

How did Islam Spread? By Sword or By Conversion?

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Introduction

“Islam is an evil religion.” “It promotes violence.” These are some common labels used against Islam by the rightwing Christian media. Such bias is based on the historical stereotype that the Arabs forced the non-Arabs into the Islamic faith. In the recent past it was not uncommon to see books with drawings of an Arab riding his horse with sword in the one hand & the Qur’an in the other.

So let us see how Islam spread in the world: by sword or by conversion?

The Qur’anic Perspective

Let us first look at the issue of “conversion by force” from the Qur’anic perspective.

The Qur’an is very clear on this issue of entering into the Islamic fold:

“There is no compulsion in religion; verily the guidance has become clear from the error. So whosoever rejects the idol and believes in God, he has laid hold onto the most firm rope which will not break; God is All-hearing, All-knowing.” (Surah al-Baqara, 2:256)

There can be no force in accepting Islam; Islam wants sincere believers, not hypocrites. By forced conversion, you only increase the numbers of hypocrites, not the number of true believers. The Prophet of Islam has also been mentioned as a reminder, not as a person who forces Islam upon others:

“Therefore, you remind (them), for you are only a reminder; you are not a watcher over them.”
(Surah al Ghaashiya, 88:21–22)

In many other verses, the Prophet is described as “a bearer of good news” and as “***a warner of God’s punishment.***” (Surah al-Baqara, 2:119; Surah Saba, 34:28) His role was just to remind the people of their natural instinct of believing in God. As the first verse explained, force is not needed because the right way is clearly distinct from the crooked way.

The Prophet’s Example

The life of the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) may be divided into two parts:

- (a) first thirteen years of the Prophet's mission in Mecca,
- (b) the last eleven years of his life in Medina.

1. In Mecca

The first thirteen years of the Prophet's mission passed in Mecca. He and the Muslims were a minority in Mecca; and so force was inconceivable and a historical impossibility. It was persecution that forced him to migrate from Mecca to Medina.

2. In Medina

The last eleven years, the Prophet lived in Medina. The majority of the people of Medina –belonging to the tribes of Aws and Khazraj– had accepted Islam prior to the Prophet's migration to that city. Obviously, this acceptance or conversion of the people of Medina could not have been achieved by force! The Prophet and his followers in Mecca had no means to physically convert the people of Medina. Islam spread in Medina through propagation only.

Once he settled in Medina, the Prophet realized that there was a minority Jewish community in that city that had no inclination to accept Islam. He met them and invited them to a pact with the Muslims so that each religious group in Medina knew its rights and obligations. The relevant part of the charter reads as follows:

The Jews who enter into this covenant shall be protected from all insults and vexations; they shall have an equal right as our own people to our assistance and good offices. The Jews of the various branches of 'Aws, Najjar, Harith, Jashim, Tha'labah, Aws, and all others domiciled in Yathrib (i.e., Medina) shall

form with the Muslims one composite nation.

They shall practice in their religion as freely as the Muslims.

The clients and allies of the Jews shall enjoy the same security and freedom. The guilty shall be pursued and punished. The Jews shall join the Muslims in defending Yathrib (i.e., Medina) against all enemies. The interior of Yathrib shall be a sacred place for all who accept this Charter. The clients and allies of the Muslims and of the Jews shall be as respected as the principals...

This clearly shows that the Prophet did not force people to accept Islam, rather he promoted peaceful co-existence with followers of other faiths.

The Wars During the Prophet's Life

What about the battles that the Prophet Muhammad fought after he established his political power in Medina? Was that for the purpose of imposing Islam upon others?

Let us briefly look at the major battles of that era:

2 AH, The Battle of Badr

Muslims confronted the Meccan forces at Badr—80 miles from Medina, and 200 miles from Mecca. The location and the circumstances are quite clear that the Meccan infidels were the aggressors.

3 AH, The Battle of Uhud

Named after a mountain just outside Medina. Meccans came to extract revenge for the defeat in Badr.

5 AH, The Battle of Ahzab (or Khandaq)

The Meccan unbelievers, in alliance with the Jews of northern Arabia, came to attack the Muslims in Medina.

6 AH, The Peace-Treaty of Hdaybiyya

In the 6th year after the Prophet's migration, accompanied by Muslims, he decided to go for pilgrimage to Mecca. The infidels prevented the Muslims from entering the city of Mecca. After lengthy negotiations, both parties signed a peace treaty for the term of ten years.

