CHAPTER 7

Early Islam in the Near East

Muḥammad's unexpected death in 632 threw his community into confusion, and the difficulty it had in simply surviving speaks volumes about the absence at this stage of a fully formed religious identity, or at least of the failure of that identity to claim the unremitting allegiance of many of those who had joined it. A number of points of tension surfaced, but probably no set of issues proved so contentious to Muslim posterity, or so critical in subsequent definitions of what it meant to be a Muslim, than that surrounding the question of leadership after the Prophet's death. Consequently this terrain is particularly dangerous for the historian. According to the standard Sunni account, Muḥammad's friend and father-in-law Abu Bakr prevented the Medinese Muslims setting themselves up as a separate community from Muḥammad's close circle of Meccan companions, and then was named through acclamation as the first caliph, or successor, of the Prophet. Shiᶜis, however, have a different recollection, and stress a story according to which Muḥammad, sometime prior to his death, identified his cousin ᶜAli as his presumptive heir. Of course both the Sunni and Shiᶜi recollections in fact reflect the fully formed expectations of the later sectarian groups and political parties.[1]

   It is virtually certain that Muḥammad had not made arrangements for the organization and leadership of his community before his death. There are dozens of separate traditions which suggest that the Prophet intended one person or another to succeed him, but as others have pointed out, their very number, let alone their inconsistency, demonstrate that in fact he had not made (or at least had not publicly revealed) any decision concerning this critical question.[2] Sunni tradition projects backwards upon the first decades after Muḥammad's death a memory of the period as a golden age, when what are identified as the "rightly-guided" caliphs ruled in the Prophet's spirit, if not with his authority. According to

[1] Wilferd Madelung has, nonetheless, systematically reviewed the sources in his reconstruction of the political development of the early post-Muhammad Muslim community. See *The Succession to Muḥammad: A Study of the Early Caliphate* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997). His conclusions are far too diverse to summarize here, but in some ways he arrives, through largely Sunni sources, at a viewpoint sympathetic to the claims of ᶜAli to priority, and thus to the expectations of the later Shiᶜi community.

[2] Moshe Sharon, "The Development of the Debate Around the Legitimacy of Authority in Early Islam," *Jerusalem Studies in Arabic and Islam* 5 (1984), 125.

that account, Muhammad was succeeded first by his close friend and confidant Abu Bakr as caliph. Abu Bakr in turn was succeeded by other companions of the Prophet each one selected through the consensus of the leaders of the community: first ᶜUmar, then ᶜUthman, and finally ᶜAli, Muhammad's cousin and son-in-law. But that viewpoint did not take final shape until much later: for example, ᶜAli's status as one of the "rightly-guided" caliphs was not a firm fixture of Sunni thought until the ninth or tenth century. Moreover, the actual circumstances of their accessions and reigns, even as described by the Sunni sources reflect a polity in turmoil, at best. Abu Bakr came to power only through a last-minute sleight-of-hand, while ᶜUmar and ᶜUthman were both assassinated. ᶜAli was raised to power by the rebels responsible for ᶜUthman's death, fought a long civil war against ᶜUthman's cousin Muᶜawiya ibn Abi Sufyan, and was himself at last murdered, a chain of events which the tradition remembers as the community's first *fitna*, "trial" or "temptation," i.e., "civil war."

