**Caliphate**

Islamic history

**Caliphate**, the political-religious state [comprising](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/comprising) the Muslim [community](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/community) and the lands and peoples under its [dominion](https://www.britannica.com/topic/dominion-British-Commonwealth) in the centuries following the death (632 CE) of the Prophet [Muhammad](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Muhammad). Ruled by a [caliph](https://www.britannica.com/topic/caliph) (Arabic *khalīfah,* “successor”), who held temporal and sometimes a degree of spiritual authority, the [empire](https://www.britannica.com/topic/empire-political-science) of the Caliphate grew rapidly through conquest during its first two centuries to include most of [Southwest Asia](https://www.britannica.com/place/Southwest-Asia), [North Africa](https://www.britannica.com/place/North-Africa), and [Spain](https://www.britannica.com/place/Spain). Dynastic struggles later brought about the Caliphate’s decline, and it ceased to exist as a functioning political institution with the [Mongol](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Mongol) destruction of [Baghdad](https://www.britannica.com/place/Baghdad) in 1258.

This article covers the history of the original caliphal state based in Arabia, the [Levant](https://www.britannica.com/place/Levant), and Mesopotamia in the 7th–13th century. *See* [caliph](https://www.britannica.com/topic/caliph) for a general discussion of the titular position that heads a caliphate; *see also* [Fāṭimid dynasty](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Fatimid-dynasty) and [Caliphate of Córdoba](https://www.britannica.com/place/Caliphate-of-Cordoba) for other historical examples of caliphates.

**Leadership after Muhammad**

The urgent need for a successor to Muhammad as political leader of the Muslim community was met by a group of Muslim elders in [Medina](https://www.britannica.com/place/Medina-Saudi-Arabia) who designated [Abū Bakr](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Abu-Bakr), the Prophet’s father-in-law, as caliph. According to the majority of Muslims, the Prophet himself had left no instructions for the selection of a leader after him, although a small minority—the [precursors](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/precursors) of the group later known as the [Shiʿah](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Shii)—advocated for [ʿAlī](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Ali-Muslim-caliph)’s claim to the Caliphate. It would be anachronistic to assume that this early group supported ʿAlī because he was a cousin and son-in-law of the Prophet. Rather, the early literature indicates that the [legitimate](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/legitimate) caliph was expected to have been an early convert to Islam (precedence in converting to Islam was termed *sābiqah* in Arabic) and to possess a constellation of [moral](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/moral) excellences (*faḍāʾil* in Arabic), such as truthfulness, generosity, courage, and, above all, knowledge. The caliph’s authority was largely epistemic—that is to say, based on his superior knowledge of both religious and worldly affairs.

Later, during the [Umayyad](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Umayyad-dynasty-Islamic-history) period (661–750), there was a growing emphasis on [kinship](https://www.britannica.com/topic/kinship) to the Prophet as a [criterion](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/criterion) of legitimate leadership, likely because the Umayyads wished to thereby compensate for their lack of *sābiqah*, having accepted Islam late during the Prophet’s lifetime. In response, supporters of the claim to leadership of ʿAlī and his descendents emphasized their lineal descent from the Prophet’s family as a marker of their legitimacy. By the 10th century the orthodox [Sunni](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Sunni) majority had also come to acknowledge kinship as a factor by understanding legitimate leadership to inhere in descent from the [Quraysh](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Quraysh), Muhammad’s natal tribe, to which the first four caliphs also belonged.

Although the reigns of the first four caliphs—[Abū Bakr](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Abu-Bakr), [ʿUmar I](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Umar-I), [ʿUthmān](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Uthman-ibn-Affan), and [ʿAlī](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Ali-Muslim-caliph)—were marred by political upheaval, civil war, and assassination, the era was remembered by later generations of Muslims as a golden age of [Islam](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Islam), and the four caliphs were collectively known as the “rightly guided caliphs” because of their close personal associations with Muhammad. The rightly guided caliphs largely established the administrative and judicial organization of the Muslim community and directed the conquest of new lands. In the 630s [Syria](https://www.britannica.com/place/Syria), [Jordan](https://www.britannica.com/place/Jordan), [Palestine](https://www.britannica.com/place/Palestine), and [Iraq](https://www.britannica.com/place/Iraq) were conquered, [Egypt](https://www.britannica.com/place/Egypt) was taken from [Byzantine](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/Byzantine) control in 645, and frequent raids were launched into North Africa, [Armenia](https://www.britannica.com/place/Armenia), and [Persia](https://www.britannica.com/place/Persia).

**The Umayyads**

The assassination of ʿUthmān and the troubled caliphate of ʿAlī that followed sparked the first sectarian split in the Muslim community. By 661 ʿAlī’s rival [Muʿāwiyah I](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Muawiyah-I), a fellow member of ʿUthmān’s [Umayyad](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Umayyad-dynasty-Islamic-history) clan, had wrested away the caliphate, and his rule established the [Umayyad dynasty](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Umayyad-dynasty-Islamic-history), which lasted until 750. Despite the largely successful reign of Muʿāwiyah, tribal and sectarian disputes erupted after his death. The majority of Muslims regarded the Umayyads as nominally Muslim at best, given their worldly and opulent lifestyles. They were also unpopular on account of their having established dynastic rule by force. Their reign is contemptuously referred to in later sources as mere “kingship” (*mulk*)—in contrast to the caliphate, which was supposed to be based on the superior personal merits of the ruler and established through a process of consultation with the people. In a conscious effort to confer legitimacy on themselves and to acquire a religious aura, the Umayyads chose the title *khalīfat allāh*, “the deputy of God,” in contradistinction to the first two caliphs in particular, who are said to have deliberately shunned such a self-aggrandizing title.

There were three Umayyad rulers between 680 and 685, and only by nearly 20 years of military campaigning did the next one, [ʿAbd al-Malik](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Abd-al-Malik-Umayyad-caliph), succeed in reestablishing the authority of the Umayyad capital of [Damascus](https://www.britannica.com/place/Damascus). ʿAbd al-Malik is also remembered for building the [Dome of the Rock](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Dome-of-the-Rock) in [Jerusalem](https://www.britannica.com/place/Jerusalem). Under his son [al-Walīd](https://www.britannica.com/biography/al-Walid) (705–715), Muslim forces took permanent possession of North Africa, converted the native [Berbers](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Berber) to Islam, and overran most of the [Iberian Peninsula](https://www.britannica.com/place/Iberian-Peninsula) as the [Visigothic](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Visigoth) kingdom there collapsed. Progress was also made in the east with settlement in the [Indus River](https://www.britannica.com/place/Indus-River) valley. Umayyad power had never been firmly seated, however, and the Caliphate disintegrated rapidly after the long reign of [Hishām](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Hisham-ibn-Abd-al-Malik) (724–743). A serious rebellion broke out against the Umayyads in 747, and in 750 the last Umayyad caliph, [Marwān II](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Marwan-II), was defeated in the Battle of the Great Zab by the followers of the [Abbasid](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Abbasid-caliphate) family.

