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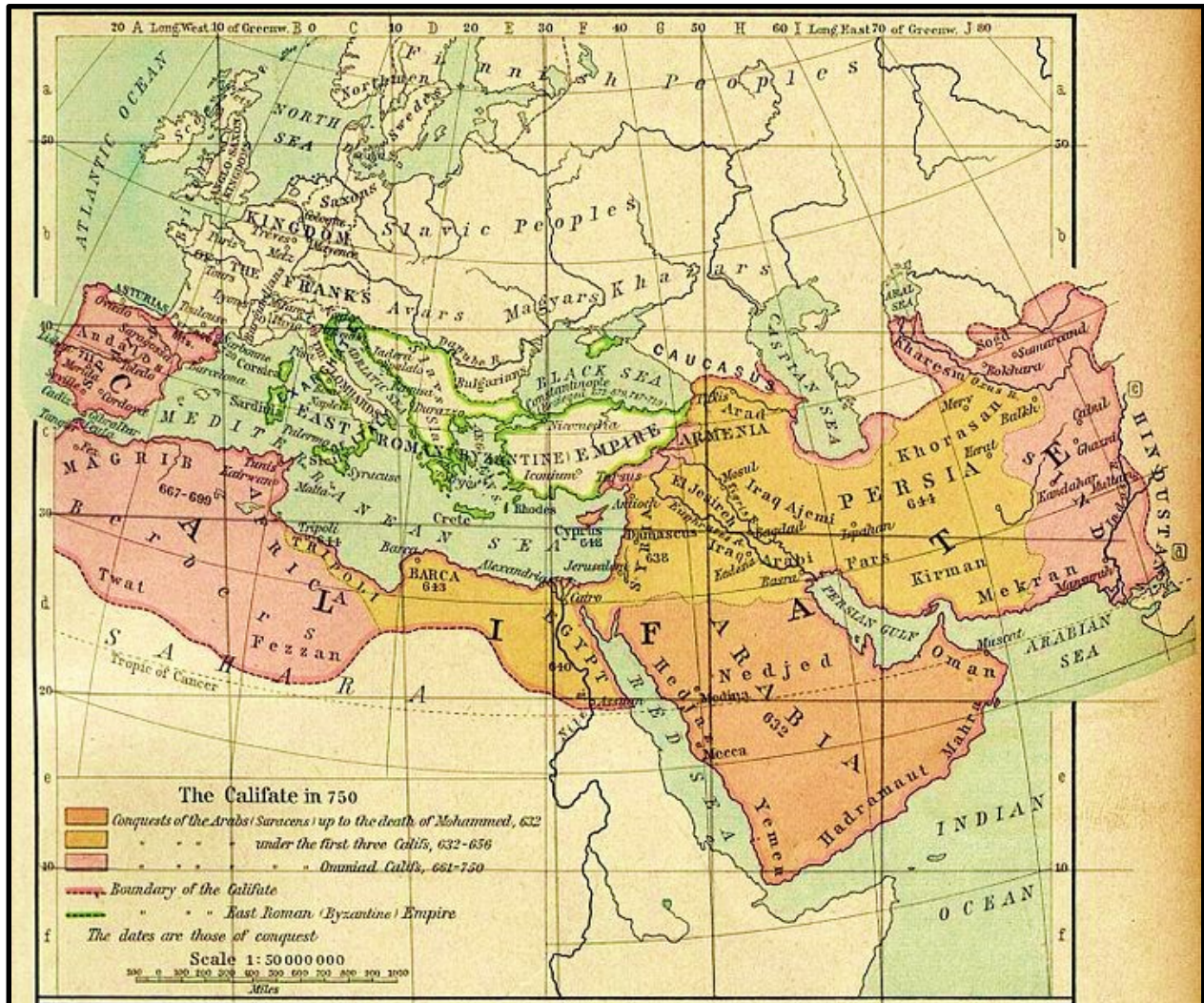
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Muhammad, Money, and the Moors: Behind the Muslim Conquest of Iberia



"The Califate in 750." Shepherd, William R. 1926.

