HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
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ARABIAN GOVERNMENT

Contents

Postclassical Government in the Middle East/North Africa: the Caliphate

Overview: During most of the postclassical period the dominant government in this region was the Caliphate, which at its height ruled an empire from present-day Pakistan in the east to Morocco and Spain in the west. The Caliphate went through three main phases: its early period centered on the need to identify succession to the Prophet Muhammed, who left no male heirs; the Umayyad dynasty (661-750 CE), based in Damascus, which loosely guided the process of Arab conquest; and the Abbasid dynasty, which began in 750 and was effectively demolished with the Mongol invasion of Baghdad in 1258 (though rulers fled to Cairo and continued to claim religious authority). Abbasid emphasis rested on internal consolidation and efforts to suppress a variety of internal challenges; but it was under the Abbasids that Arab Islam enjoyed the greatest mercantile prosperity and cultural creativity.

Key issues Arab Islamic government was not particularly original in terms of administrative structure. It also faced recurrent problems of succession, with bitter quarrels and sometimes outright bloodshed among siblings competing for power. This aside, the most important features of this government were: 1. The familiar one of seeking to maintain such a large territory, and under the Abbasids the gradual loss of ground to breakaway regions (particularly in North Africa and Spain); 2. The complex issue of the role of Islam in the state; and 3. The establishment of distinctive economic and particularly social policies, extending the state's welfare function.

Formation The term caliph most commonly meant "successor to the prophet of God", but the minority Shia group insisted that the caliph should be appointed by God from the descendants of the Prophet. Early caliphs were elected by a council of tribal leaders, which some hold to be an early form of Arab democracy. But this system ended with the triumph of the Umayyad dynasty, which introduced the principle of heredity. It was this transition that prompted the Shia revolt, in favor of Muhammad's son-in-law. Subsequent Arab conquests made the Umayyad caliphate the largest empire the world had seen to that point (5.17 million square miles at its height), and the sixth largest in human history. But the Umayyads were ultimately unseated by rebellions by a variety of groups, including Shiites but also non-Arab Muslims, leading to Abbasid triumph and relocation of the capital to Baghdad).

Administrative system Ummayad rule was very loosely organized (even more than Roman rule had been), with great latitude for local systems and administrative structures including tolerance for the sizable religious minorities of Christians and Jews. Abbasids, with greater Persian involvement, tightened up somewhat. Typically a grand vizier was appointed to oversee administration, with regional emirs taking charge under his direction; 24 provinces were established. Over time, Viziers often wielded greater power than the Caliphs, many of whom devoted themselves to a life of indulgence and the often intricate patterns of court intrigue (including the special role of eunuchs, castrated men initially hired to guard the wives and concubines of the ruler but who could gain wider powers within the court apparatus). No clear system of administrative recruitment or training was established. While education expanded rapidly, it was under mosque control for the most part. Under the Abbasids particularly, many non-Arabs and even non-Muslims gained a role in the bureaucracy. Local and regional governments maintained prior traditions by building and maintaining roads and operating an extensive postal system – the post office in Baghdad even had a map showing distances between major cities (though mailmen served as spies as well). Considerable latitude continued to extend to local governments, though gradually the role of Arabic in record-keeping gained ascendancy. Throughout the Arab caliphates, recruitment of a reliable military force was an essential feature of the state, sometimes including the use of slaves as soldiers.