**The Abbasid caliphate**

The Abbasids, descendants of an uncle of Muhammad, owed the success of their revolt in large part to their appeal to various pietistic, extremist, or merely disgruntled groups and in particular to the aid of the [Shiʿah](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Shii), who held that the Caliphate belonged by right to the descendants of [ʿAlī](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Ali-Muslim-caliph). That the Abbasids disappointed the expectations of the Shiʿah by taking the Caliphate for themselves left the Shiʿah to evolve into a sect, permanently hostile to the [Sunni](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Sunni) majority, that would periodically threaten the established government by revolt. The first Abbasid [caliph](https://www.britannica.com/topic/caliph), [al-Saffāḥ](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Abu-al-Abbas-al-Saffah) (749–754), ordered the elimination of the entire Umayyad clan; the only Umayyad of note who escaped was [ʿAbd al-Raḥman](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Abd-al-Rahman-III), who made his way to [Spain](https://www.britannica.com/place/Spain) and established an [Umayyad dynasty](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Umayyad-dynasty-Islamic-history) that lasted until 1031.

The period 786–861, especially the caliphates of [Hārūn](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Harun-al-Rashid) (786–809) and [al-Maʾmūn](https://www.britannica.com/biography/al-Mamun) (813–833), is accounted the height of Abbasid rule. The eastward orientation of the [dynasty](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/dynasty) was demonstrated by [al-Manṣūr](https://www.britannica.com/biography/al-Mansur-Abbasid-caliph)’s removal of the capital to [Baghdad](https://www.britannica.com/place/Baghdad) in 762–763 and by the later caliphs’ policy of marrying non-[Arabs](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Arab) and recruiting [Turks](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Turkic-peoples), [Slavs](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Slav), and other non-Arabs as palace guards. Under al-Maʾmūn, the [intellectual](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/intellectual) and artistic heritage of [Iran](https://www.britannica.com/place/Iran) (Persia) was [cultivated](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/cultivated), and Persian administrators assumed important posts in the Caliphate’s administration. After 861, [anarchy](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/anarchy) and rebellion shook the empire. Tunisia and eastern Iran came under the control of hereditary governors who made token acknowledgment of Baghdad’s suzerainty. Other provinces became less-reliable sources of [revenue](https://www.britannica.com/topic/revenue-economics). The Shiʿah and similar groups, including the [Qarmaṭians](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Qarmatians) in [Syria](https://www.britannica.com/place/Syria) and the [Fāṭimids](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Fatimid-dynasty) in [North Africa](https://www.britannica.com/place/North-Africa), challenged Abbasid rule on religious as well as political grounds.

**Competing claims**

Abbasid power ended in 945, when the [Būyids](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Buyid-dynasty), a family of rough tribesmen from northwestern Iran, took Baghdad under their rule. They retained the Abbasid caliphs as figureheads. The [Samanid dynasty](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Samanid-dynasty) that arose in Khorāsān and [Transoxania](https://www.britannica.com/place/Transoxania) and the [Ghaznavids](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Ghaznavid-dynasty) in [Central Asia](https://www.britannica.com/place/Central-Asia) and the [Ganges River](https://www.britannica.com/place/Ganges-River) basin similarly acknowledged the Abbasid caliphs as spiritual leaders of Sunni [Islam](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Islam). On the other hand, the [Fāṭimids](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Fatimid-dynasty) proclaimed a new caliphate in 920 in their capital of Al-Mahdiyyah in [Tunisia](https://www.britannica.com/place/Tunisia) and [castigated](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/castigated) the Abbasids as usurpers; the Umayyad ruler in Spain, [ʿAbd al-Raḥmān III](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Abd-al-Rahman-III), adopted the title of caliph in 928 in opposition to both the Abbasids and the Fāṭimids. [Nominal](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/Nominal) Abbasid authority was restored to Egypt by [Saladin](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Saladin) in 1171. By that time the Abbasids had begun to regain some semblance of their former power, as the [Seljuq dynasty](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Seljuq) of sultans in Baghdad, which had replaced the Būyids in 1055, itself began to decay. The caliph [al-Nāṣir](https://www.britannica.com/biography/al-Nasir) (1180–1225) achieved a certain success in dealing diplomatically with various threats from the east, but [al-Mustaʿṣim](https://www.britannica.com/biography/al-Mustasim) (1242–58) had no such success and was murdered in the Mongol sack of Baghdad that ended the Abbasid line in that city. A scion of the family was invited a few years later to establish a puppet caliphate in [Cairo](https://www.britannica.com/place/Cairo) that lasted until 1517, but it exercised no power whatsoever. From the 13th century onward a variety of rulers outside Cairo also included caliph among their titles, although their claims to universal leadership of the Muslim [community](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/community) seem to have been more notional than real.

**The caliphate in the modern era**

The concept of the caliphate took on new significance in the 18th century as an instrument of statecraft in the declining [Ottoman Empire](https://www.britannica.com/place/Ottoman-Empire). Facing the erosion of their military and political power and territorial losses inflicted in a series of wars with European rivals, the Ottoman sultans, who had occasionally styled themselves as caliphs since the 14th century, began to stress their claim to leadership of the Islamic community. This served both as means of retaining some degree of influence over Muslim populations in formerly Ottoman lands and as means of [bolstering](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/bolstering) Ottoman legitimacy within the empire. The caliphate was abolished in 1924, following the dissolution of the Ottoman Empire and the rise of the Turkish Republic.

In the 20th century the reestablishment of the caliphate, although occasionally [invoked](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/invoked) by Islamists as a symbol of global Islamic unity, was of no practical interest for mainstream Islamist groups such as the [Muslim Brotherhood](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Muslim-Brotherhood) in [Egypt](https://www.britannica.com/place/Egypt). It did, however, figure prominently in the [rhetoric](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/rhetoric) of violent extremist groups such as [al-Qaeda](https://www.britannica.com/topic/al-Qaeda). In June 2014 an insurgent group known as the [Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Islamic-State-in-Iraq-and-the-Levant) (ISIL; also known as the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria [ISIS] and the Islamic State [IS]), which had taken control of areas of eastern Syria and western Iraq, declared the establishment of a caliphate with the group’s leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi as caliph. Outside extremist circles, the group’s claim was widely rejected.

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**ʿUmar II:** Umayyad caliph

**ʿUmar II**, in full**ʿUmar ibn ʿAbd al-ʿAzīz**, (born 682/683, [Medina](https://www.britannica.com/place/Medina-Saudi-Arabia), Arabia [now in Saudi Arabia]—died February 720, near [Aleppo](https://www.britannica.com/place/Aleppo), Syria), pious and respected [caliph](https://www.britannica.com/topic/caliph) who attempted to preserve the [integrity](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/integrity) of the Muslim Umayyad caliphate (661–750) by emphasizing religion and a return to the original principles of the Islamic faith.

