully conquered a vast amount of territory starting with Mecca and expanding throughout Arabia, Anatolia, Persia, and into North Africa and Spain. While the conquest of such a vast area is amazing to begin with, what was even more impressive was the speed in which the conquest was accomplished: Arabia, the whole of the Sasanian Empire, and much of the Byzantine Empire's Asia lands were under Muslim control less than thirty years after Muhammad's death. Since Islam was a new religion and Arabia had lacked any real political unity prior to this time, how did the Muslims have so much success? The answer lies in a combination of their use of geography, organizational skills, and military tactics.

Most people, except for the nomads who lived there, avoided the deserts in Arabia. Muhammad wisely made allies with these nomads. These nomads were very experienced in desert life and the use of camels as transportation. With help from the nomads, camels, and to a lesser extent horses, Muslim armies were able to cross desert areas quicker and with less ill effects than their enemies who largely viewed the desert as an obstacle to be avoided. This mobility helped them rapidly move armies and supplies to where they were needed most. However, this mobility was used as part of campaign strategy rather than as a battle tactic.¹ Furthermore, battles were often sought where the desert could be used as a safe area to retreat to should the battle not go well for the Muslims. Retreat to the desert merely meant a wait until a more favorable opportunity for battle. Lines of supply, communication, and reinforcements were safe from enemy attack. The desert was not the only geographical feature the Muslim armies used to their advantage. For example, at the Battle of Yarmuk they chose a battlefield to face Byzantine troops that allowed them to drive their enemies into ravines, killing many of them and helping Islam win the day. In other battles, Muslim armies made good use of terrain from which

to provide strong defensive positions. If one considers the geography of those areas conquered quickest and easiest, they were almost all either desert or near desert. Anatolia took much longer to take from the Byzantines than areas like Syria, Palestine, and Egypt. The Sasanian capital of Ctesiphon was near the western fringes of the empire – not far from the desert areas of Iraq – and thus was easily reached. Had the Sasanian capital been located farther away, such as in Isfhan or Tehran (as later Iranian capitals were), the empire would likely have held out much longer.

While the desert nomads were a very useful fighting force with strong tribal unity and loyalty, they were sometimes unreliable in battle, such as at the Battle of Yamama.² They were also somewhat untrusted especially since many tried to part ways with his Abu Bakr after Muhammad's death. There was also concern over any nomad tribal leader having control over too many troops that he might then use against the Muslims. The Muslim military leaders formed their armies in a manner that superbly dealt with this situation. In the chain of command, tribal leaders would have command over the lowest levels especially the basic units of ten men. This kept the tribesman fighting alongside friends and relatives, men they knew they could trust to stand by them and fight to the death. Kinship was the primary source of discipline amongst the nomads.³ In higher levels, command positions were only given to devout Muslims – those whose first loyalty was to Islam, not any tribe. This also kept only trusted Muslims in command of any forces large enough to be potentially dangerous. Furthermore, Islam was the force that finally unified the nomads and by putting devout Muslims in the higher leadership positions, this prevented tribal jealousy from causing problems. As Fed Donner summarizes:

The rise of the state made it possible to meld into an incredibly effective fighting force those tribesmen whose energies had hitherto been consumed by petty quarrels among themselves and whose political horizons had hitherto been limited to their own tribe and affairs. The success of the conquests was first and foremost the product of an organizational breakthrough of proportions unparalleled in the history of Arabian society until modern times.⁴

The nomads were primarily used as light cavalry – the role in which they were quite experienced. The fighting core of the army was made of devout Muslims, usually from the cities. These saw the brunt of hand-to-hand fighting and were far more dependable. The Muslim armies lacked heavy cavalry and bows that were effective from horseback. Byzantines consider their cavalry the pride of their army and the Sasanians had their Asawira horse-mounted knighthood.⁵ Rather than trying to match their enemies' heavy cavalry, the Muslim armies instead sought to limit their usefulness. Using their mobility to concentrate their forces, Muslim armies would take up strong positions in terrain favorable to infantry and which limited the effectiveness of cavalry. Muslim archers on foot would attempt to kill or drive off heavy cavalry from a distance. Despite the somewhat inferior design of their bows, the Muslims were very skilled archers and held archery in high regards.⁶ Should enemy heavy cavalry make a charge, Muslim infantry were well trained in the use of spears to break cavalry charges. In general, Muslim armies also lacked the skills and the experience for siege warfare and as such usually made it a point to keep fighting away from enemy fortifications. Their offer of not looting a city that surrendered without a fight greatly helped prevent sieges. They also quickly developed a sense of battle tactics by dividing their forces into groups of four divisions: a left, a center, a right, and a reserve.⁷

Another reason for the success of the Muslim armies was the weakened state of the Byzantine and Sasanian Empires due to their lengthy war which had barely concluded when the Islamic wars of conquest began. While this idea does have some merit, it does not entirely explain the Muslim success. Many of the areas that were conquered early were quite ready to leave Byzantine rule. Many were overtaxed and several also had religious disagreements with their empire. The tax required by the Muslims was usually far less than that of the Sasanians and

Byzantines. Muslim rulers were also usually more accepting of other religions than the Orthodox Christian Byzantines or the Zoroastrian Sasanians. Furthermore, while the Sasanians were in somewhat of a state of disarray at the time, Byzantium seemed to still be quite strong. For example, at the Battle of Yarmuk, the Muslim army was outnumbered approximately four to one.

With their expert use of geography, organization, and military tactics is not surprising that the armies of Islam were able to have the success that they did.

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- ⁵ Parry and Yapp, *War, Technology, and Society in the Middle East*. 37.
- ⁶ Hugh Kennedy, *The Armies of the Caliphs*. (New York: Routledge, 2001). 177.
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