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# The Islamic Conquest Of The Central Maghreb (21-95 Ah / 642-714 Ad): A Comparative Study

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## Abstract:

The aim of this paper is to show that the Islamic conquests in the Central Maghreb were a conquest of the hearts of its inhabitants before they were a conquest of territory. The essence of the civilisational and cultural message carried by the Mashriqis found its identity and political unity in the Maghreb, in terms of cultural and civilisational dimensions, in comparison with other peoples.

The people of the Maghreb found in Islam a cultural legitimacy that was not in conflict with the ancient cultural heritage of the Central Maghreb and that forced them to belong culturally to the Mashriq, without extinguishing their desire to develop on the basis of their cultural heritage. The Central Maghreb, while adopting Islam as a theoretical and fundamental reference for legitimacy, entered the house of Islam, which historically witnessed significant progress in the expansion of its cultural and social space through what has been referred to in historical writings as the "Islamic conquests".

**Keywords:** Islamic conquest; Maghreb; Central Maghreb; Berbers; Africa.

## Introduction:

The Islamic conquest of the central Maghreb is seen by its inhabitants as a conquest of hearts before a conquest of territory. The essence of the cultural and civilisational message that the Easterners brought to the Maghreb resonated with its people, who intellectually engaged with its content and found in it their identity and political existence in terms of cultural and civilisational dimensions in relation to other peoples (Kanon, A. D.T., pp. 38-45).

There is an important historical fact: the people of the central Maghreb had a civilisation before the arrival of the Easterners and contributed to the making of human history. In the spirit of the times, the Muslim Easterners came to the Maghreb from Egypt, which was a province of the Byzantine Empire. Strategically, it was impossible to establish the conquest in Egypt while the Byzantine state remained in the Maghreb (Al-Jilali, A., 1994, Vol. 1, p. 72).

The period preceding the definitive establishment of Islamic civilisation in the Maghreb is significant and crucial, as it determined the destiny and future of the region - a destiny linked culturally and civilisationally to the East, rather than to Roman and Byzantine Europe. This future was linked to Islam as an alternative to Christianity, Judaism and paganism, the religions of the ancient peoples, including the Maghrebi (Charles, D.T., 3, 1896).

This transformation that accompanied the mid-first Hijri century / late seventh century AD was not an easy transition for the inhabitants of the region, nor was it an easy task for the Eastern Muslims who were the agents of this transformative project that began in the late era of the Rightly Guided Caliphs and was not completed until the mid-Umayyad period (41 AH / 132 AH). The Caliphate deployed formidable armies and leaders who excelled in leadership, governance, politics and culture (Lqbal, M., 1984, p. 57).

At the beginning of their conquests, the Easterners were the bearers of a vast civilisational project, which they undertook with responsibility and executed with integrity, despite the mistakes, setbacks and shortcomings for which some rulers (caliphs) and their princes were responsible (Bahaz, E., 1994, p. 09).

There is no responsibility in this for the Muslim soldier from the East, who came with great hope to bring and spread the message of Islamic civilisation to the people of the Central Maghreb. The mistakes of the Eastern conquerors in the Central Maghreb lie in their lack of knowledge of the conditions, culture, climate, geography and history of the local population. This is why the resistance of the Moroccans and the people of the central Maghreb during the conquest of their lands is considered natural, legal and legitimate, as they were used to it with their previous rulers (the Romans, the Vandals and the Byzantines) (Ibn Adhari, M, 1948, vol. 1, pp. 29, 41, 46, 47, 52).

It seems that before the Islamic conquest, the people of the central Maghreb were destined to live under the authority of others or alongside foreign rulers (Sifr, A, 1959, p. 396). When the Easterners knocked on the doors of the Central Maghreb, they entered with force, announcing that they had come with a message of civilisation for the inhabitants, which they only had to accept. The Islamic faith penetrated their hearts and they believed in the ultimate religion, overcoming their own desires. By embracing Islam, they gained new brothers and felt a sense of pride enveloping them as they felt the horizon expanding before them (Bihaz, I, 2006, Vol. 1, p. 55). In this way, the Maghreb was no longer just their home in the civilisational sense, but also the East. A Moroccan was no longer just a brother to another Moroccan, despite traditional differences and customs; rather, all Muslims became brothers.

After resisting the newcomers, the inhabitants of the Maghreb realised that these visitors from the East were different from their predecessors who had come to the Maghreb, because they brought with them ideas and a message that sometimes resonated with the thoughts of the Moroccans. The key elements of this message were initially: freedom, dignity, honour, justice, brotherhood, equality and courage. This is evidenced by the fact that Moroccans are described as noble and free. The qualities of freedom, honour and dignity have always been cherished by the people of the Central Maghreb in the past and continue to be emphasised in modern times.

