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# Why Did Islam Spread So Quickly?

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A medieval caravan of Muslim pilgrims traveling to Mecca

**Overview:** According to the holy texts of the Muslims, in 610 CE a local merchant named Muhammad retreated to a cave outside the city of Mecca in Arabia to meditate. There, the archangel Gabriel appeared and gave Muhammad words to recite. These words were to give birth to a religion called Islam. Within 140 years, followers of Islam had created an empire that ruled the Middle East and stretched across North Africa into Europe. This Mini-Q explores why this new religion was able to spread so quickly.

## The Documents:

- Document A: Arabian Peninsula Trade Routes (map)
- Document B: Verses from the Qur'an
- Document C: The Spread of Islam (map)
- Document D: The Ghazu
- Document E: The Duties of the Caliph
- Document F: The People of Hims

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A Mini Document Based Question (Mini-Q)

## Why Did Islam Spread So Quickly?

In 610 CE, a merchant trader from Mecca made one of his frequent visits to a cave on nearby Mount Hira. For Muhammad ibn Abdallah it was a time to pray, to get away from the scramble for money and wealth he felt was causing his people to lose their way. According to Muhammad, it was on this visit to Mt. Hira that the archangel Gabriel squeezed him hard and caused words to flow from his mouth. The words said that **Allah** was the one God. No doubt a bit shaken, Muhammad reported the event to his wife and her cousin but otherwise stayed silent. The words continued to come.

In 610 Mecca was a bustling Arabian trade town with camel caravans arriving regularly from points north and south. It was also the site of an annual pilgrimage where Arab pagans came to perform rituals at the sacred **Ka'ba** (the holy shrine in Mecca). The Meccan population included a number of Jewish families and some Christians. There may have been a feeling among the pagan Arabs that their religious world was less sophisticated than that of the Jews and the Christians. They had nothing to match the Torah and the Bible. They had no Abraham or Moses or Jesus. But all that was about to change.

After receiving Allah's words for two years, Muhammad decided it was time to talk. Encouraged by the support of close friends and his wife, Kadija, Muhammad began to recite the received words in public. He spoke of the one god, Allah, and the importance of charity – sharing wealth with the weak and poor. Together these teachings would be given the name **Islam**, the Arabic word for “submission.” A follower of Islam was to be called a Muslim, meaning one “who submits to the will of Allah.” After

Muhammad's death in 632, Allah's words that Muhammad was reciting would be written down and called the **Qur'an**.

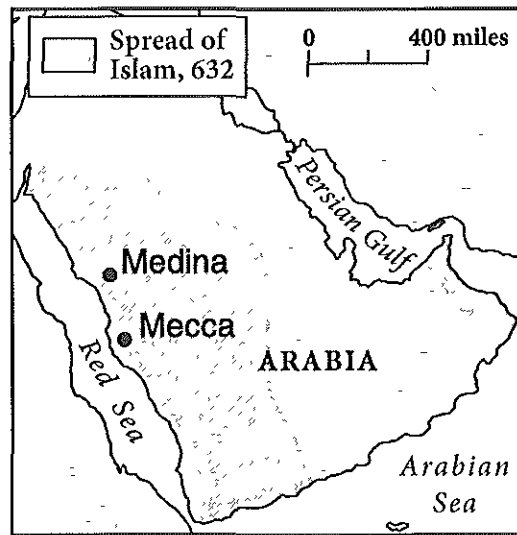
At first, many in Mecca resisted Muhammad's preaching. What would happen to idol worship? Surely pilgrimages to Mecca would stop. Business would suffer. By 622 resistance was so strong that Muhammad decided to leave. Together with 70 families, he migrated 250 miles north. There, in the town of Medina, he established a new base. He also made a symbolic break with the past. Muham-

mad had respect for Jews and Christians, “people of the Book,” as he called them. However, at a prayer session in 624, Muhammad symbolically turned his body to the south – away from Jerusalem and toward Mecca. It was as much as saying that a new religion had been born.

