

The Rightly Guided Caliphs: Umar ibn Al-Khattab



The second of the Rightly Guided Caliphs (*Al-Khulafa' Ar-Rashidun*) was Umar ibn Al-Khattab. He was also the first man to take the title of Commander of the Faithful. Umar assumed leadership of the *Ummah* after the death of Abu Bakr. The year was 634 CE and Umar ruled for approximately 10 years.

Umar was born into a middle class family approximately 11 years after the birth of Prophet Muhammad. He had what we would call a harsh upbringing, his father would beat him when he thought it necessary and at times worked his son to the point of exhaustion. Despite this Umar was literate, an uncommon skill in pre-Islamic Arabia, and grew into a tall, well-built, muscular man known for his fierce demeanor and wrestling skills.

As Umar grew into manhood he supplemented the meagre income he earned from shepherding for his father and aunts, by engaging in wrestling competitions. His skill increased and so too did his business acumen. By the time Prophet Muhammad, may the mercy and blessings of Allah be upon him, began openly calling people to Islam Umar was a successful trader and businessman.

Umar's path to the truth began with an intense hatred of Islam. Umar was one of the men in Mecca that considered Islam to be an obstacle to economic growth and stability, thus he used his immense strength and influence to ridicule the new religion and he openly took part in the abuse and torture of some of the weaker converts to Islam. Umar's hatred for Islam was so strong that he volunteered to kill Prophet Muhammad and thus put an end to the changes taking place in Mecca.

The complete story of Umar's conversion to Islam can be found on many websites. However for the sake of brevity we can say that Allah prevented him from killing Prophet Muhammad and instead seized his heart through the beautiful sound of Quran being recited. When Umar pronounced his intention to murder Prophet Muhammad a young believer tried to divert him by revealing that Umar's own dear sister and her husband had converted to Islam. It had the desired effect and Umar changed course. Umar was so incensed by the turn of affairs that he lashed out at his sister and caused her great harm, even drawing blood, a melee ensued however after some minutes Umar realized how he had nearly hurt his sister and calmed down. He asked to hear the parts of the Quran his sister had been reciting before he had stormed into their house.

Umar's eyes filled with tears of remorse and joy and he rushed to Prophet Muhammad declaring his love for Islam and Allah's Messenger. Within days Umar led a procession of believers to the *Kabah* where they prayed openly. Islam was strengthened by Umar; his fierce hatred became love and he declared that his life and his death now belonged to Allah and His Messenger, Muhammad. The first two *Rashidun*, Abu Bakr and Umar ibn Al-Khattab became close friends and they were the two companions closest to Prophet Muhammad. Ali ibn Abi Talib is reported to have

said that Prophet Muhammad went out in the morning with Abu Bakr and Umar and he would return at night with Abu Bakr and Umar.

Umar ibn Al-Khattab was a pious and generous man. He would often spend the nights in worship, and he was a staunch believer in Allah's promise of Paradise. Umar readily spent his wealth for the sake of Allah and to benefit the believers. Umar once distributed 22,000 dirhams to the needy and had a habit of giving away bags of sugar. When Umar was asked why he distributed the sugar he said, "Because I love it and God said, 'By no means shall you attain piety, unless you spend (in God's Cause) of that which you love; and whatever of good you spend, God knows it well.' (Qur'an 3:92)"

Umar was the best in righteousness after Prophets and Abu Bakr. Prophet Muhammad said, "Follow the example of the two who come after me, Abu Bakr and Umar. The *Sunnah* is filled with examples of the virtues of Umar ibn Al-Khattab including this profound and significant statement from Prophet Muhammad. "Among the nations who came before you some were inspired; if anyone from among my *Ummah* were to be inspired it would be Umar."

Umar loved Prophet Muhammad so much that he was determined to stay close to him during all the battles the Muslim armies took part in. It is understood that Umar was present at the first battle, the battle of Badr and all the other battles at which the Messenger of Allah was present. Umar was a great man and a great leader; in fact, his faith, knowledge, intellect, attitude and influence were all exceptional and all based on his strong relationship with Allah and His Messenger.