The role of Islam Unlike Christianity, Islam was born in close association to the state: Muhammad was primarily a prophet and religious leader, but he sought and gained firm control of local government, and this linkage was passed on to the Caliphate. There was no question that, in Islamic political theory, the primary role of the state was promotion and protection of the faith and enforcement of Islamic law. The *Qur'an* made few references to the Arab term for caliph, but it clearly suggested that the office was established by God. Other passages emphasized the importance of religious rule: "So govern the people by that which God has revealed (Islam), and follow not their vain desires, beware of them in case they seduce you from just some part of that which God has revealed to you." Many later Arab theorists continued to emphasize the religious functions of the ruler, along with more general obligations of personal piety, provision of justice, and concern for public welfare. They also frequently insisted on the importance of having a single leader for Islam. The same line of thinking stressed the role of the state in enforcing the Sharia, or Islamic law, and even the necessity to rise up against a ruler who was not fulfilling his religious functions. However, this approach was complicated by several factors, in theory and in practice. Interpretations of Sharia law could vary. Many rulers, as noted, were not personally pious nor primarily interested in religious enforcement, but this did not necessarily prompt revolt. The Prophet himself had said that Muslims could live under a nonMuslim state (even concealing their religious identity if necessary), for after all religious, not political goals were primary for a faithful Muslim. A related tension surrounded the concept of *jihad,* or struggle. For many early Muslims, particularly through the Umayyad period, this could mean active military efforts against unbelievers (though the Prophet had also warned against efforts to convert by force). More commonly, it came to mean defense against attacks on Islam or, even more widely, a personal struggle to maintain a virtuous life – in this latter case, not intimately connected to government at all. From the 8th century onward most political theorists emphasized the more harmonious aspects of Islam over the confrontational. Overall, the Islamic approach to the state was and remains complex, not totally unlike tensions which arose under Christianity despite a different initial base.

Economic and welfare functions Effective caliphs quickly realized that economic prosperity was vital, if only to provide adequate tax revenues. They frequently claimed basic land ownership, with private property a delegation from the state and therefore subject to taxation and regulation alike. The real estate tax was central to government finances, though other levies, including taxes on the sale of cattle, were involved as well. Resistance to taxation did occur, but was put down by military force. The collective approach did not prevent the rise of a market economy, but it could lead to interventions, for example to deal with periods of scarcity or to handle limited resources. The government established a central monetary system, replacing a welter of local currencies. Islamic emphasis on charity had clear implications for government. Tax revenues were used in part for state-sponsored support for the poor including widows, the elderly, orphans and the disabled. This was an unprecedented extension of state functions, and an important innovation.

Cultural role For the most part, the flowering of science and literature, as well as religion was independent of the state, though the government did encourage missions to place like India to seek out useful knowledge and technology. Nevertheless, some Abbasid rulers tried actively to support rational inquiry, even punishing scholars who tried to insist on faith alone. However, this government stance declined after the 9th and 10th centuries. Some historians have argued that state intervention in intellectual life, and then the turn away from cultural diversity, played a role in the larger decline of cultural creativity toward the end of the Arab caliphate.

Loose ends Regional rebellions against the Abbasids led to the formation of more localized caliphates, some even before the Mongol invasions, claiming many of the same governmental principles though without the ability to point to overall Islamic leadership. Ultimately the principal claim to the caliphate passed, in the 16th century, to the Ottoman regime, but much later, in 1924 and after the Ottoman collapse and the rise of the secular Turkish republic, the office was abolished altogether. Some have speculated that this left the door open to renewed and sometimes dangerous claims to the mantle of caliph.

Study questions

1. What were the main complexities in the Islamic approach to government during the postclassical period?
2. Why and how did the role of jihad change during the course of the postclassical caliphates?
3. What were the main functions of government during the period of the Arab caliphates?

Further reading

Patricia Crone and Martin Hinds, *God's Caliph: religious authority in the first centuries of Islam* (Cambridge University Press, 1986)

Hugh Kennedy, *The Prophet and the Age of the Caliphates: the Islamic Near East from the 8th to the 11th centuries* (Routledge, 2004)

Ira Lapidus, *History of Islamic Societies* (Cambridge University Press, 2002)

20TH CENTURY

The Middle East/North Africa

Overview The various countries in this region had diverse political experiences in the century after World War I. A fairly consistent thread, though with important exceptions, was the absence of commitment to multi-party democracy. Key parts of the region were held as European mandate territories after the war, with boundaries that were arbitrarily determined between the British and French without great regard for political viability – an ongoing problem. Full decolonization was completed after World War II, though in the case of Algeria only after bitter struggle. Political patterns in the region were also strongly affected by outside interference, drawn by the importance of oil and more general Cold War, or post-Cold War, rivalries. Finally, a number of major internal wars affected key parts of the region: several wars pitted the new nation of Israel against neighboring Arab states; a major conflict in the 1970s involved Iran and Iraq; after 2014 Saudi Arabia and Iran conducted a brutal proxy war in Yemen. Generally, nations in the region maintained unusually high military budgets, urged on by arms exporters in the United States, Russia and elsewhere.