His father, ʿAbd al-ʿAzīz, was a governor of [Egypt](https://www.britannica.com/place/Egypt), and through his mother he was a descendant of [ʿUmar I](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Umar-I) (second caliph, 634–644). He received a traditional education in Medina and won fame for his piety and learning. In February or March 706, ʿUmar was appointed governor of the Hejaz. During his [tenure](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/tenure) of office, he initiated policies that later characterized his reign, particularly his creation of a consultative body of pious men to aid him in his rule.

ʿUmar was elevated to the caliphate by the will of his predecessor, the caliph Sulaymān, in September or October 717. At his accession the stability of the Umayyad caliphate was threatened by the discontent of the Mawālī (non-Arab Muslims) and the “pious opposition,” who resented the Umayyads allegedly for putting political interests ahead of established religious principles. ʿUmar, who was mainly interested in home affairs, attempted no major military conquests, and soon after his accession he lifted his predecessor’s disastrous siege of Constantinople (now Istanbul). Initiating a policy of internal consolidation, he dismissed unpopular governors, reformed the taxation system, and granted the Mawālī the same fiscal rights as [Arab](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Arab) Muslims.

Although many of his policies seemed [untenable](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/untenable), ʿUmar attempted to arrest the disintegration of the Umayyad caliphate by appealing to a broad segment of the Muslim population. He, alone of the Umayyads, was respected by the later ʿAbbāsid [dynasty](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/dynasty) and was highly regarded even among the Shīʿites, schismatic followers of Muhammad’s son-in-law ʿAlī.

**ʿAbd al-Muʾmin:** Almohad caliph

**ʿAbd al-Muʾmin**, in full **ʿAbd al-Muʾmin ibn ʿAli**, (born *c.* 1094, Tagra, Kingdom of the Ḥammādids—died 1163, Rabat, Almohad Empire), [Berber](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Berber) [caliph](https://www.britannica.com/topic/caliph) of the [Almohad](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Almohads) [dynasty](https://www.britannica.com/topic/dynasty) (reigned 1130–63), who conquered the [North African](https://www.britannica.com/topic/history-of-North-Africa) Maghrib from the [Almoravids](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Almoravids) and brought all the Berbers under one rule.

**Life**

ʿAbd al-Muʾmin came from a humble family: his father had been a potter. He seems to have been well instructed in the Muslim faith and must have had a good knowledge of Arabic, for he wished to continue his studies at one of the centres of Muslim learning in the East. A chance meeting with [Ibn Tūmart](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Ibn-Tumart), a Berber religious reformer, made him abandon this idea and begin his brilliant career.

Around 1117, Ibn Tūmart, the founder of the Almohad movement, was returning from a long stay in the East. He landed at Mahdīyah in [Tunisia](https://www.britannica.com/place/Tunisia) and began a journey to southern [Morocco](https://www.britannica.com/place/Morocco), his native country. Wherever he stopped along the way, he proclaimed a twofold message: strict [adherence](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/adherence) to the doctrine of the oneness of God (hence the name [Almohads](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Almohads) or al-Muwaḥḥidūn, Unitarians) and scrupulous observance of [Islāmic law](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Shariah). ʿAbd al-Muʾmin heard Ibn Tūmart preach at Mellala, near [Bejaïa](https://www.britannica.com/place/Bejaia), [Algeria](https://www.britannica.com/place/Algeria). He was an attentive listener and from that time attached himself to the man who had revealed to him the true doctrine.

ʿAbd al-Muʾmin does not seem to have played any special role among Ibn Tūmart’s [disciples](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/disciples) during the slow journey that took them to [Marrakech](https://www.britannica.com/place/Marrakech). But when his master declared his opposition to the ruling [Almoravid](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Almoravids) regime, proclaimed himself the *mahdī* (“divinely guided one”), and took refuge in the remote [High Atlas](https://www.britannica.com/place/High-Atlas) region, ʿAbd al-Muʾmin went with him. Ibn Tūmart won a following in the mountains and founded a small Almohad state there, centred on the village of Tinmel. When al-Bashīr, the reformer’s second in command, was killed in an attack on Marrakech, ʿAbd al-Muʾmin took his place and became Ibn Tūmart’s designated successor. The *mahdī*died in 1130. His death was kept secret at first to allow ʿAbd al-Muʾmin—a stranger to the High Atlas—time to win support from the Almohad leaders. When he was proclaimed leader of the Almohads, he assumed the prestigious title of caliph.

His first task was to carry on the struggle against the Almoravids. Learning from the failure at Marrakech, he realized that he must conquer Morocco from the mountains. On the plains, the Christian knights who served the Almoravids could easily repulse the Almohads’ Berber infantry. He spent the next 15 years winning control of the High Atlas, [Middle Atlas](https://www.britannica.com/place/Middle-Atlas), and [Rif](https://www.britannica.com/place/Rif-mountains-Morocco) regions, finally moving into his native country, north of [Tlemcen](https://www.britannica.com/place/Tlemcen).

Near that town, the Almoravids, having suffered the loss of Reverter, the leader of their Catalan mercenaries, were defeated by ʿAbd al-Muʾmin in open battle in 1145. The Almohad forces then moved west, subjugating Morocco’s Atlantic coastal plain. They then laid siege to Marrakech and took it by storm in 1147, massacring the Almoravid inhabitants.

Arab historians have left a description of the man who had now become master of Northwest Africa. He was a sturdy Berber of medium height, with dark hair and regular features. A good soldier, with great courage and endurance, he was at the same time learned in [Islām](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Islam) and a gifted orator. Although he had personal charm and could, when necessary, show patience and moderation, he was at times as harsh as his master, Ibn Tūmart. When a revolt broke out in the Atlantic plain area following the capture of Marrakech, he conducted a methodical purge there in which more than 30,000 people were executed.

ʿAbd al-Muʾmin left neither memoirs nor a political testament; his ideas must be deduced from his actions. His newfound power and his very success raised problems that demanded immediate solutions.

The capture of Marrakech posed the [moral](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/moral) question of whether to abandon this city founded by the Almoravid heretics, whom he had exterminated without pity. He contented himself with destruction of their palace and mosques and retained Marrakech as the capital of his new empire.

Soon he had to choose between two imperial policies: to complete the conquest of [North Africa](https://www.britannica.com/place/North-Africa) or to concentrate his energies on [Spain](https://www.britannica.com/place/Spain), where the Christians were threatening the former Almoravid domains. Showing good judgment as well as feeling for his native country, he gave priority to North Africa.

