The **Umayyad Caliphate** was the second of four Islamic caliphates and was founded in Arabia after the Prophet Muhammad's death. The Umayyads ruled the Islamic world from 661 to 750 C.E. Their capital was in the city of Damascus; the founder of the caliphate, Muawiya ibn Abi Sufyan, had long been the governor of [Syria](https://www.thoughtco.com/syria-facts-and-history-195089).

Originally from Mecca, Muawiya named his dynasty the "Sons of Umayya" after a common ancestor he shared with the Prophet Muhammad. The Umayyad family had been one of the major combatant clans in the [Battle of Badr](https://www.learnreligions.com/biography-of-the-prophet-muhammads-later-life-2004472) (624 CE), the decisive battle between Muhammad and his followers on the one hand, and the powerful clans of Mecca on the other.

Muawiya triumphed over Ali, the fourth caliph, and Muhammad's son-in-law, in 661, and officially founded the new caliphate. The Umayyad Caliphate became one of the major political, cultural, and scientific centers of the early medieval world.

The Umayyads also began the process of spreading Islam throughout Asia, Africa, and Europe. They moved into Persia and Central Asia, converting the rulers of key Silk Road [oasis](https://www.thoughtco.com/what-is-an-oasis-195360) cities such as Merv and Sistan.  They also invaded what is now [Pakistan](https://www.thoughtco.com/pakistan-facts-and-history-195642), beginning the process of conversion in that area that would continue for centuries. Umayyad troops also crossed Egypt and brought Islam to the Mediterranean coast of Africa, from whence it would disperse south across the Sahara along caravan routes until much of West Africa became Muslim.

Finally, the Umayyads waged a series of wars against the Byzantine Empire based in what is now Istanbul. They sought to overthrow this Christian empire in Anatolia and convert the region to Islam; Anatolia would eventually convert, but not for several centuries after the collapse of the Umayyad Dynasty in Asia.

Between 685 and 705 CE, the Umayyad Caliphate reached its apex of power and prestige. Its armies conquered areas from Spain the west to Sindh in what is now [India](https://www.thoughtco.com/geography-and-history-of-india-1435046). One after another, additional Central Asian cities fell to the Muslim armies - Bukhara, Samarkand, Khwarezm, Tashkent, and Fergana. This rapidly expanding empire had a postal system, a form of banking based on credit, and some of the most beautiful architecture ever seen.

Just when it seemed that the Umayyads truly were poised to rule the world, however, disaster struck. In 717 CE, the Byzantine emperor Leo III led his army to a crushing victory over the Umayyad forces, which had been besieging Constantinople. After 12 months trying to break through the city's defenses, the hungry and exhausted Umayyads had to retreat empty-handed back to Syria.

A new caliph, Umar II, tried to reform the financial system of the caliphate by increasing the taxes on Arab Muslims to the same level as taxes on all other non-Arab Muslims. This caused a huge outcry among the Arab faithful, of course, and caused a financial crisis when they refused to pay any taxes at all. Finally, renewed feuding broke out among the various Arab tribes around this time, leaving the Umayyad system tottering.

It managed to press on for a few more decades. Umayyad armies got as far into western Europe as France by 732, where they were turned back at the [Battle of Tours](https://www.thoughtco.com/muslim-invasions-battle-of-tours-2360885). In 740, the Byzantines dealt the Umayyads another shattering blow, driving all Arabs from Anatolia. Five years later, the simmering feuds between the Qays and Kalb tribes of Arabs erupted into full-scale war in Syria and Iraq. In 749, religious leaders proclaimed a new caliph, Abu al-Abbas al-Saffah, who became the founder of the [Abbasid Caliphate](https://www.thoughtco.com/what-was-the-abbasid-caliphate-195293).

Under the new caliph, members of the old ruling family were hunted down and executed. One survivor, Abd-ar-Rahman, escaped to Al-Andalus (Spain), where he founded the Emirate (and later Caliphate) of Cordoba. The Umayyad caliphate in Spain survived until 1031.