Overview of the Islamic Empires

by Adam J. Silverstein

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Tertiary Source:

The Ottoman empire was the first Muslim super-state of this period to rise and the last to fall, lasting in some form or another from the early 14th to the early 20th centuries. It rose when, in c. 1300, an ambitious leader of Turkish frontier warriors in western Anatolia managed to carve out an independent Muslim state in the region. The state, named after its founder Osman (in a garbled European pronunciation, 'Ottoman'), expanded rapidly at the expense of the Byzantine empire, and in 1453 the Ottomans conquered Constantinople (in a garbled Turkish pronunciation, 'Istanbul'). Over the following century, they would take Jerusalem, Mecca, and Medina from the Mamluk Sultanate (which they conquered in 1517) and Baghdad from the Safavids in 1534, while expanding westwards into Europe, adding Belgrade and Hungary to their realms, and besieging Vienna in 1529. . . .

By the mid-16th century, the Ottomans had created a strong, centralized, and cosmopolitan empire that incorporated some of Islam's—and the world's—greatest cities and resources, with footholds in Europe, Asia, and Africa. But being cosmopolitan proved to have both positive and negative results: on the one hand, trade and culture in Ottoman cities were boosted through the absorption of tens of thousands of Jewish refugees from the Spanish Inquisition; the Ottoman military machine was partly made up of Christian youths ('Janissaries', or 'new soldiers', in Turkish); and, having inherited the disparate groups of Turkmen who inhabited Anatolia between the 13th and 15th centuries, the Ottomans ruled over a significant population of Shiites and Sufis (sometimes possessing radically unorthodox beliefs), as well as various groups of Christians….

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From elsewhere in Afghanistan in the early 16th century, a prince known as Babur launched a successful raid into India. As Babur had claimed descent from both Chinggis Khan and Timur, it was a safe bet that he would try to conquer something. This he did in 1526, when his forces defeated the sultan of Delhi and established a dynasty in India. It was under his grandson Akbar (r. 1556–1605), however, that the Mughal empire was created, and for the next century and half Akbar and his successors flourished and their territories expanded. By the reign of Aurangzeb (1658–1707), the Mughals ruled almost all of the Indian subcontinent, as well as parts of Iran and Central Asia, with a combined population of some 100 million people. Though the overwhelming majority of these subjects were not Muslims, they were fully integrated into society at all levels, enjoying unprecedented tolerance: they were exempt from paying the jizya poll-tax, Mughal emperors married Hindu wives, and the Muslim lunar calendar was abandoned by Akbar in favour of a solar one. Mughal culture fused Islamic traditions with Indian ones, creating new forms and setting new standards in painting, poetry, and architecture. The legacy of their achievements can be seen today in the magnificence of the Taj Mahal and in the use of the term 'mogul' with reference to those who possess power and wealth.

Not all of Akbar's ideas were readily adopted by his successors, however. In 1581, Akbar founded what he called the Din-i Ilahi, or 'Divine Religion', which aimed to accommodate the many truths of all religions known to him within a single system. Even Sufi missionaries could not get away with such a scheme and the most vocal opposition to this heresy came from the Sufi leader Ahmad Sirhindi (1564–1624). Akbar's experiment did not survive his death and eventually the excesses of tolerance offered to non-Muslims triggered excesses of intolerance: Aurangzeb waged jihad against Hindus, with mixed results. The empire's borders reached their greatest extent, but with more land to rule and fewer locals willing to cooperate, the Mughals declined rapidly, losing effective power from as early as 1725 (though the state would survive until 1857 [when the British assumed full control of the remaining Mughal territory]).

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But what were the British – and other Europeans – doing in Asia at all? The quick answer, then as now, is 'buying things'. From the 16th century, small nations with big ships (the Dutch and the Portuguese) and later big nations with big ships (the British and French) sought to gain control over trade routes to the Far East, from which spices and other commodities could be bought directly (and hence cheaply). For centuries, Muslim states and societies had benefited from their strategic location, serving as a bridge between Europe and Asia. In the pre-modern period, the geographical centrality of the Muslim world was combined with its superior culture, political organization, and military strength, which allowed Muslims to dominate much of Afro-Eurasia at a time when Europeans were—in relative terms—only beginning to climb down from the trees. But in the 17th and, especially, 18th centuries, the decline of the great Muslim empires coincided with the rise of European ones.

As a result of the Industrial Revolution, Europeans gained important production and communication advantages; the Napoleonic Wars (1793–1815) channelled industrial efforts towards military objectives; the French Revolution mobilized large sectors of the population by encouraging patriotism and notions of state service; and the Enlightenment generated scientific justification for the existence of a hierarchy of civilizations (at the top of which were Europeans, of course). As the three great Muslim empires were largely land-based, they would have been unable to compete with European ships, even had they been at the height of their strength, which they were not. The Mughals and Safavids lost power in the early 18th century, and the Ottomans managed to survive only by reorganizing their empire along European lines. The failed Ottoman siege of Vienna in 1683, and the humiliating defeats suffered in the Russian–Ottoman war of 1768–74 disabused the sultans of any ideas that they were militarily superior—or even equal—to European powers. Decentralization of the empire, factionalism within the court, and other internal instabilities contributed to the impression that the Ottoman empire was 'the sick man of Europe'. In response, from the time of Selim III (r. 1789–1807) sultans sought to

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reassert themselves through internal measures, leading to the ‘reorganization’ (Tanzimat) of the empire (c. 1839–76), through which secular law replaced shari’a, non-Muslims were made equal to Muslims, and Ottoman administration was modernized in most respects….

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