In 1151 he subjugated the area around [Constantine](https://www.britannica.com/place/Constantine-Algeria) and on his way home fought a battle near Sétif against a powerful coalition of Arab tribes that had been wandering over the Berber country for a century, gradually destroying its simple, pastoral, and sedentary way of life. ʿAbd al-Muʾmin was victorious, but instead of punishing these people who had showed themselves to be the worst enemies of the Berbers and the Almohad government, he came to rely on them to strengthen his [dynasty](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/dynasty) against internal opposition from the family of Ibn Tūmart. He also wished to use the Arab cavalry in his [holy war](https://www.britannica.com/topic/holy-war) against the Christians in Spain.

In 1158–59 ʿAbd al-Muʾmin conquered Tunisia and [Tripolitania](https://www.britannica.com/place/Tripolitania). This marked the zenith of Berber power in Islām: a Berber caliph reigned over all of North Africa west of [Egypt](https://www.britannica.com/place/Egypt), and his authority was acknowledged by most of Muslim Spain as well.

**ʿAbd al-Muʾmin’s government**

Even while he was pursuing his conquest, ʿAbd al-Muʾmin had established a central government for his empire. To the traditional clan organization of the Maṣmudah and other Berber peoples supporting the Almohads he added an organization to promote the spread of Almohad doctrine and a central administration (the *makhzan*) modeled on those of Muslim Spain, which was staffed largely by Spanish Muslims. A government land registry was improvised to assure the dynasty regular revenue. ʿAbd al-Muʾmin fully accepted the responsibilities of an art patron, but remembering the puritanical austerity of Ibn Tūmart, he sometimes imposed on the mosques built for him by Andalusian artisans a plainness that became more [precious](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/precious) than the prevailing elaborate ornamentation.

ʿAbd al-Muʾmin died in 1163. His work, faithfully carried on by his successors Abū Yaʿqūb Yūsuf (reigned 1163–84) and [Abū Yūsuf Yaʿqūb al-Manṣūr](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Abu-Yusuf-Yaqub-al-Mansur) (1184–99), was maintained for more than half a century. Disturbances caused by the rebellious Arab tribes impoverished the country without endangering the dynasty. After their defeat by the Spanish Christians at Las Navas de Tolosa in 1212, however, the Almohads began to decline, and their empire soon disintegrated.

Though in the long run ʿAbd al-Muʾmin’s successors proved unable to perpetuate his achievements, he himself had written one of the most glorious chapters in the history of the Muslim West.

**ʿAbbasid caliphate**

**ʿAbbasid caliphate**, second of the two great [dynasties](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/dynasties) of the [Muslim](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Islam) [empire](https://www.britannica.com/topic/empire-political-science) of the [caliphate](https://www.britannica.com/place/Caliphate). It overthrew the [Umayyad](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Umayyad-dynasty-Islamic-history) caliphate in 750 CE and reigned as the Abbasid caliphate until it was destroyed by the [Mongol](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Mongol) invasion in 1258.

**[Islamic world: The third fitnah](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Islamic-world/The-third-fitnah%22%20%5Cl%20%22ref317130)**

The name is derived from that of the uncle of the Prophet [Muhammad](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Muhammad), [al-ʿAbbās](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Abbas-ibn-Abd-al-Muttalib) (died c. 653) of the [Hashemite](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Hashimite) clan of the [Quraysh](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Quraysh) tribe in [Mecca](https://www.britannica.com/place/Mecca). From about 718, members of his family worked to gain control of the empire from the Umayyads and, by skillful [propaganda](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/propaganda), won much support, especially from [Shiʿi](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Shii) Arabs and Persians in [Khorāsān](https://www.britannica.com/place/Khorasan-historical-region-Asia). Open revolt in 747, under the leadership of [Abū Muslim](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Abu-Muslim), led to the defeat of [Marwān II](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Marwan-II), the last Umayyad [caliph](https://www.britannica.com/topic/caliph), at the [Battle of the Great Zab River](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Battle-of-the-Great-Zab-River) (750) in Mesopotamia and to the proclamation of the first Abbasid caliph, [Abū al-ʿAbbās al-Saffāḥ](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Abu-al-Abbas-al-Saffah).

Under the Abbasids the caliphate entered a new phase. Instead of focusing, as the Umayyads had done, on the West—on [North Africa](https://www.britannica.com/place/North-Africa), the Mediterranean, and southern Europe—the caliphate now turned eastward. The capital was moved to the new city of [Baghdad](https://www.britannica.com/place/Baghdad), and events in [Persia](https://www.britannica.com/place/Persia) and [Transoxania](https://www.britannica.com/place/Transoxania) were closely watched. For the first time, the caliphate was not [coterminous](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/coterminous) with [Islam](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Islam). In Egypt, North Africa, Spain, and elsewhere, local dynasties claimed caliphal status. With the rise of the Abbasids, the base for influence in the empire became international, emphasizing membership in the [community](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/community) of believers rather than Arab nationality. Since much support for the Abbasids came from [Persian](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Persian) converts, it was natural for the Abbasids to take over much of the Persian ([Sasanian](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Sasanian-dynasty)) tradition of government. Support by pious Muslims likewise led the Abbasids to acknowledge publicly the embryonic [Islamic law](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Shariah) and to profess to base their rule on the religion of Islam.

Between 750 and 833 the Abbasids raised the [prestige](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/prestige) and power of the empire, promoting commerce, industry, arts, and science, particularly during the reigns of [al-Manṣūr](https://www.britannica.com/biography/al-Mansur-Abbasid-caliph), [Hārūn al-Rashīd](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Harun-al-Rashid), and [al-Maʾmūn](https://www.britannica.com/biography/al-Mamun). Their temporal power, however, began to decline when [al-Muʿtaṣim](https://www.britannica.com/biography/al-Mutasim) introduced non-Muslim [Berber](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Berber), [Slav](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Slav), and especially Turkish mercenary forces into his personal army. Although these troops were converted to Islam, the base of imperial unity through religion was gone, and some of the new army officers quickly learned to control the caliphate through assassination of any caliph who would not accede to their demands.

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The power of the army officers had already weakened through internal rivalries when the Iranian [Būyids](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Buyid-dynasty) entered Baghdad in 945, demanding of al-Mustakfī (944–946) that they be recognized as the sole rulers of the territory they controlled. This event initiated a century-long period in which much of the empire was ruled by local dynasties. In 1055 the Abbasids were overpowered by the [Seljuqs](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Seljuq), who took what temporal power may have been left to the caliph but respected his position as the titular leader, restoring the authority of the caliphate, especially during the reigns of al-Mustarshid (1118–35), [al-Muqtafī](https://www.britannica.com/biography/al-Muqtafi), and [al-Nāṣir](https://www.britannica.com/biography/al-Nasir). Soon after, in 1258, the [dynasty](https://www.britannica.com/topic/dynasty) fell during a Mongol siege of Baghdad.