In 628, Muhammad made the hard decision to return to Mecca. Despite

opposition, he was allowed back in the city. He soon had enough support to order that the idols in the Ka'ba be destroyed and the shrine dedicated to Allah. Pilgrimages to the Ka'ba became one of the Five Pillars, or essential duties, of Islam. These duties – confession of belief, prayer five times a day, **Ramadan**, an annual month-long fast, giving alms to the poor, and the pilgrimage to Mecca – would become the bedrock practices of Islam.

From this modest beginning in west-central Arabia, Islam exploded in size. Within 100 years of Muhammad's death, it had reached Europe and Asia. The question before us is why. Examine the documents that follow and answer the question: *Why did Islam spread so quickly?*

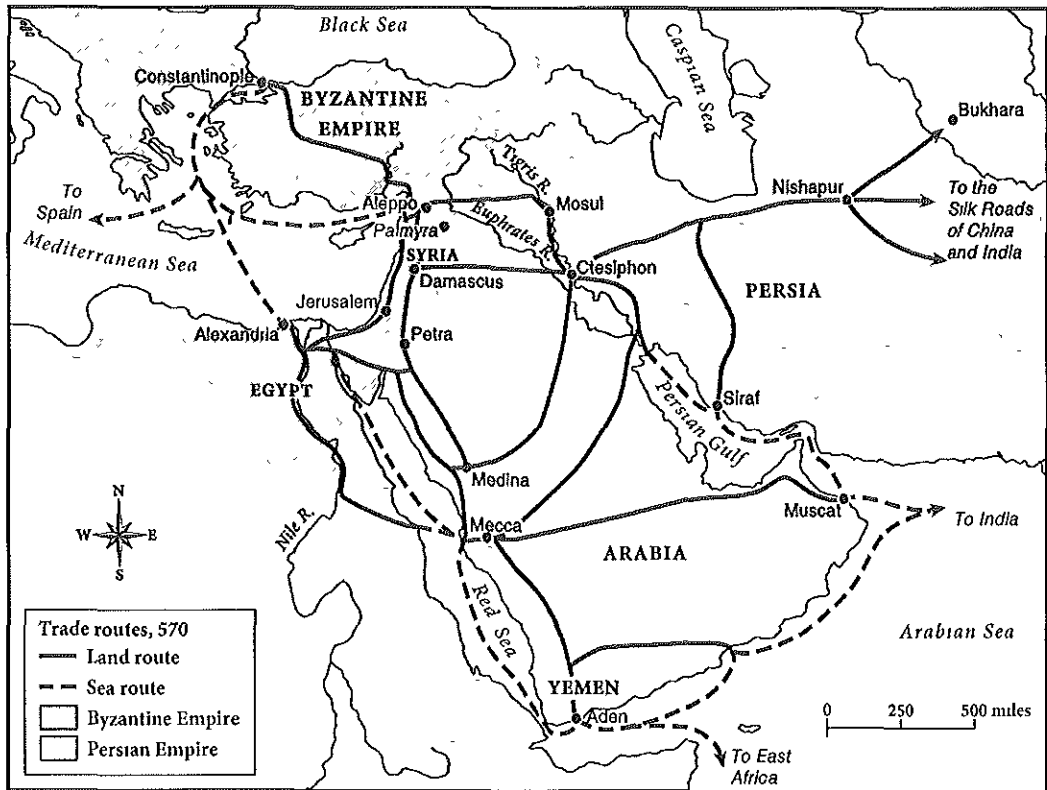


### Document A

Sources: Desmond Stewart and the Editors of Time-Life Books, *Great Ages of Man: Early Islam*, Time-Life Books, 1967. Map created from various sources.

By the middle of the sixth century ... Mecca was ... prosperous and important. First, it was at the crossroads of the lucrative caravan trade. Vast camel trains, bearing spices, perfumes, precious metals, ivory and silk, filed through the town, headed north on the way from Yemen ... to the markets of Syria, and headed east from the Red Sea across the desert to Iraq. Adding to the profits from caravans was a brisk pilgrimage trade, for Mecca was the site of Arabia's holiest pagan shrine [the Ka'ba].