Forms of government This was the only large region where monarchy persisted strongly, and in some cases, as with Jordan, the monarchies themselves were new. Saudi Arabia, the Arab Emirates and other Gulf nations, and Morocco were the key cases in point. Egypt however cast off a rather weak monarch in the 1950s, and earlier the collapse of the Ottoman Empire completed the end of hereditary rule in Turkey. The new nation of Israel committed to democracy quickly after World War II, but amid huge complications concerning the political rights of many Palestinians. The Arab Spring risings in 2010 aimed at greater democracy and commitments to human rights, but they quickly failed except in Tunisia. During most of the period most countries in the region were ruled by an authoritarian strongman and/or a single party; this was the form of government reestablished in Egypt after the Arab spring, and preserved amid bitter civil war in Syria.. Finally, internal strife and outside interference combined in the 21st century to create essentially failed states in Lebanon, Yemen and Libya.

Religion Religion and religious strife continued to play an outsize role in many of the region's governments. The Saudi Arabian government continued to sponsor a religious police, regulating dress and habits and severely limiting entertainment options; this approach began to ease slightly in the second decade of the 21st century. Saudi officials also underwrote Islamic initiatives in other countries, in the region and also in South Asia. Over time Israel, initially rather secular, committed increasingly to Judaism. Lebanon was bitterly divided among Christians and Sunni and Shiite Muslims. In contrast, in several countries authoritarian leaders worked to control Islamic political movements, often providing important protections for religious minorities: this was true in Iraq before the 2003 American invasion, where a Sunni leader presided over a majority Shiite nation; in Egypt; and in Syria. Here the religious thrust was an important factor as an opposition movement – as with the Muslim Brotherhood, established In Egypt in 1928. Finally amid the chaos of American invasion of Iraq plus civil war in Syria, the so-called Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) emerged in 2014, briefly ruling a considerable stretch of territory and subjecting it to a particular version of Islamic law, with great cruelty to many women and religious minorities. Movements of this sort also sponsored recurrent terrorism in the region and beyond.

Important markers Major developments in the region included the "Suez crisis" of 1956: a new regime in Egypt seized control of the Suez Canal from British and French authorities and, with backing from the United States and the Soviet Union, held off a threat of attack. Egyptian management of the Canal proved quite successful from that point onward. Another important milestone involved the creation of the Organization of Petroleum Exporting States (OPEC) in 1960. During the first half of the twentieth century, the region's oil resources had been dominated by Western companies. New or stronger national governments after World War II managed to wrest control away from foreign ownership; oil revenues began to flow back into the region, with huge results in places like Saudi Arabia and the Gulf states. The formation of OPEC (predominantly though not exclusively Middle Eastern) introduced greater ability to manage supply and pricing. Governments in oil-rich countries began to utilize oil revenues to expand urban development and create new universities, along with a great deal of personal enrichment for the upper class.

Study questions

1. What factors contributed to the pervasiveness of authoritarianism in the Middle East and North Africa?
2. What was the role of Islamic movements in the politics of the region?

Further reading

James Gelvin, *The Modern Middle East: a history* (4th ed., Oxford University Press, 2014)

Peter Mandaville, *Global Political Islam* (Routledge, 2007)

Keith Watenpaugh, *Being Modern in the Middle East: revolution, nationalism, colonialism and the Arab middle class* (Princeton University Press, 2007)

Jason Brownlee and others, *The Arab Spring: politics of transformation in North Africa and the Middle East* (Oxford University Press, 2013)