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[…particularly ambitious Hāshimite family, the ʿAbbāsids. The ʿAbbāsids, who were kin but not descendants of Muhammad, claimed also to have inherited, a generation earlier, the authority of one of ʿAlī’s actual descendants, Abū Hāshim. Publicly Abū Muslim called for any qualified member of Muhammad’s family to become caliph, but privately…](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Islamic-world/The-third-fitnah%22%20%5Cl%20%22ref317130)

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**[Islamic world: First Mongol incursions](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Islamic-world/Mongols%22%20%5Cl%20%22ref317280)**

[The ʿAbbāsid line continued, however, until 1517; the Mamlūk sultan Baybars I, shortly after his defeat of the Mongols, invited a member of the ʿAbbāsid house to “invest” him and to live in Cairo as spiritual head of all Muslims.…](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Islamic-world/Mongols%22%20%5Cl%20%22ref317280)

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**[Islamic arts: Early period: the Umayyad and ʿAbbāsid dynasties](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Islamic-arts/Early-period-the-Umayyad-and-Abbasid-dynasties%22%20%5Cl%20%22ref316743)**

[Of all the recognizable periods of Islamic art, this is by far the most difficult one to explain properly, even though it is quite well documented. There are two reasons for this difficulty. On the one hand, it was a formative period, a…](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Islamic-arts/Early-period-the-Umayyad-and-Abbasid-dynasties%22%20%5Cl%20%22ref316743)



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**ʿAbbasid caliphate**

**DATE**

* 750 - 1258

**KEY PEOPLE**

* [al-Ma'mun](https://www.britannica.com/biography/al-Mamun)
* [Harun al-Rashid](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Harun-al-Rashid)
* [al-Mansur](https://www.britannica.com/biography/al-Mansur-Abbasid-caliph)
* [Mongke](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Mongke)
* [al-Mutawakkil](https://www.britannica.com/biography/al-Mutawakkil)
* [al-Mu'tadid](https://www.britannica.com/biography/al-Mutadid-Abbasid-caliph-died-902)
* [Abu al-Abbas al-Saffah](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Abu-al-Abbas-al-Saffah)
* [al-Nasir](https://www.britannica.com/biography/al-Nasir)
* [al-Muqtafi](https://www.britannica.com/biography/al-Muqtafi)
* [al-Muktafi](https://www.britannica.com/biography/al-Muktafi)

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**Abu al-Abbas al-Saffah**

ʿAbbāsid caliph

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**Alternative Title:** Abū al-ʿAbbās al-Saffāḥ

**Abu al-Abbas al-Saffah**, also spelled **Abū al-ʿAbbās al-Saffāḥ**, (born 722—died 754, [Anbar](https://www.britannica.com/place/Anbar) [Iraq]), Islamic [caliph](https://www.britannica.com/topic/caliph) (reigned 749–54), first of the [ʿAbbāsid dynasty](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Abbasid-caliphate), which was to rule over the eastern [Islamic world](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Islamic-world) for approximately the next 500 years. The ʿAbbāsids were descended from an uncle of [Muhammad](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Muhammad) and were cousins to the ruling [Umayyad dynasty](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Umayyad-dynasty-Islamic-history). The Umayyads were weakened by decadence and an unclear line of succession, and they enjoyed little popular support, prompting the ʿAbbāsids to declare open revolt in 747. When Abu al-Abbas assumed the caliphate in 749, he began a campaign of extermination against the Umayyads, the [ʿAlids](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Alid-family), other ʿAbbāsid leaders who had become too popular, and all other claimants to power. He named himself al-Saffah, “the blood-shedder,” because of his savage attacks. He established a firm legal and dynastic base for the ʿAbbāsids. His successor moved the caliphate to [Baghdad](https://www.britannica.com/place/Baghdad).

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[…head of the ʿAbbāsid family, Abū al-ʿAbbās al-Saffāḥ, who now subordinated the claims of the party of ʿAlī to those of his own family and who promised to restore the unity of the ummah, or jamāʿah. The circumstances of his accession reconfigured the piety-minded opposition that had helped bring him…](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Islamic-world/The-third-fitnah%22%20%5Cl%20%22ref317133)

[](https://www.britannica.com/place/Caliphate/The-Abbasid-caliphate%22%20%5Cl%20%22ref135901)

**[Caliphate: The Abbasid caliphate](https://www.britannica.com/place/Caliphate/The-Abbasid-caliphate%22%20%5Cl%20%22ref135901)**

[The first Abbasid caliph, al-Saffāḥ (749–754), ordered the elimination of the entire Umayyad clan; the only Umayyad of note who escaped was ʿAbd al-Raḥman, who made his way to Spain and established an Umayyad dynasty that lasted until 1031.…](https://www.britannica.com/place/Caliphate/The-Abbasid-caliphate%22%20%5Cl%20%22ref135901)

**[Barmakids: Khālid ibn Barmak.](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Barmakids%22%20%5Cl%20%22ref84012)**

[Under the ʿAbbāsid caliph Abū al-ʿAbbās as Saffāḥ, Khālid shared ministerial authority with Abū al-Jahm and was entrusted with the army and the collecting of the land tax.…](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Barmakids%22%20%5Cl%20%22ref84012)



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**Abu al-Abbas al-Saffah**

QUICK FACTS

**BORN**

722

**DIED**

754 (aged 32)
al-Anbar, [Iraq](https://www.britannica.com/place/Iraq)

**TITLE / OFFICE**

* [Caliph](https://www.britannica.com/topic/caliph), [Caliphate](https://www.britannica.com/place/Caliphate) (749-754)

[CALIPH](https://www.britannica.com/topic/caliph)

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**Caliph**

Islamic title

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Professor, Department of Near Eastern Languages and Cultures, Indiana University. Her publications include *Striving in the Path of God: Jihad and Martyrdom in Islamic Thought* (2013) and *The...*

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**Alternative Titles:** calif, khalīfah

**Caliph**, Arabic **khalīfah (“successor”)**, in Islamic history the ruler of the Muslim [community](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/community). Although *khalīfah* and its plural *khulafāʾ* occur several times in the [Qurʾān](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Quran), referring to humans as God’s [stewards](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/stewards) or vice-regents on earth, the term did not denote a distinct political or religious institution during the lifetime of the Prophet [Muhammad](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Muhammad). It began to acquire its later meaning and to take shape as an institution after Muhammad’s death (June 8, 632 CE), when [Abū Bakr](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Abu-Bakr), a companion of the Prophet and an early convert to [Islam](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Islam), was elected by a majority of Muslims as the leader of the Muslim community and assumed the title *khalīfat rasūl Allāh*, “successor of the messenger of God.” Abū Bakr’s successor, [ʿUmar ibn al-Khaṭṭāb](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Umar-I), is said to have first assumed the title *khalīfat Abī Bakr* (“successor to Abū Bakr”), because the title *khalīfat khalīfat rasūl Allāh* (“the successor to the successor of the messenger of God”) would have been cumbersome. ʿUmar also designated himself *amīr al-muʾminīn*, “the commander of the faithful,” which became an additional customary title for succeeding rulers.

