Islamic Conquests Up To 700 A.d. – Islamic Strengths / Roman Weaknesses? Essay, Research Paper

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attempt to highlight both the Arabian strengths and the Byzantine and Persian

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correctly these nomadic tribes, and their sedentary and tribal brothers, could

provide an imposing and effective force.?

It was Muhammad and most significantly the new religion of Islam that

finally harnessed this power. It is important to note that Muhammad?s Islamic

state did not destroy the tribal system that underpinned Arabian life.? Instead, we should see the Islamic state as

a ?supra-tribe?.? Muhammad and Abu Bakr

utilised the strong control that tribal leaders could exert over their kinsmen

by associating a tribal leader with the state.?

The status of the leader and the status of the state were inextricably

linked.? Thus the Islamic state?s

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non-Muslims, and as the Qu?ran says ?There is no God but God?.? By implying the universal and unique nature

of god, and the overriding moral authority of God, Islam provided the impetus

for political unification and centralisation.?

As Muhammad was God?s presence on earth it is easy to see how he was

associated with power.? His perceived

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blood feuds and retaliation, as well as legitimising centralised taxation and

control.? Once Islam and the Islamic

state?s power had been created and legitimised successive leaders furthered

centralisation and control.? Sedentary

tribes were given precedence over nomadic ones.? Indeed Nomadism was frowned upon by the Islamic state.? By emphasising the dominance of the

sedentary tribes around Medina, notably the muharijun and the Quraysh, the

state associated power with sedentary, centralised tribes.? Further actions show a desire for the nomads

to settle.? Upon conquest individuals

were only permitted to receive the lucrative ata, or stipend, if they settled:

?the sooner one settles, the sooner one receives the stipend?.? This desire for settlement can surely be

seen as a form of control.? By

encouraging settlement the central authorities encouraged further control.The centralised administrative

structure enabled the Islamic state to organise and fund the conquests.? Traditionally historians viewed the Islamic

conquests as economically driven migrations, but evidence points to a more

organised and strategic movement.? The

first settlers or soldiers that had conquered territories did not bring women,

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implies a stage-by-stage approach to conquest: overpower the occupiers and then

allow controlled migration.? The

interpretation that the Islamic conquests were a collection of random and

eclectic raids is also questionable.? It

can be persuasively argued that the conquests were centrally controlled.? The best example of central directive

authority is Umar?s decision to switch the great Khalid from the Iraqi frontier

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these arguments by suggesting that the state had the power to tax and recruit

from all tribes via state run agents.?

He argues that Umar formed conquest parties by instructing his network

of agents to contribute recruits to the Islamic cause.? No historian seems to suggest that the

Muslims had any technological superiority over the great power, and in most

cases they were numerically outnumbered.?

It has been suggested that there were more Arabs fighting for the

Byzantines than there were for the Muslims at Yarmuk.? Similarly, at the decisive battle of Qadisiyya, the Persians,

under the command of Rustam, were numerically superior to the Arabs.? Evidence is sparse and unreliable, but the

way in which the Muslims consistently defeated both empires suggests that in

military terms they must have had some advantage.? Whether this advantage was due to intelligent strategy, religious

fanaticism, a crop of talented generals or better communications is in some

ways irrelevant.? It would be extremely

hard not to suggest that the Arabs had some kind of military advantage.The Byzantine entry into

Ctesiphon in 628 is a false indicator of Byzantine strength.? The Persians were suffering from a series of

internal crisis?s and the Byzantines ultimate victory was largely a result of

Turkish assistance.? Most significantly

the entry into Ctesiphon was the culmination of two decades of damaging warfare

with the Persians.? It was remarkable

that Heraclius managed to raise the necessary resources to launch his

counter-offensive against the Turks.? At

the time the Persians occupied large parts of Palestine and Syria and the imperial

authorities faced a financial crisis.?

The melting down of bronze statues and the removal of plate from

churches highlight the financial plight of the empire.? Similarly the need for Turkish allies shows

us the severe recruitment crisis faced by Heraclius.? Heraclius? remarkable comeback was achieved at a cost.? Generations of civilians in Syria and

Palestine had grown up without imperial rule.?