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By the dawn of the seventh century, the infant Muslim nation stretched from the shores of the African Atlantic, to the dry plains of Hindustan and the mountains of Central Asia and Caucasia. Even Europe was not beyond their reach, with the Iberian Peninsula—modern-day Spain and Portugal—finding itself under the flag of the Islamic empire by the end of the eighth century. The invasion of Iberia was one which came about for three distinct reasons: (1) to spread Islam beyond its traditional basin of Arabia and North Africa, a desire born from the *Qur'an* and the traditions of the *hadiths*; (2) to bring more Christians and Jews or *dhimmis* under its rule so that they may be subject to the *jizyah* tax, a move made for purely economic reasons; and (3) to placate the large, well-trained, and unengaged army of indigenous North Africans, whom had been conquered and assimilated by the Muslim armies, by directing them to whet their blades on foreign rather than turn them inward toward the caliphate. This thesis holds that if any one of these three motivators were not present, the Islamic invasion of Iberia may not have occurred.

In 711, an army consisting almost entirely of Berbers (also known as Moors), the indigenous peoples of northwestern Africa, under the charge of general Tariq ibn Ziyad landed on the southern tip of Iberia, in today's Gibraltar, and made a lightning advance against the Visigoths who held the peninsula. According to the chronicles of Ibn Adl-el-Hakem, the invading Muslims found an ally in the governor of today's Spanish exclave of Ceuta, a man by the name Ilyan, which expedited the invasion.¹ The Visigoths—led by king Roderic—swiftly capitulated. By 713, the Muslims had conquered most all of Iberia up to the Ebro River, near

¹ Abd-el-Hakem, Ibn. "Medieval Sourcebook: Ibn Abd-el-Hakem: The Islamic Conquest of Spain." Internet History Sourcebooks Project. Accessed May 06, 2016. <http://legacy.fordham.edu/halsall/source/conqspain.asp>.

today's Spanish and French border.² The Basques and to a degree the Catalans were essentially the only peoples that managed to hold out against the Muslim throng, enduring the 700-year-long Catholic-led campaign to reconquer Spain, which concluded in the early fifteenth century. After the Abbasid revolution in 750 saw the ruling Umayyad dynasty deposed (a topic beyond the capacity of this thesis) the latter retreated to Iberia and held out there for over 200 years against the bellicose Christians to their north and east, and their former subjects to the south.³

It is worth noting that Iberia was not the only region of the world to see martial action by the Muslim nation at the time of Tariq ibn Ziyad's invasion. Conflicts raged against the expanding Chinese Tang dynasty and the region's indigenous peoples in Central Asia, the Byzantine Empire in Asia Minor and the Mediterranean, the Kashmiris in India and Pakistan, *et cetera*.⁴ However, the invasion of Iberia was unique from other Muslim advances chiefly in the makeup of its assault forces and the ease through which the campaign was won.

Regarding the first item, due to the distance from the heart of the nation and the limited manpower left over from the conquering of North Africa, to launch its campaign of conquest into Europe the Muslims made use of the indigenous Berbers. "The garrison and occupation requirements of this campaign (which was conducted at the farthest western reaches of the Muslim empire) most likely used up all the available troops, evidently forcing the Arabs to begin recruiting large numbers of Berber mercenaries for the purpose of quickly invading Iberia."⁵ Unlike other caliphate actions around the world, the invaders of Spain and Portugal were not

² Deegan, Arthur. *Roderic's Failure and Tariq's Success: Why the Muslims Conquered Spain*. Academia. Academia. Accessed May 6, 2016.

³ Haywood, John. *Historical Atlas of the Medieval World: AD 600-1492*. Sterling Publishing, 2000, 3.14.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 3.13.

⁵ Tindle, James. *Iberian Uniqueness in the Arab Invasion of Spain*. PDF. Oklahoma Christian University.

primarily Arab. Other than a handful of Arabs in the upper echelons of command, the army was most entirely Berber.⁶

As far as the second item, in all their campaigns the Muslims had not seen an opposing force be defeated so easily—especially an opposing force so well-established and politically powerful. As Arthur Deegan writes:

What is often forgotten about the conquest of Spain is the kingdom of the Visigoths had been established there for nearly 300 years. Despite the longevity of the kingdom, the Muslim invaders expeditiously seized the Visigoths' land. The kingdom of the Visigoths fell almost immediately to Muslim forces because of poor political and social conditions, such as issues of succession, military unrest, and intolerance that afflicted Visigothic rule for decades leading up to the invasion of 711.⁷