[](https://www.britannica.com/quiz/caliphs-and-caliphates)

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[What does the word caliph mean? What caliph’s murder caused a civil war? Test your knowledge of caliphs and caliphates in this quiz.](https://www.britannica.com/quiz/caliphs-and-caliphates)

Abū Bakr and his three immediate successors are known as the “perfect” caliphs or the “rightly guided caliphs” (*al-khulafāʾ al-rāshidun*), whose combined rule is idealized by the majority of Muslims for having been based on the concepts of *[shūrā](https://www.britannica.com/topic/shura)* (consultation), *[ijmāʿ](https://www.britannica.com/topic/ijma)* (consensus) of Muslims, and *bayʿah* (allegiance). In contrast, subsequent rulers of the Muslim polity instituted dynastic rule, which violated the concept of *shūrā* and, therefore, was largely regarded as [illegitimate](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/illegitimate), although it was often grudgingly accepted in a [pragmatic](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/pragmatic) vein.

Nevertheless, the title of caliph was borne by the 14 [Umayyad](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Umayyad-dynasty-Islamic-history) rulers of [Damascus](https://www.britannica.com/place/Damascus) and subsequently by the 38 [ʿAbbāsid](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Abbasid-caliphate) caliphs of [Baghdad](https://www.britannica.com/place/Baghdad), whose [dynasty](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/dynasty) fell before the [Mongols](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Mongol) in 1258. There were titular caliphs of ʿAbbāsid descent in [Cairo](https://www.britannica.com/place/Cairo) under the [Mamlūks](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Mamluk) from 1258 until 1517, when the last caliph was captured by the [Ottoman](https://www.britannica.com/place/Ottoman-Empire) [sultan](https://www.britannica.com/topic/sultan-Islamic-title) [Selim I](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Selim-I). The Ottoman sultans then claimed the title and used it until it was abolished by the Turkish Republic on March 3, 1924.

After the fall of the [Umayyad dynasty](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Umayyad-dynasty-Islamic-history) at Damascus (750), the title of caliph was also assumed by the [Andalusian](https://www.britannica.com/place/Al-Andalus) branch of the family who ruled in Spain at [Córdoba](https://www.britannica.com/place/Cordoba-Spain) (755–1031; *see also* [Caliphate of Córdoba](https://www.britannica.com/place/Caliphate-of-Cordoba)), and it was also assumed by the [Fāṭimid](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Fatimah) rulers of [Egypt](https://www.britannica.com/place/Egypt) (909–1171), who claimed to descend from [Fāṭimah](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Fatimah) (a daughter of Muhammad) and her husband, [ʿAli.](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Ali-Muslim-caliph)

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According to the [Shiʿah](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Shii)s, who call the supreme office the “[imamate](https://www.britannica.com/topic/imamate),” or leadership, no caliph is [legitimate](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/legitimate) unless he is a lineal descendant of the Prophet Muhammad. Later, [Sunni](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Sunni) scholars insisted that the office belonged to the tribe of [Quraysh](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Quraysh), to which Muhammad himself belonged, but this condition would have vitiated the claim of the Ottoman sultans, who held the office after the last ʿAbbāsid caliph of Cairo transferred it to Selim I.

This table provides a list of the primary caliphs.

| **Primary caliphs\*** |
| --- |
| **caliph** | **reign** |
| **"Perfect" caliphs** |
| \*When Muhammad died, Abū Bakr, his father-in-law, succeeded to his political and administrative functions. He and his three immediate successors are known as the "perfect" or "rightly guided" caliphs. After them the title was borne by the 14 Umayyad caliphs of Damascus and subsequently by the 38 ʿAbbāsid caliphs of Baghdad. ʿAbbāsid power ended in 945, when the Būyids took Baghdad under their rule. The Fāṭimids, however, proclaimed a new caliphate in 920 in Tunisia, and it lasted until 1171. ʿAbbāsid authority was partially restored in the 12th century, but the caliphate ceased with the Mongol destruction of Baghdad in 1258. |
| **Abū Bakr** | 632–634 |
| **ʿUmar I** | 634–644 |
| **ʿUthmān ibn ʿAffān** | 644–656 |
| **ʿAlī** | 656–661 |
| **Umayyad caliphs (Damascus)** |
| **Muʿāwiyah I** | 661–680 |
| **ʿAbd al-Malik** | 685–705 |
| **al-Walīd** | 705–715 |
| **Hishām** | 724–743 |
| **Marwān II** | 744–750 |
| **ʿAbbāsid caliphs (Baghdad)** |
| **al-Saffāh** | 749–754 |
| **Hārūn al-Rashīd** | 786–809 |
| **al-Maʾmūn** | 813–833 |
| **Fāṭimid caliphs (Al-Mahdiyyah)** |
| **al-Mahdī** | 909–934 |
| **al-Qāʾim** | 934–946 |
| **al-Manṣūr** | 946–953 |
| **al-Muʿizz** | 953–975 |
| **al-Ḥākim** | 996–1021 |
| **al-Mustanṣir** | 1036–94 |
| **al-Mustaʿlī** | 1094–1101 |
| **ʿAbbāsid caliph (Baghdad)** |
| **al-Nāṣir** | 1180–1225 |

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**[Islam: The state](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Islam/Impact-of-modernism%22%20%5Cl%20%22ref299098)**

[…the office of the Sunni caliph (khalīfah, one who is successor to the Prophet Muhammad in rulership) is religious, this does not imply any functions comparable to those of the pope in Roman Catholicism. The caliph has no authority either to define dogma or, indeed, even to legislate. He is…](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Islam/Impact-of-modernism%22%20%5Cl%20%22ref299098)

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**[Egypt: The Arab conquest](https://www.britannica.com/place/Egypt/From-the-Islamic-conquest-to-1250%22%20%5Cl%20%22ref306931)**

[…had from conquering Egypt, the caliph ʿUmar I, according to some sources, showed reluctance to detach ʿAmr’s expedition from the Syrian army and even tried to recall the mission once it had embarked; but ʿAmr, with or without the caliph’s permission, undertook the invasion in 639 with a small army…](https://www.britannica.com/place/Egypt/From-the-Islamic-conquest-to-1250%22%20%5Cl%20%22ref306931)

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**[Egypt: Religious affairs](https://www.britannica.com/place/Egypt/Ottoman-administration%22%20%5Cl%20%22ref307005)**

[Later the caliph—purportedly the last of the Abbasid line—returned to Egypt, where he died in the reign of Süleyman. The claim that the caliph had transferred his authority to the Ottoman sultan is generally considered an 18th-century invention.…](https://www.britannica.com/place/Egypt/Ottoman-administration%22%20%5Cl%20%22ref307005)



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**Caliph**

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**Al-Hādī**

ʿAbbāsid caliph

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[See Article History](https://www.britannica.com/biography/al-Hadi-Abbasid-caliph/additional-info#history)

**Alternative Titles:** Mūsā al-Hādī, al-Hādī Ila al-Ḥaqq

**Al-Hādī**, in full **al Hādī Ila al Ḥaqq**, also called **Mūsā al-Hādī**, (died 786), fourth [caliph](https://www.britannica.com/topic/caliph) of the ʿAbbāsid [dynasty](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/dynasty) (reigned 785–786).