Quite naturally, much of the secondary literature about early Islam has focused on this issue of leadership. We cannot hope to summarize the discussion here, but can only identify some of the major themes touching upon the question of religious identity and authority. In the first place, the tribal factor continued to play an important and destabilizing role in the development of what would come to be identified as the Islamic polity. In the wake of the Prophet's death, the community was shaken by the so-called Wars of *Ridda*, of "return" or, more grandly, "apostasy," when the *umma* under the leadership of Abu Bakr fought against those tribes which considered the tribal confederation suspended and their allegiance to it terminated, now that Muhammad was gone. The Sunni tradition casts this as a defining moment for the Muslim state. The Muslims' victory is credited with both preserving a unitary state, and cementing the identification of Islam with the Arabs. But at least as important was ᶜUmar's subsequent decision (reversing the exclusionary policy of Abu Bakr) to allow those tribes which had rebelled during the course of the *Ridda* wars and been subdued to participate in the expanding incursions into and attacks on the Fertile Crescent. On one level, ᶜUmar's decision reincorporated the defeated Arabs into the polity as Muslims; at the same time, however, it also acknowledged at least implicitly the continuing claims of the tribes to the self-identities of their members, as well as the *umma*'s need for their participation.[3] Under the caliphate of ᶜUthman, the "tribal factor" continued to destabilize the *umma*, and now from its very core. That caliph pursued a well-known policy of favoring members of his own clan of Umayya from within the larger tribe of Quraysh. The Banu Umayya had held a sort of aristocratic status in pre-Islamic Meccan society. Since, however, most of them had been among the most implacable enemies of the Prophet until shortly before his death, this policy appeared to some Muslims to represent the return to prominence of the pre-Islamic

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[3] Compare M. A. Shaban, *Islamic History, A.D. 600–750 (A.H. 132): A New Interpretation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1971), 28–9, where he sees ᶜUmar's decision as re-establishing the principle of "Islamic Co-Operation."

Meccan nobility, and so it alienated many within the community, and contributed to the tensions which led to ʿUthman's murder.[4]

Those tensions were possible, however, only because Muhammad's preaching had generated a new and competing dynamic. One of the themes of this book has been that of the indeterminacy of the identity of "Islam" at least until the late seventh century, or even later. Nonetheless, the movement led by Muhammad and those who succeeded him, however it is to be identified, was a religious one, or more precisely had important religious components, and those components had considerable force, even if (from the standpoint of those looking for categorical clarity) they lacked a crystalline character. The monotheism preached by Muhammad was of central importance, since it both demanded a radical break from the polytheism of pre-Islamic Arabia (Arabian polytheism had acknowledged Allah's existence, but not his jealous claims), and provided a channel for dialogue with Near Eastern Judaism and Christianity.[5] More importantly, Muhammad's religious message had social and political implications, which were reflected most acutely in ʿUmar's establishment of a *diwan*. The *diwan* was essentially a list of those who were entitled to a share in the booty acquired during the course of military campaigns and distributed by the state; rank within it depended not on tribal identity, but on *sabiqa*, "precedence" according to one's contributions to the new polity.

The new religious imperatives were not *necessarily* contradictory to those of the tribal order. Indeed, they could even work hand in hand. Historians have given various explanations for the Arab conquests in the Near East in the fourth and fifth decades of the seventh century: some have stressed various social and environmental factors peculiar to tribal Arabia, others the newly-found religious fervor of the Arabs.[6] But again, a nuanced answer to the question need not be a zero-sum one. The tribal factor played an unmistakable role in the initial stages of Muslim history, and continued to do so for some time. In Arabia, tribal politics involved *ghazw*, the practice of collecting booty by conducting raids on commercial caravans, rival tribes, or settled (and relatively defenseless) communities. And as is well known, the Arab conquests began as an extension and redirection of the older practice of *ghazw*: having united the Arabs of the peninsula for the first time in a single state, the leaders of the community sought an outlet for this tribal imperative, and conveniently found one in the rich but weakened societies of Syria and Iraq. But the monotheism preached by Muhammad contributed its own imperatives. The Koran is not a squeamish document, and exhorts the believers

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[4] Martin Hinds, "The Murder of the Caliph ʿUthmān," *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 3 (1972), 450–69; cf. Madelung, *Succession*, 80f.

[5] Z. D. H. Baneth, "What Did Muḥammad Mean When He Called His Religion 'Islām'? The Original Meaning of Aslama and its Derivatives," *Israel Oriental Studies* 1 (1971), 183–90. See G. R. Hawting, *The Idea of Idolatry and the Emergence of Islam: From Polemic to History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), for a sustained challenge to the idea that the Koran was in fact a response to Arabian polytheism.

