

The Caliphs and the Spread of Islam

With Muhammad's death on June 8, 632 CE, Islam faced a crisis. Since Muhammad had left no explicit instructions about a successor, and since he had not fathered a son, how would they decide?

After some debate between the Meccans and Medinans, it was finally decided that Abu Bakr, Muhammad's loyal friend and supporter, should be the new leader of Islam. Not only was Abu Bakr Muhammad's father-in-law (father of Ayesha), but he also gave up his business to make the *hijrah* to Medina. Thus, he was named *First Caliph*. A *caliph* is a successor.

Under Abu Bakr's leadership, and with the help of his first lieutenant, Umar ibn al-Khattab, rebellious tribes were defeated and the Arab world united. Still, the new rulers felt threatened by the political situation in Arabia. They led a series of *jihads*, or holy wars, against neighboring empires. They began by attacking the area of Syria, controlled by the Byzantine Empire, as well as the area of Iraq, ruled by the Persian Sasanians.

Abu Bakr died in 634 CE, and Umar was elected Second Caliph. For a decade, Umar led his armies, victoriously capturing both Damascus and Jerusalem, strongholds of the Byzantine Empire. As seen on the map below, by 644 CE Muslims also controlled all the Persian area of Iraq and most of Iran.

Spread of Islam: 632-644 CE