Al-Hādī’s persecution of the ʿAlids, representatives of the [Shīʿīte](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Shii) sect of [Islām](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Islam), precipitated revolts in [Medina](https://www.britannica.com/place/Medina-Saudi-Arabia), Egypt, and Iraq, all of which were put down brutally. Throughout his short reign, he struggled with the question of succession, attempting to annul the rights of his brother, [Hārūn ar-Rashīd](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Harun-al-Rashid), who was later to become one of the most famous rulers of the ʿAbbāsid dynasty. At the time of al-Hādī’s death, which may have been a murder, ar-Rashīd was imprisoned and then later was released to assume the caliphate.

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[The elder prince, al-Hādī, was four when Hārūn was born. The princes were brought up in the court at Baghdad and educated in the Qurʾān (the holy book of Islam), poetry, music, anecdotes about the Prophet Muhammad, early Islamic history, and current legal practice. Hārūn had as tutor…](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Harun-al-Rashid%22%20%5Cl%20%22ref175488)

**[Barmakids: Yaḥyā](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Barmakids%22%20%5Cl%20%22ref84017)**

[…in succession after his brother Mūsā, but a little later—and due to al-Khayzurān’s and Yaḥyā’s influence—the Caliph intended to deprive Mūsā of his rights as an heir apparent but died before accomplishing his scheme. Hārūn decided not to put up any opposition to the new caliph Mūsā al-Hādī. This wise…](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Barmakids%22%20%5Cl%20%22ref84017)

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**[Shiʿi](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Shii)**

[Shiʿi, member of the smaller of the two major branches of Islam, the Shiʿah, distinguished from the majority Sunnis.…](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Shii)



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**Al-Hādī**

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**DIED**

786

**TITLE / OFFICE**

* [Caliph](https://www.britannica.com/topic/caliph), [Caliphate](https://www.britannica.com/place/Caliphate) (785-786)

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**Middle East**, the lands around the southern and eastern shores of the [Mediterranean Sea](https://www.britannica.com/place/Mediterranean-Sea), [encompassing](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/encompassing) at least the [Arabian Peninsula](https://www.britannica.com/place/Arabia-peninsula-Asia) and, by some definitions, [Iran](https://www.britannica.com/place/Iran), [North Africa](https://www.britannica.com/place/North-Africa), and sometimes beyond. The central part of this general area was formerly called the [Near East](https://www.britannica.com/place/Near-East), a name given to it by some of the first modern Western geographers and historians, who tended to divide what they called the Orient into three regions. Near East applied to the [region](https://www.britannica.com/science/region-geography) nearest [Europe](https://www.britannica.com/place/Europe), extending from the Mediterranean Sea to the [Persian Gulf](https://www.britannica.com/place/Persian-Gulf); Middle East, from the Persian Gulf to [Southeast Asia](https://www.britannica.com/place/Southeast-Asia); and Far East, those regions facing the [Pacific Ocean](https://www.britannica.com/place/Pacific-Ocean).



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[Is the literacy rate in Afghanistan very high? Does Yemen take its name from the Arabic word meaning "northerly?" Sort through the facts in this quiz of Syria, Iraq, and other countries of the Middle East.](https://www.britannica.com/quiz/the-middle-east-fact-or-fiction)

The change in usage began to evolve prior to [World War II](https://www.britannica.com/event/World-War-II) and tended to be confirmed during that war, when the term Middle East was given to the British military command in [Egypt](https://www.britannica.com/place/Egypt). By the mid-20th century a common definition of the Middle East [encompassed](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/encompassed) the states or territories of [Turkey](https://www.britannica.com/place/Turkey), [Cyprus](https://www.britannica.com/place/Cyprus), [Syria](https://www.britannica.com/place/Syria), [Lebanon](https://www.britannica.com/place/Lebanon), [Iraq](https://www.britannica.com/place/Iraq), Iran, [Israel](https://www.britannica.com/place/Israel), the [West Bank](https://www.britannica.com/place/West-Bank), the [Gaza Strip](https://www.britannica.com/place/Gaza-Strip), [Jordan](https://www.britannica.com/place/Jordan), Egypt, [Sudan](https://www.britannica.com/place/Sudan), [Libya](https://www.britannica.com/place/Libya), and the various states and territories of Arabia proper ([Saudi Arabia](https://www.britannica.com/place/Saudi-Arabia), [Kuwait](https://www.britannica.com/place/Kuwait), [Yemen](https://www.britannica.com/place/Yemen), [Oman](https://www.britannica.com/place/Oman), [Bahrain](https://www.britannica.com/place/Bahrain), [Qatar](https://www.britannica.com/place/Qatar), and the Trucial States, or Trucial Oman [now [United Arab Emirates](https://www.britannica.com/place/United-Arab-Emirates)]). Subsequent events have tended, in loose usage, to enlarge the number of lands included in the definition. The three North African countries of [Tunisia](https://www.britannica.com/place/Tunisia), [Algeria](https://www.britannica.com/place/Algeria), and [Morocco](https://www.britannica.com/place/Morocco) are closely connected in [sentiment](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/sentiment) and [foreign policy](https://www.britannica.com/topic/foreign-policy) with the Arab states. In addition, geographic factors often require statesmen and others to take account of [Afghanistan](https://www.britannica.com/place/Afghanistan) and [Pakistan](https://www.britannica.com/place/Pakistan) in connection with the affairs of the Middle East.

Occasionally, [Greece](https://www.britannica.com/place/Greece) is included in the compass of the Middle East because the Middle Eastern (then Near Eastern) question in its modern form first became apparent when the Greeks rose in rebellion to assert their independence of the [Ottoman Empire](https://www.britannica.com/place/Ottoman-Empire) in 1821 (*see* [Eastern Question](https://www.britannica.com/event/Eastern-Question)). Turkey and Greece, together with the predominantly Arabic-speaking lands around the eastern end of the Mediterranean, were also formerly known as the [Levant](https://www.britannica.com/place/Levant).

Use of the term Middle East nonetheless remains unsettled, and some agencies (notably the [United States](https://www.britannica.com/place/United-States) [State Department](https://www.britannica.com/topic/US-Department-of-State) and certain bodies of the United Nations) still employ the term Near East.