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**Document B**

Source: Verses from the Qur'an.

*Those who submit to God and accept the true Faith; who are devout, sincere, patient, humble, charitable, and chaste; who fast and are ever mindful of God – on these, both men and women, God will bestow forgiveness and rich recompense [reward]. (33:35)*

*... (W)hoever killed a human being, except as punishment for murder or other villainy..., shall be deemed as having killed all mankind; and ... whoever saved a human life shall be deemed as having saved all mankind.... (5:32)*

*But the believers who do good works, both men and women, shall enter Paradise. They shall not suffer the least injustice. (4:124)*

*Do not devour one another's property by unjust means, nor bribe the judges with it in order that you may wrongfully and knowingly usurp [take] other people's possessions.... (2:188)*

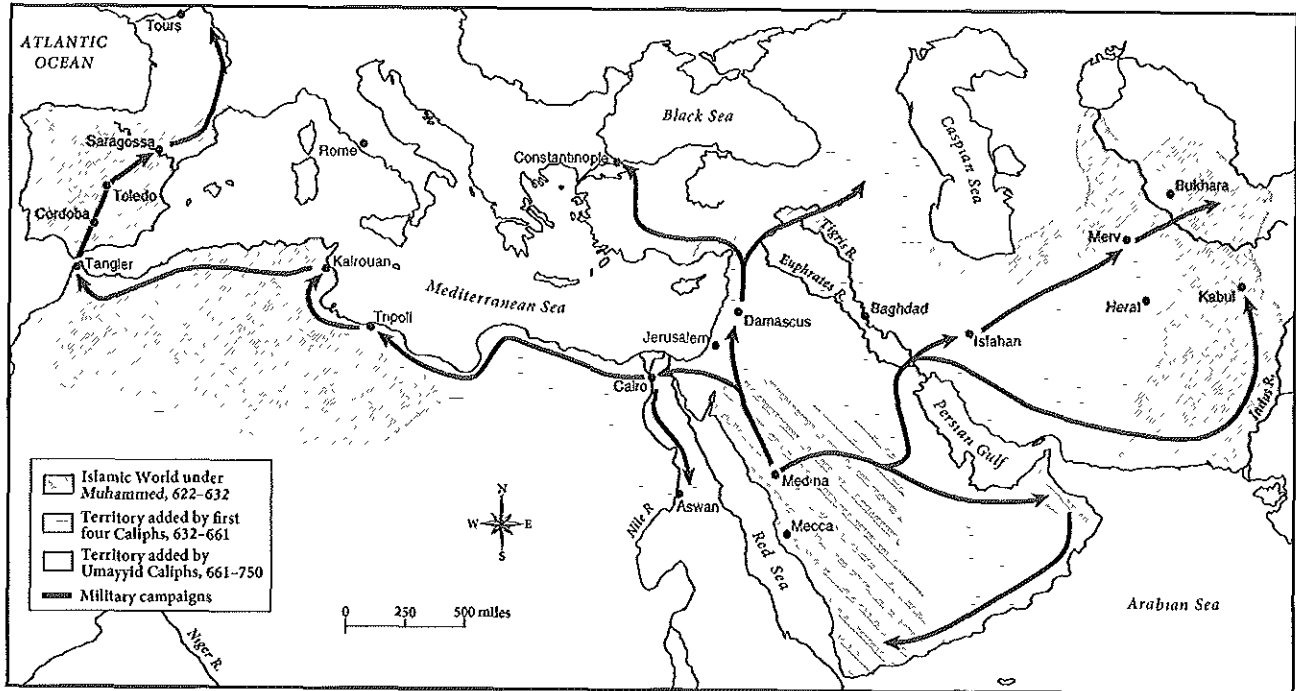
*Permission to take up arms is hereby given to those who are attacked, because they have been wronged. God has power to grant them victory. (22:39)*

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### Document C

Source: Map created from various sources.