When Prophet Muhammad died the entire *Ummah* went into a deep state of shock. None more than Umar, he found himself feeling lost and out of control, even refusing to believe Prophet Muhammad had now passed away. Abu Bakr had to take matters into his own hands and call the people away from Umar. In his famous address he (Abu Bakr) said, "Whoever amongst you worshipped Muhammad, know that Muhammad is dead, but whoever worshipped Allah, know that Allah is alive and will never die." He then recited **Quran 3:144** saying, "**Muhammad is no more than a Messenger and indeed (many) Messengers have passed away before him. If he dies or is killed, will you then turn back on your heels (as disbelievers)? And he who turns back on his heels, not the least harm will he do to Allah; and Allah will give reward to those who are grateful.**" The people were overcome, as if they had never heard this verse before, which of course they had. They all in their grief started reciting it. Umar said that on hearing Abu Bakr recite he began to feel dizzy and fell to the ground. He then understood that Prophet Muhammad was dead.

When Abu Bakr became the first of the Rightly Guided Caliphs, Umar hastened to swear allegiance to him and to encourage others to do so he took his oath of allegiance publicly. Little did Umar ibn Al-Khattab know that in just over two years he would be standing in front of the *Ummah* as the second Caliph.



It was Abu Bakr who chose Umar to be the second *khalifah* (caliph) of Islam. On his death bed Abu Bakr gathered his friends and advisors together and asked them to choose his successor from among themselves, however they were unable to do so and went back to Abu Bakr and insisted that he make that decision himself. He chose Umar Ibn Al-Khattab. Umar took on the leadership of the *Ummah* in 634 CE at the death of Abu Bakr.

Umar himself was aware of his reputation for toughness and his first act was to address the people and outline his expectations particularly his expectations for himself. His speech leaves us in no doubt that Umar did not seek accolades, nor was he searching for greatness. He did however want to uphold the legacy of Prophet Muhammad. He began by saying, "O people, know that I have been appointed to govern your affairs, so recognize that my toughness is now weakened, but I will continue to be tough and harsh on the people of oppression and transgression..." It was during Umar's caliphate that Islamically ideal religious and political infrastructure was formed and consolidated. He gave meaning to and demonstrated these words from the Quran:

"O you who believe, stand out firmly for justice as witnesses to Allah..." (Quran 4:135)

Umar ibn Al-Khattab's reign saw the small Islamic nation based at Medina turn into a world power. Military strongholds were formed and they later transformed into some of the great cities of the Islamic Caliphate such as Basra, Damascus, Kufa and Fustat the city now known as Cairo. Umar divided this widespread Caliphate into provinces and he appointed governors whose responsibilities and authority were clearly defined. Any corrupt administrators were severely punished. The executive and the judiciary were separated and *qadis* were appointed to administer justice according to Islamic principles.

Caliph Umar insisted that his appointed governors live simple lives and be accessible to the people at all times, and he set this example himself. He could often be found amongst the people or in the mosque where his clothing and demeanor meant he was indistinguishable from the ordinary man. Umar also spent many a watchful night seeking anyone who needed help or assistance. There are a number of *hadiths* that attest to Umar's almost nightly vigils, walking the streets of Medina. There were poor people and hungry travelers whom Umar cooked for and babies born with the help of Umar ibn Al-Khattab's wife. Umar was able to discover what the common people thought and could make or change rules accordingly. For instance, the children's stipend usually paid at weaning was changed to being paid at birth thus encouraging mothers not to hasten the time of weaning.

One particular story is of the milk maid encouraged by her mother to adulterate the milk in order to make more money. Umar ibn Al-Khattab heard the conversation where the milk maid defied her mother and said that although they may trick the Caliph and the people, they could never hide the deception from Allah. Umar encouraged his son to marry this girl because of her Islamic values and principles. At one time a woman brought a claim against the Caliph himself. When Umar ibn

Al-Khattab appeared before the *qadi*, the *qadi* stood up as a sign of respect towards the Caliph. Umar reprimanded him, saying, "This is the first act of injustice you did to this woman!"

Throughout this significant expansion of the *Ummah* Umar ibn Al-Khattab closely controlled general policy and laid down the principles for administering the conquered lands. The structure of Islamic legal practice is due to him. Umar was an outstanding administrator. He established a *Shura* council where he sought and took advice on matters of state, important decisions were made only after thorough debate.

Umar established the institution known as the *Diwan* by which annual stipends from the public treasury were paid to all members of the *Ummah*. Fully accountable finance, accounting, taxation and treasury departments were organized. Police, prisons and postal units were established and soldiers in the vast Muslim armies were paid. Teachers were also paid as education was encouraged. The study of Islamic sciences, language, literature, writing and calligraphy all received patronage and over 4,000 mosques were built. The standardization of the text of the Quran was completed during Umar's caliphate.