The implications of this peace treaty were very far-reaching:

Firstly, until the signing of this treaty, the Muslims were mostly busy in defending themselves against the Meccans (their external enemies) and the Jews (their internal enemies).

Secondly, only after the signing of this treaty, did the Muslims feel safe and secure enough to travel to regions and countries outside Medina. The peace-treaty gave Muslims the opportunity to start an organized campaign to propagate Islam among surrounding tribes and countries.

Thirdly, from the 6th year of the Prophet's migration to the 9th year, so much propagation and missionary work had occurred that almost the entire Arabian Peninsula came into the fold of Islam—without the force of sword! As a result, the 9th year is known as *'Amul Wufūd*—the Year of Delegations: because many delegations of Arab tribes were coming to Medina to declare their acceptance of Islam.

9 AH, the Conquest of Mecca

Only when the Meccans violated the conditions of the peace-treaty, did the Muslims take over the city of Mecca without bloodshed—thereafter, in 9th AH, Mecca was declared as a holy city where idol-worshipping was forbidden.

Even then the idol-worshippers of Mecca were given four months' grace period to stay and study Islam. If they were still not convinced of Islam's message, then they were to be asked to leave the holy territory of Mecca. (See the Qur'an Surah at-Tawba, 9:3)

Two Phases of Prophet Muhammad's Life

First Phase: Meccan era of the first 13 years. He was in a minority, and so force not possible.

Second Phase: Medinese era of the last 11 years of his life.

1st to 6th year: defending against the aggression of the Meccan forces and their allies.

7th to 9th year: propagation & outreach to others resulting in conversion of almost the entire Arabian Peninsula

In all such cases, we see that neither sword nor force was used to convert people to Islam. Especially for the Jews and the Christians —whom Islam recognizes as Ahlul Kitab, the People of the Scriptures— Islam guaranteed them freedom of their faith and religious practices under Islamic rule.

The Conquests after the Prophet

After the death of the Prophet Muhammad, the Muslims gradually conquered Iraq, Syria, Palestine, Egypt and Iran.

During the reign of Abu Bakr, Iraq was conquered in 633 CE. During the reign of 'Umar ibn al-Khattab, Syria was conquered in 635 CE, Palestine in 637 CE, Egypt in 642 CE, and also two-thirds of Persia was conquered. The rest of Persia was conquered during the reign of 'Uthman bin 'Affan.

Many historians look at the conquests of the rulers who came after the Prophet as a proof of “conversion

by force to Islam”. However, we have a different perspective on these conquests made by Muslims after the Prophet's death. It is true that Muslims conquered these neighbouring lands and countries BUT does that mean that Islam, the religion, was spread by force?

The confusion arises when writers and historians interpret the expansion of the Muslim/Arab Empire as the expansion of Islam, the religion.

It is undeniable that the Muslim/Arab Empire spread by military force all over the Middle East; but this did not automatically translate into the spread of Islam as a religion.

Ira M. Lapidus, in his *A History of Islamic Societies* writes:

“The question of why people convert to Islam has always generated intense feeling. Earlier generations of European scholars believed that conversions to Islam were made at the point of the sword and that conquered peoples were given the choice of conversion or death. It is now apparent that conversion by force, while not unknown in Muslim countries, was, in fact, rare. Muslim conquerors ordinarily wished to dominate rather than convert, and most conversions to Islam were voluntary.¹”

In majority of cities, the inhabitants continued to follow their own religions. The Muslim conquerors signed treaties guaranteeing to the conquered people the freedom to practice their religion as long as they paid the required tribute to the caliph's treasury.