Infighting and, as stated, the political turmoil surrounding the eventual usurping of Roderic—whom would die on the battlefield against the Moorish invaders—as crown of the Spanish Visigoths served to cripple the Christians ability to withstand and repulse and the Muslims legions, granting to the latter an easy win with limited casualties and fairly cooperative new subjects.⁸

By the end of the Prophet Muhammad's life, the virgin Islamic nation had expanded from the environs of Medina to control a large swath of the Arabian desert, up to the Sinai Peninsula and down to the Gulf of Aden. This was just the beginning of the explosive rise of the Muslim

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Deegan.

⁸ Ibid; Haywood, 3.13.

empire, who by the twilight of the seventh century had conquered the Persians, the Egyptians, and were encroaching on the Byzantines.⁹ This was an expansion motivated by religion.

A principal component of the Islamic faith is the concept of *jihad*. “The word *jihad* literally means ‘a struggle,’ ‘a striving,’ or ‘a great effort.’ In its primary religious connotations (sometimes referred to as ‘the greater jihad’), it means the struggle of the soul to overcome the sinful obstacles that keep a person from God.”¹⁰ In other words, *jihad* is an internal battle between a person and the world to stay true to his or her faith despite that which lead him or her to question or go against it.

However, there is another form of *jihad*—the form which in the modern Western world has become a mark of a perceived Muslim bloodlust. “However, because Islam perceives this inward struggle for holiness and submission to be inseparable from the outward struggle for the welfare of humanity, *jihad* has more often been associated with its secondary connotation (‘the lesser jihad’) [...]”¹¹ This lesser *jihad* refers to the duty of every Muslim to rise up and defend against an enemy of humanity—i.e., an impinging tyrannical government—or the Islamic religion.¹²

Jihad is supposed to be purely defensive. “But perhaps the most important innovation in the doctrine of *jihad* was its outright prohibition of all but strictly defensive wars. ‘Fight in the way of God those who fight you,’ the Quran says, ‘but do not begin hostilities; God does not like the aggressor’ (2:190).”¹³ This has not prevented it from being used countless times as justification for offensive wars, as in the case of Iran’s Islamic revolution and its war against

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Aslan, Reza. *No god but God: The Origins, Evolution, and Future of Islam*. Random House, 2006, 81.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Ibid., 84.

Iraq; the infidels and heretics pose a threat to the continued existence of our nation, so they must be attacked.¹⁴ Due to a distinct lack of primary sources dating to 711 and whom were present during the Iberian invasion (Ibn Abd-el-Hakem's chronicles were penned in approximately 870), it is uncertain whether the doctrine of lesser *jihad* was used to justify the attack, but what is certain is the idea was present at the time.¹⁵

It is clear, though, that Islam values spreading the religion. Although it says in the *Qur'an* to never spread it through violence—" 'there can be no compulsion in religion' (2:256)." ¹⁶—again like *jihad* this law of the religion appears to have been taken with a grain of salt countless times.¹⁷ However, this thesis holds the following interpretation of religion and the Iberian invasion: the Muslims' goal was not necessarily to force the Christians and Jews of Iberia to convert to Islam by threatening them with death or the like, but to secure the area to allow the missionaries and zealots to come and share the word of Islam to its inhabitants. This is not to say this absolutely was the case—again, because of the lack of clear primary sources, this is an interpretation held by this thesis—and the Islamic empire may have desired to spread the religion through any means necessary.

Should the desire to spread Islam not have been present, a—nay, *the*—key motivator in the expansion of the empire would be missing. It is arguable that should this be the case, the Muslim nation would have never expanded beyond Mecca and Medina. In this instance, the Muslims would have nary a need to pick a fight with the European Christians and Jews.

¹⁴ Ibid., 86.

¹⁵ Abd-el-Hakem.

¹⁶ Aslan, 85.

¹⁷ Ibid., 87.

Transitioning from the topic of the religious to the economic motivators behind the invasion, Arthur Deegan provides an excellent segue between the points.