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[The war between Iraq and Iran, which began in 1980, also reached a conclusion. The war had been conducted with the utmost ferocity on both sides. The Iraqi leader, Hussein, employed every weapon in his arsenal, including Soviet…](https://www.britannica.com/topic/20th-century-international-relations-2085155/The-Middle-East%22%20%5Cl%20%22ref305319)

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[At least two abiding conflicts did seem ripe for resolution in the wake of the Cold War and the Persian Gulf War. In the](https://www.britannica.com/topic/20th-century-international-relations-2085155/The-quest-for-a-new-world-order-1991-95%22%20%5Cl%20%22ref305392)**[Middle East](https://www.britannica.com/topic/20th-century-international-relations-2085155/The-quest-for-a-new-world-order-1991-95%22%20%5Cl%20%22ref305392)**[mutually reinforcing changes on the international, regional, and domestic fronts breathed new life into the peace process.…](https://www.britannica.com/topic/20th-century-international-relations-2085155/The-quest-for-a-new-world-order-1991-95%22%20%5Cl%20%22ref305392)



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**Al-Muʿtaḍid**

ʿAbbāsid caliph [died 902]

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**Al-Muʿtaḍid**, (died 902), one of the greatest of the ʿAbbāsid caliphs (reigned 892–902), known especially for his ruthless skill in dealing with competing provincial [dynasties](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/dynasties), sects, and factions.

The son of al-Muwaffaq, al-Muʿtaḍid was coregent, with [al-Muʿtamid](https://www.britannica.com/biography/al-Mutamid-Abbasid-caliph-died-892), in his father’s last years. He became [caliph](https://www.britannica.com/topic/caliph) on al-Muʿtamid’s death in 892, having forced him to disinherit his own son. As caliph, al-Muʿtaḍid reorganized the administration and reformed finances. He concluded a peace with the [Ṭūlūnids](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Tulunid-dynasty) by marrying their caliph’s daughter and dealt cruelly with many other factional dynasties that had appeared, including the Dulafids, Ṣaffārids, and ʿAlids. By playing factions against each other, he increased the influence of the Hamdānids and Sāmānids. But al-Muʿtaḍid’s troops were defeated by the [Qarmaṭians](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Qarmatians), a schismatic sect and political movement, and he soon died. He was, according to some sources, poisoned in a palace intrigue.

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**[Iraq: The ʿAbbāsid Caliphate](https://www.britannica.com/place/Iraq/The-Abbasid-Caliphate%22%20%5Cl%20%22ref793604)**

[During the reigns of al-Muʿtaḍid (892–902) and his son al-Muktafī (902–908), Iraq was united under ʿAbbāsid control. Once more Baghdad was the capital, although the caliphs had largely abandoned the Round City of al-Manṣūr on the west bank, and the centre of government now lay on the east bank…](https://www.britannica.com/place/Iraq/The-Abbasid-Caliphate%22%20%5Cl%20%22ref793604)

**[chronology: Muslim](https://www.britannica.com/topic/chronology/Christian%22%20%5Cl%20%22ref523297)**

[…work of the ʿAbbāsid caliph al-Muʿtaḍid, who brought the Nowrūz (Persian New Year’s Day) back to date in keeping with the agricultural activities of the community. Maḥmūd Ghāzān introduced the Khānian era in Persia in ah 701, which was a reversion to the regnal chronologies of antiquity. It continued in…](https://www.britannica.com/topic/chronology/Christian%22%20%5Cl%20%22ref523297)

**[Caliph](https://www.britannica.com/topic/caliph)**

[Caliph, in Islamic history the ruler of the Muslim community. Although khalīfah and its plural khulafāʾ occur several times in the Qurʾān, referring to humans as God’s stewards or vice-regents on earth, the term did not denote a distinct political or religious institution during the lifetime of the…](https://www.britannica.com/topic/caliph)



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**Al-Muʿtaḍid**

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902

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**ʿUthmān ibn ʿAffān**

Muslim caliph

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**ʿUthmān ibn ʿAffān**, (died June 17, 656, Medina, Arabian Peninsula), third [caliph](https://www.britannica.com/topic/caliph) to rule after the death of the Prophet[Muhammad](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Muhammad). He centralized the administration of the [caliphate](https://www.britannica.com/place/Caliphate) and established an official version of the [Qurʾān](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Quran). ʿUthmān is critically important in [Islamic](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Islamic-world) history because his death marked the beginning of open religious and political conflicts within the Islamic [community](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/community) (*see* *[fitnah](https://www.britannica.com/topic/fitnah)*).

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**[Islamic world: Discontent in ʿUthmān’s reign](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Islamic-world/Uthmans-succession-and-policies%22%20%5Cl%20%22ref317089)**

[This phase of conquest ended under ʿUthmān and ramified widely. ʿUthmān may even have sent an emissary to China in 651; by the end of the...](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Islamic-world/Uthmans-succession-and-policies%22%20%5Cl%20%22ref317089)

ʿUthmān was born into the rich and powerful [Umayyad](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Umayyad-dynasty-Islamic-history) clan of [Mecca](https://www.britannica.com/place/Mecca), and he became a wealthy merchant. When [Muhammad](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Muhammad) began preaching in Mecca about 615 CE, he soon aroused the hostility of the Umayyads, but about five years later ʿUthmān accepted Muhammad and thus became the first convert of high social and economic standing. Muhammad valued this contact with the Meccan [aristocracy](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/aristocracy), and he allowed ʿUthmān to marry one of his daughters. ʿUthmān rarely displayed energy or [initiative](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/initiative), however, and his role in the first years of Islamic history was passive.

[ʿUmar](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Umar-I), the second caliph, died in 644, and ʿUthmān was elected successor by a council named by ʿUmar before his death. Apparently ʿUthmān was selected as a compromise, when the more powerful candidates cancelled each other out. He also represented the Umayyad clan, which had suffered a partial eclipse during the Prophet’s lifetime but was now reasserting its influence.

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As caliph ʿUthmān [promulgated](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/promulgated) an official recension of the Qurʾān, which had existed in various versions. ʿUthmān followed the same general policies as ʿUmar but had a less forceful personality than his predecessor. He continued the conquests that had steadily increased the size of the Islamic empire, but the victories now came at a greater cost and brought less wealth in return. ʿUthmān tried to create a [cohesive](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/cohesive) central authority to replace the loose tribal alliance that had emerged under Muhammad. He established a system of landed fiefs and distributed many of the provincial governorships to members of his family. Thus much of the treasure received by the central government went to ʿUthmān’s family and to other provincial governors rather than to the army. As a result of his policies, ʿUthmān was opposed by the army, and he was often dominated by his relatives—unlike ʿUmar, who had been strong enough to impose his authority on the governors, whatever their clan or tribe.

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By 650 rebellions had broken out in the provinces of Egypt and Iraq. In 655 a group of Egyptian malcontents marched upon [Medina](https://www.britannica.com/place/Medina-Saudi-Arabia), the seat of caliphal authority. ʿUthmān, however, was conciliatory, and the rebels headed back to [Egypt](https://www.britannica.com/place/Egypt). Shortly thereafter, however, another group of rebels besieged ʿUthmān in his home, and, after several days of [desultory](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/desultory) fighting, he was killed.