Umar ibn Al-Khattab was eager to advance the Muslim *Ummah* by utilizing technology and construction techniques known in the lands they conquered. The building of windmills such as were used in Persia was encouraged throughout the Caliphate. Old bridges and roads were repaired and new ones built. It is said that a traveller could move with ease from Egypt to Khorasan in central Asia. The vast territories of West Asia and North Africa were linked together into a free trade zone. A population census was taken and Umar established the Islamic calendar beginning at the *Hijrah* of Prophet Muhammad.

Sadly, and ironically, Umar, a man that stood for justice for all was assassinated because of a verdict he had given in a civil case. One of the Companions, Mugheera bin Sho'ba, rented a house to a Persian carpenter named Abu Lulu for two dirhams a day, a sum Abu Lulu felt was too high. He complained to the Caliph Umar ibn Al-Khattab who gathered all the facts, and determined the rent was fair. This minor incident precipitated the end of Umar's 10-year reign as the 2nd Caliph of the *Ummah*. Abu Lulu vowed to take the life of the Caliph. The next morning, Umar went to the mosque and as he was leading the prayer, reciting the Quran, Abu Lulu thrust his double-edged sword into the Caliph's stomach. The internal bleeding could not be stopped and Umar ibn Al-Khattab the leader of the faithful passed away the following day. The year was 644 CE.

Take the quiz

1) Umar assumed leadership of the *Ummah* after the death of:

- A. *Abu Bakr.*
- B. *Uthman ibn Affan.*
- C. *Ali ibn Abi Talib.*
- D. *Bilal ibn Rabah.*

2) Umar ibn Al-Khattab ruled the *Ummah* for:

- A. *approximately one year.*
- B. *approximately five years.*
- C. *approximately ten years.*
- D. *approximately twenty years.*

3) Select a true statement.

- A. *Umar's path to the truth began with a natural curiosity of Islam.*
- B. *Umar's path to the truth began with an intense hatred of Islam.*
- C. *Umar's path to the truth began with a strong desire to seeking the truth.*
- D. *Umar's path to the truth began with his natural attraction towards the personality of the Prophet Muhammad.*

4) From which of the following means did Umar earn a living during his lifetime?

- A. *Shepherding.*
- B. *Wrestling competitions.*
- C. *Business and trade.*
- D. *All of the above.*

5) Umar ibn Al-Khattab is known to be:

- A. *the first of the Rightly Guided Caliphs.*
- B. *the second of the Rightly Guided Caliphs.*
- C. *the third of the Rightly Guided Caliphs.*
- D. *the fourth of the Rightly Guided Caliphs.*

6) How did Umar ibn Al-Khattab set himself as an example for others?

- A. He wore clothing in a manner in which he was indistinguishable from the ordinary man.
- B. He maintained a demeanor in a manner in which he was indistinguishable from the ordinary man.
- C. He spent many a watchful night seeking anyone who needed help or assistance.
- D. All of the above.

7) What were the governors under Umar ibn Al-Khattab instructed by him to do?

- A. They were instructed to live lavish lives thus enjoying their wealth and success.
- B. They were instructed to make themselves accessible to the people at all times.
- C. They were instructed to be harsh and severe with the people.
- D. They were instructed to maintain their power in any way possible.

8) What was the cause of the death of Umar ibn Al-Khattab?

- A. He was poisoned by an arch enemy of Islam.
- B. He died whilst fighting during a battle.
- C. He was assassinated by a sword.
- D. He succumbed to prolonged illness and disease.

9) Which of the following is true with regards to Umar ibn Al-Khattab's policy of making decisions?

- A. He established a Shura council where he sought and took advice on matters of the state.
- B. He made all decisions' on his own trusting only himself.
- C. He established a judiciary to make all decisions on his behalf regardless of his consent.
- D. All of the above.

10) What was the name of the assassin who killed Umar ibn Al-Khattab?

- A. Abu Lulu.
- B. Abu Lahab.
- C. Abu Jandal.
- D. Kaab ibn Al-Ashraf.

11) One of the great achievements at the time of the Caliphate of Umar was:

- A. the construction of a modern railway system.
- B. the establishment of the Islamic calendar.
- C. the compilation and printing of the Holy Quran.
- D. the construction of the first mosque in Medina.