### The Spread of Islam



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## Document D

Source: Karen Armstrong, *Islam: A Short History*, Random House, 2000.

For centuries... Arabs had [added to] their inadequate resources by means of the ghazu [raids against other tribes], but Islam had put a stop to this because the ummah [Muslim community] was not permitted to attack one another. What would replace the ghazu, which had enabled Muslims to scratch out a meager livelihood?... The obvious answer was a series of ghazu raids against the non-Muslim communities in the neighboring countries. The unity of the ummah would be preserved by an outwardly directed offensive [attack].

There was nothing religious about these campaigns.... The objective ... was plunder and a common activity that would preserve the unity of the ummah. For centuries the Arabs had tried to raid the richer settled lands beyond the [Arabian] peninsula: the difference was that this time they encountered a power vacuum. Persia and Byzantium had both been engaged for decades in a long ... series of wars with one another. Both were exhausted.

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## Document E

Source: Abu al-Hasan Al-Mawardi, *The Ordinances of the Government*, circa 975 CE.

Note: In 632, following the death of Muhammad, the first caliph (a spiritual ruler, sometimes called an imam) was selected to lead the Muslim community. Over the next three centuries, the duties of the caliph were firmly established, with the understanding that the caliph would not delegate these duties to others. The excerpt below, from a book of Islamic law written by an Arab judge in the 10th century, outlines four of the ten public duties of the caliph.

### The Ordinances of Government

1. To maintain the religion according to established principles and the consensus of the first generation of Muslims. If . . . some dubious person deviates from it, the Imam must clarify the proofs of religion to him, expound that which is correct, and apply to him the proper rules and penalties so that religion may be protected from injury and the community safeguarded from error.
2. To execute judgments between litigants [people involved in lawsuits] and to settle disputes between contestants so that justice may prevail and so that none commit or suffer injustice.
3. To defend the lands of Islam and to protect them from intrusion so that people may earn their livelihood and travel at will without danger to life or property.
4. To enforce the legal penalties for the protection of God's commandments from violation and for the preservation of the rights of his servants from injury or destruction. . . .
6. To wage . . . jihad [holy war] against those who, after having been invited to accept Islam, persist in rejecting it, until they either become Muslims or enter the Pact\* so that God's truth may prevail over every religion.

\* The Pact was an arrangement often made by Muslim rulers that permitted conquered Christians, Jews and other non-Muslims to continue to practice their religion if they paid a special tax called the *jizyah* and obeyed Islamic laws.

## Document F

**Source:** Ahmad ibn-Jabir al-Baladhuri, *The Origins of the Islamic State*, circa 850 CE.

**Note:** In the year 636, the Byzantine Emperor Heraclius ("hair-uh-kli-us") gathered an army at the Yarmuk River in Syria to resist the expansion of Islam. The people of Hims are the Syrians, non-Muslims who had been under Byzantine rule. This account was written by the Arabic Muslim historian al-Baladhuri about 200 years after the battle.

Heraclius gathered [a] large Byzantine army ... numbering about 200,000. This army he put under the command of one of his choice men.... The Moslems gathered together and the [Byzantine] army marched against them. The battle they fought at al-Yarmuk was of the fiercest and bloodiest kind.... In this battle 24,000 Moslems took part. The [Byzantines] and their followers in the battle tied themselves to each other by chains, so that no one might set his hope on flight. By Allah's help, some 70,000 of them were put to death....

When Heraclius massed his troops against the Moslems and the Moslems heard that they were coming to meet them at al-Yarmuk, the Moslems re-

funded to the inhabitants of Hims the [land tax] they had taken from them saying, "We are too busy to support and protect you. Take care of yourselves." But the people of Hims replied, "We like your rule and justice far better than the state of oppression and tyranny in which we were. The army of Heraclius we shall indeed . . . repulse from the city." . . . Saying this, they closed the gates of the city and guarded them... When by Allah's help the "unbelievers" were defeated and the Moslems won, they opened the gates of their cities, went out with the singers and music players who began to play, and paid the [land tax].

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