[6] Fred M. Donner, *The Early Islamic Conquests* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1981), 3–9, gives a useful summary of the various interpretations.

to *jihad*. Verses such as "Do not follow the unbelievers, but struggle against them mightily" (25.52) and "Fight [those who have been given a revelation] who do not believe in God and the last day" (9.29) may originally have been directed against Muhammad's local enemies, the pagans of Mecca or the Jews of Medina, but could be redirected once a new set of enemies appeared. To the contemporary eye, piety and the desire for loot were not incompatible, and so we are told that Koran readers were instructed to recite to the Arab soldiers *Surat al-Anfal*, a chapter of the Koran dealing largely with the spoils of war, as a means of encouraging them and strengthening their hearts before battle, a practice for which the tradition claimed Prophetic precedent. The complex nature of the Muslim Arab conquests is captured nicely in the historian al-Tabari's account of Arab general Saᶜd ibn Abi Waqqas's exhortation to his soldiers as they prepared for a pivotal battle against the Persians in 635:

> This land is your inheritance and the promise of your Lord. God permitted you to take possession of it three years ago. You have been tasting it and eating from it, and you have been killing its people, collecting taxes from them, and taking them into captivity. … You are Arab chiefs and notables, the elect of every tribe, and the pride of those who are behind you. If you renounce this world and aspire for the hereafter, God will give you both this world and the hereafter.[7]

Whatever inspired them, the Arab conquests must have come as a shock to the inhabitants of Iraq, Syria, and Egypt. They knew *of* the Arabs, of course, as nomads from the desert had for centuries been moving in and out of the settled areas of the Fertile Crescent. Moreover, as we saw earlier, the Byzantine and Sasanian Empires had, in the century or so before the conquests, maintained a master–client relationship with the Arab states of the Ghassanids and the Lakhmids which served as buffers between the imperial provinces and the ungovernable tribes and wastes of the peninsula. But nothing prepared the citizens of Damascus or Ctesiphon for the tremendous victories of the Arabs over Byzantine and Sasanian forces at the battles of Yarmuk in Jordan (636) and Qadisiyya in Iraq (636 or 7), nor for the possibility that these provinces would be permanently occupied and administered by a new Arab state.

The bewilderment of the inhabitants of the Near East was long-lasting, and testifies to the drawn out gestation of a distinctive Muslim identity. Contemporary non-Muslim sources indicate a protracted effort on the part of the non-Arab inhabitants of the Near East to comprehend these unexpected rulers in terms which

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[7] Muhammad ibn Jarīr al-Ṭabarī, *Tārīkh al-rusul wa'l-mulūk*, ed. M. J. De Goeje and others (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1879–1901), 1.2289 = *The History of al-Ṭabarī*, vol. 12, trans. Yohanan Friedmann (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 1992), 84–5; cf. al-Ṭabarī, *Tārīkh*, 2294–5 = *History* 12.89-90; al-Ṭabarī, *Tārīkh*, 2095 = *History*, vol. 11, trans. Khalid Yahya Blankenship (Albany, New York: SUNY Press, 1993), 94. See also Martin Hinds, "Kūfan Political Alignments and Their Background in the Mid-Seventh Century A.D.," *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 2 (1971), 346–67, esp. 358; G. H. A. Juynboll, "The Qur'ān Reciter on the Battlefield and Concomitant Issues," *Zeitschrift der Deutschen Morgenländischen Gesellschaft* 125 (1975), 11–13; Patricia Crone, *Meccan Trade and the Rise of Islam* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1987), 244–5.