For their part, the Muslims reversed the damage done by years of oppressive legislation. Under Muslim rule, any convert to Islam was seen as an equal and enjoyed full rights of other Muslims. Whether because some connected the conversion to Catholicism with the degradation of the Visigothic kingdom, or due to promised equality, many people converted to Islam. Even those who continued to practice Christianity or Judaism, classified as *dhimmi*, played an important role in Muslim society and had most of the rights and freedoms as Muslims did, including the owning of property, so long as they paid the *jizyah*.¹⁸

What Deegan is referring to with the term *jizyah* is a special tax levied on the *dhimmis*, the Christians, Jews, and Persian Zoroastrians within the empire, and there were a lot of the them. The *dhimmis*, in addition to their overwhelming majority presence in Iberia, had large population centers in today's Israel, Palestine, Egypt, Syria, Jordan, Armenia, southeastern Turkey, and Iran.¹⁹ Being so populous within the nation, they were an important tax base. What better way to increase said tax base than by conquering a country made up almost entirely by God's people?

Should the *jizyah* tax not have existed, the economic value of invading Iberia would have been greatly diminished; in other words, it may have been costlier to invade the peninsula than to not. No reasonable nation would seek to damage itself economically. Therefore, without the *jizyah*, the invasion may not have occurred.

¹⁸ Deegan.

¹⁹ Haywood, 3.13.

In 702 the Muslims claimed victory after a long campaign over the Berbers in North Africa. Less than a decade later, they utilized their new subjects to form the core of the invasion force against the Visigoths.²⁰ Given the ferocity of the war against the Berbers, it is likely the caliphate wanted to make certain these Moorish fighters would not rise up against them. What better way do that than to send them off to a foreign land to make war there? The fact the Berbers did rise up later is of no consequence to this thesis; the Umayyads could not have known this and thus took no action to prevent such an uprising.

Should the army have been all Arab, there would have been little to no need to placate them by sending them into Iberia; the Arabs were not a conquered people—as the ruling dynasty was Arab—and enjoyed significant socioeconomic privileges—in other words, they were not oppressed—within the nation. Also, the Umayyads were within acceptable political standing at the time. The dynasty would not fall significantly out of political favor until the Abbasid revolution four decades after the invasion of Iberia.²¹ Summarily, an Arab-majority army would maintain its allegiance to the Arab leadership under most any circumstance and not need to be mollified to prevent an uprising.

However, this raises a noteworthy question: if the army had been mostly or all Arab instead of Berber, would it have made the invasion more likely to occur because of the presumed superior martial skill of the Arabs—if they were able to conquer the Berbers—and the greater certainty of their loyalty? It is worth noting that this thesis does not hold that the invasion would without a doubt not have occurred should any of the three aforementioned factors not have been present, but that it *may* not have occurred. While this thesis cannot digress too far into countering

²⁰ Haywood, 3.14.

²¹ Ibid.

this idea, a short attempt will be made. For the Iberia-invading force to be constituted of mostly Arabs the history of the caliphate's campaigns would have to be radically altered. The Muslim empire made heavy use of Arab fighters in the previously-mentioned conflicts against the Byzantines, Chinese, and Kashmiris, limiting its ability to dispatch Arab-majority armies to other theatres.²² In other words, for Tariq bin Ziyad's legions to have been Arab, other Muslim advances would have had to occur differently, sooner or later chronologically, or not at all so that the Arabs could be sent against the Visigoths. So, perhaps an all-Arab force would have increased the likelihood of an invasion and others are invited to delve into this idea further should they wish.

In Iberia in the early eighth century, Christianity and Islam clashed. The Muslim empire's Berber armies scored an easy victory against the disorganized and ineffective Visigoth defenders and would hold on to the peninsula for another 250 years. This campaign stood out from the other Muslim operations of the time by the constitution of its forces—North African rather than Arab—and how quickly the enemy force capitulated. The invasion of Iberia was motivated primarily by three factors: (1) to spread Islam into the region; (2) to increase the empire's non-Muslim tax base, and (3) to reduce the likelihood of a Berber uprising against the caliphate. This thesis holds that if any one of these three motivators were not present, the Islamic invasion of Iberia may not have occurred.

²² Tindle.

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