The populations of these important border lands were alienated from the

empie.? The religious divisions that

plagued the near east can only have intensified this alienation.? Whilst we must not suggest that the division

between Monophytism and imperial orthodoxy encouraged active resistance to the

Byzantines, it cannot have encouraged passionate resistance to Muslim

invaders.? In Egypt however the

religious divisions were more pronounced.?

These divisions, which were inextricably linked with cultural divisions,

created a popular attitude that was ambivalent at best to Byzantine rule.? The situation in Egypt was not helped by the

appointment of the militantly orthodox Cyrus as governor.? The war with Persia had economic and

political effects.? The Byzantines

needed time to recover administrative control over its peoples, as well as time

to recover the economic and military resources that were so depleted during the

Persian wars.Again the lack of evidence makes

it difficult for us to ascertain the precise reasons for Byzantine military

failure, but the apparently large number of Arabs in the Byzantine army shows

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surprise element of the Muslim conquests exemplifies certain Byzantine

weaknesses.? The Byzantines lacked the

intelligence gathering sources to recognise the threat from the Muslims and as

a result had to fight on the Muslim?s terms. In previous wars the Byzantines

used attritional methods to defeat their enemies, but as the disastrous defeat

at Yarmuk suggests the significant early conflicts were large battles.? The Byzantine defences, in relation to the

Arabian desert, were clearly inadequate.?

Much responsibility for the maintenance of city walls was given to city

dwellers, perhaps symptomatic of a lack of imperial control. Residents of the

frontier cities were only too keen to make peace with the Muslims.? It is debatable whether this was due to

cultural and religious differences with the imperial authorities, or to a

rational and pragmatic belief that Muslim rule was the most advantageous way

forward.? Some historians suggest that

the defence in depth policy that necessitated the self-protection of cities

played into the hands of the Muslims.?

The strategy of leaving the elite and mobile forces behind the frontier

was tantamount to letting the Muslims invade the border-lands.? However, it can also be argued that this

policy was also the saviour of the empire.?

These mobile forces were able to restrict the Muslims behind the

Anatolian plateau and thus protect Constantinople. Again the viability of this

argument is largely irrelevant.? The

Roman Empire lacked the resources; the strategy and the military might to

defeat the Muslims.? The dearth of men,

money and close-knit administration was primarily the result of the sapping

Persian war, as well as the cultural and religious divisions that beset the

empire in the 7th century.The Byzantine Empire, in part at

least, survived the 7th century, but by the middle of the 7th

century the Sasanian Empire had been totally destroyed.? The Sasanian Empire had of course

experienced the same debilitating effects of war that the Byzantine Empire

had.? Thus we can say that both empires

were stretched in terms of resources, as well as psychologically

war-weary.? Short-term problems also

afflicted the Sasanians with the floods and plagues of the early to mid 7th

century being the prime examples.? More

long term, structural weaknesses were exposed as a result of the Byzantine

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house caused problems in terms of succession.?

It was difficult for new rulers to gain the credibility and respect that

was needed to maintain the support of the independently minded

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Kings between 628 and 632 bear testament to this problem.? Internal struggles, as in the Roman Empire,

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Roman weaknesses played a significant role in the success of the Islamic

conquests.? Both empires were slowly

recovering from a long and damaging war and we can say with some certainty that

their military status was perilous.?

Both empires were ill-prepared for an attack from the Muslims and as was

often the case in this period the external pressures of the 7th

century intensified existing internal problems.? It would be wrong however to underplay Arab strengths.? The unity of purpose and organizational

power of the Islamic state was remarkable.?

In less than 40 years Muhammad and his successors under the umbrella of

Islam had created a centralised Arabian state capable of defeating both

powers.? The strength of Islam in

creating the state and in providing the ideological underpinning for centralisation

and expansion was extremely significant.?

It is for these reasons that I believe that Arab strengths were more

important than Roman and Persian weaknesses.?

Yes, the position of the great powers was perilous, but the phenomenal

rise of the Islamic state was needed to fully exploit both powers? weaknesses. In the two decades after the

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