made sense to them.[8] So, for example, the Christians of Syria knew the Arab conquerors as "Saracens," "Hagarenes," "Ishmaelites," or even "Amalek." A century after the Prophet's death the last of the Church Fathers, John of Damascus, still used these terms to describe the Muslims, and furthermore suggested that Muhammad's religious ideas were in part the outcome of his encounter with a monk subscribing to the Christian Arian heresy.[9] Seventh-century Byzantine sources devote much more polemical attention to Judaism than to the Arabs' new faith. On the one hand, that may simply reflect the inertia of the Byzantine polemical tradition, and a lingering perception that the hated Jews posed a more serious religious threat. On the other, it may also reflect the predominance of the Jewish contribution to the religious matrix from which Islam emerged. Christians writing in Syriac, who were often better informed about the Arabs and their faith than were their more remote Byzantine colleagues, also at first seem to have understood the Muslim phenomenon in a Jewish framework, describing, for example, the construction of the Dome of the Rock as a rebuilding of the ancient Temple, and asserting that Muhammad and his followers accepted the Jewish law. A monk writing in a monastery in northern Iraq in the 680s referred to Muhammad as a "guide" who instructed the Arabs in the "ancient law," by which he meant the Torah.[10]

To the inhabitants of the Near East, what the Arabs were was – Arabs. In the wake of the *Ridda* wars, and of the Arabs' sudden conquest of most of the Near East, the new religion became identified more sharply as a monotheism for the Arab people. As is well known, the Arabs made no attempt to impose their faith on their new subjects, and at first in fact discouraged conversions on the part of non-Arabs. A caliph such as ʿUmar seems to have regarded himself, first and foremost, as the leader of the Arabs, and their monotheistic creed as the religious component of their new political identity. So, for example, while he recognized the right of some Christian Arab tribes to retain their own faith, he did not impose on them the humiliating head-tax (*jizya*) to which other non-Muslims were now subject. And so, too, when the Christian Arabs of the tribe of Iyad sought refuge in the Byzantine Empire, ʿUmar wrote to the emperor demanding their return, and threatening to drive non-Arab Christians out of lands under Arab control if he did not comply.[11] Similarly, Syriac sources from the mid- to late-seventh century

[8] The best survey of these sources is now Robert G. Hoyland, *Seeing Islam as Others Saw It: A Survey and Evaluation of Christian, Jewish and Zoroastrian Writings on Early Islam* (Princeton: Darwin Press, 1997).

[9] Daniel J. Sahas, "The Seventh Century in Byzantine-Muslim Relations: Characteristics and Forces," *Islam and Christian–Muslim Relations* 2 (1991), 11, and idem, *John of Damascus on Islam: The "Heresy of the Ishmaelites"* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1972).

[10] Averil Cameron, "The Eastern Provinces in the Seventh Century A.D.: Hellenism and the Emergence of Islam," *Hellenismos: Quelques Jalons pour une Histoire de l'Identité Grecque*, ed. S. Said (Leiden: Brill, 1991), 287–313, esp. 294–5; G. J. Reinink, "The Beginnings of Syriac Apologetic Literature in Response to Islam," *Oriens Christianus* 77 (1993), 165–87, esp. 166–7; S. P. Brock, "Syriac Views of Emergent Islam," in *Studies on the First Century of Islamic Society*, ed. G. H. A. Juynboll (Carbondale and Edwardsville: Southern Illinois University Press, 1982), 11–12.

[11] Madelung, *The Succession to Muhammad*, 74.

referred to Muhammad in political rather than religious terms, as king of the Arabs, rather than as prophet.[12]

In hindsight, of course, both Muhammad and his religion amounted to much more. The sharpening of the Muslims' religious identity took place during a period – the second half of the seventh and the beginning of the eighth centuries – which is sometimes referred to as that when the Muslim state was in essence an "Arab kingdom." The formation of this distinct religious identity and the consolidation of the empire dominated by Arabs, were really the culmination of the longer-term process by which the Arabs of the peninsula were incorporated into the dominant social and cultural patterns of the Near East.

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[12] Brock, "Syriac Views," 14.