The late Marshall Hodgson, in his famous book, *the Venture of Islam*, says: “There was no attempt at converting the peoples of the imperial territories, who practically all adhered to some form of confessional religion already...In the chiefly non-Arab agricultural lands, the object was not conversion but rule...The superiority of Islam as religion, and therefore in providing for social order, would justify Muslim rule: would justify the simple, fair-dealing Muslims in replacing the privileged and oppressive representatives of the older, corrupted allegiances...²”

Ira M. Lapidus, writes the following in earlier quoted book *A History of Islamic Societies*: “The second principle...was that the conquered populations should be as little disturbed as possible. This means that the Arab-Muslims did not, contrary to reputation, attempt to convert people to Islam. Muhammad had set the precedent of permitting Jews and Christians in Arabia to keep their religions, if they paid tribute; the Caliphate extended the same privileges to Middle Eastern Jews, Christians, and Zoroastrians, whom they considered 'People of the Book,' the adherents of earlier written revelations...³”

Expansion of The Muslim /Arab Empire Versus Expansion of The Islamic Faith

I have no hesitation in saying that some Muslim rulers actually preferred that the conquered citizens follow their old religion in order to ensure the flow of desired revenue into their treasuries! They were not in the business of promoting or spreading the Islamic faith.

Examples from Muslim History

History provides sufficient proof that the Muslim empires were spread by military might, but that does not necessarily translate into the spread of Islam by force too.

1. Look at the example of **India**:

Muslims ruled India for about 800 years, but there never was a Muslim majority in that country. The numbers themselves show that force was not part of the spread of Islam in that region.

A prominent Indian historian and journalist, Dr. Khuswant Singh, in his *A History of the Sikhs*, has discussed about the early days of Islam in India. He clearly states that Islam was spread in India not by the Muslim rulers but by the Muslim spiritual masters and missionaries⁴.

2. Study the history of the **Far East**, and you will see that a Muslim army or navy never set its feet in Malaysia or Indonesia. However, population-wise Indonesia is the largest Muslim country in the world. Islam spread there only through Muslim traders and missionaries. Lapidus mentions three theories to explain the acceptance of Islam in the Far East: the role of merchants, the importance of the missionaries, and the value of Islam to the common people rather than to the ruling elites⁵. It was through the character and behaviour of the Muslim traders that the Indonesians were first attracted to Islam.

Similar situations in the spread of Islam are recorded for the African continent.

3. Look at the last Muslim empire, the **Ottoman Empire**. It was ruled by a Turkish caliph and was governed by the *millet* system, a multi-religious, multi-cultural society. Ottoman Empire dominated vast region of Christian land in Eastern Europe but it never forced its Christian citizens to convert to Islam; they were given the right to govern their own lives according to their own religious traditions. Look at Greece, a neighbour of Turkey, that was colonized by Muslim Turks for about 500 years, but you never hear or see of a sizeable minority of Muslims among the Greeks, even today.

If we were to compare the attitude of the Muslim rulers towards the minorities living under their rule during the nineteenth century—with the attitude of the Europeans and the Americans towards their minorities, I dare to say that the record of the Muslims would be much better.

Professor Davison, a prominent historian of the Ottoman Empire, writes, “It might in fact have been argued that the Turks were less oppressive of their subject people than were Prussians of the Poles, the English of the Irish, or the Americans of the Negroes... There is evidence to show that in this period [i.e., late 19th century], there was emigration from independent Greece into the Ottoman Empire, since some Greeks found the Ottoman government a more indulgent master [than their own Greek government].⁶”

4. Islam faces a very formidable enemy in form of the biased media in **Europe** and the **Americas**. But

look at the growth and spread of Islam in the West. In spite of all the hurdles, it is one of the fastest growing religions in the United States of America. It already has a strong presence in the United Kingdom, France and Germany. This speaks volumes about how this religion has spread and is spreading even now.

The Path of Future

Muslims in the West must realize that the strongest response to the biased media is their own behaviour and character. If they portray the correct Islamic conduct in their daily lives, then their neighbours, their co-workers and those who know them will not believe in the negative portrayal of Islam in the media.

Imam Ja'far as-Sadiq, the sixth Shi'a Imam from the Ahlul Bayt (P), said,

“Call the people towards Islam without using your tongue.”

That is, not by words but by actions—your behaviour at home, at work–place and in the community should be a means of defending and portraying the true image of Islam.

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1. Ira M. Lapidus, A History of Islamic Societies (Cambridge: CUP, 1988) p. 243–244.
 2. M. Hodgson, The Venture of Islam, vol. 1, p. 199.
 3. A History of Islamic Societies, p. 43.
 4. Khushwant Sing, A History of the Sikhs, vol. 1 (N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1963) pp. 20–28.
 5. A History of Islamic Societies, p. 469.
 6. Roderic H. Davison, Reform in the Ottoman Empire 1856–1876 (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1963) p. 116.

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