If we return to the reasons for the Islamic conquest of the Central Maghreb, we find that many historians have addressed this issue, listing the points of the reasons for the conquest. These can be summarised in the following points:

- Bringing the correct Islamic message to the region.
- To extend the geographical boundaries of the Islamic state.
- To eliminate the Byzantine threat in the region.
- To connect the East with the Maghreb.

### **The geographical meanings of the concept of Islamic Morocco (Central Morocco)**

It is difficult to limit the geographical meanings of the concept of Islamic Morocco and the definitions and attributes given to it (Al-Sharif, M., 1985, p. 41), whether in Islamic historical writings or in biased foreign perspectives. Morocco is not only a geographical space, but also a historical process marked by the dynamics of belonging to history, religion, common culture and civilisational development within communities governed by elements of unity and similarity rather than division and disparity.

Moreover, relying solely on the manifestations of geography presents objective difficulties related to the effectiveness of Morocco in relation to its geographical reality and the challenges of establishing this alignment with the collective memory of Moroccans regarding the space to which they belong. In fact, there is a specific Moroccan civilisational identity that is inherent to the process of forming the concept, characterised by uniqueness and specificity.

In reality, the country of Morocco is that geographical, social and historical space that derives its legitimacy not only from geography but also from belonging to a similar socio-cultural and ethnic structure. This is symbolised by the interaction of the inhabitants of central Morocco in their ways of thinking, their reactions to external aggression, their way of life, their clothing, their language, their religion and their patterns of thought, as well as their collective memory. This is despite the manifestations of diversity that contribute more to the components of this structure than to its variation and fragmentation (Al-Arawi, A., 1984, p. 30). The borders of central Morocco have fluctuated between expansion and contraction, depending on historical conditions.

The Central Maghreb has not lost its distinguishing features, such as its identity and essence, especially as a culturally unique region that actively engages with others (Arkoun, M., Beirut 1987, p. 32). It is true that the Greater Maghreb and its backbone, the Central Maghreb, have been presented in foreign writings (in various fields of knowledge such as history, anthropology, political science, travel, etc.) as an open space for incoming civilisations. In this context, it has been portrayed as a submissive subject reacting to its fate, rather than as an influential actor resisting others while still struggling with its wounds. The theorists of these writings (Provenza, B., 1985, p. 32) were forced to acknowledge the cultural exchanges that took place between Moroccan and Eastern cultures, the failure of colonial culture before the Islamic conquests, and the success of Islam in establishing a culture of Moroccan unity. This led to the fusion of the Maghreb and the East into a single culture and civilisation. The Maghreb, as a region, space, history, culture and heritage, has succeeded in interacting with the East, contributing to Islamic

civilisation and leaving its mark through its people, including the conquest of Andalusia. We must not forget the cultural interactions that preceded it by a thousand years (the Romans, the Vandals, the Byzantines) between the East and the Maghreb, which were linked to the civilisation of the Phoenician East.

The difficulty and duration of the Islamic conquest of the central Maghreb are not related to ideology, but rather to the resistance of the Moroccans to the conquering Easterners and newcomers, the spirit of the times, events in the East, and the role of the Byzantines in indoctrinating and feeding the minds of some weaker Moroccans who sought sovereignty in resisting the Easterners. It also includes the mistakes of certain rulers, princes, governors and military leaders in their dealings with the Moroccans, compounded by the Easterners' ignorance of the geography of the Maghreb.

The Islamisation of the Moroccans was not a major problem for the project of conquest in the region, as there was no competing religion. The Moroccans abandoned Christianity when it became synonymous with Romanisation. There was no conflict or competition between the Eastern language of communication and the language spoken by the Moroccans in the cultural and intellectual spheres. Thus, the debate on the depth of the Islamic mission and its impact on the revival of civilisation, renewal, continuity and gradual interaction of the Moroccans took place without coercion or control on the part of the newcomers.

The spread of Islam provided the first point of reference for the Middle Maghreb, as well as a cultural and intellectual framework within which to formulate possible answers to the various questions that arose in the new Maghreb society. Moroccans found in Islam a cultural legitimacy that was not in conflict with the ancient cultural heritage of the Middle Maghreb. This legitimacy, which was unique in its kind, forced them to align themselves culturally with the East without extinguishing their desire to develop on the basis of their cultural and civilisational heritage and historical achievements, which, it is believed, had culturally shaped the whole of the medieval Maghreb.

Thus, while adopting Islam as its theoretical and fundamental reference for legitimacy, the Middle Maghreb entered the House of Islam, which historically witnessed rapid progress in the expansion of its cultural and social space through what is known in historical writings as the "Islamic conquests". Consequently, the reality of belonging meant that the Middle Maghreb was influenced by the circumstances of the House of Islam. Can the relationship of this belonging be read as an emotional response and influence, or as an interaction and impact? During this period, the Maghreb presented itself as a character eager for integration, without losing its historical distinctiveness in terms of liberation, dignity and independence.

### **The Role of the Geography of the Maghreb in the Stages of Islamic Conquest**

Since the campaign of Abdullah ibn Sa'ad ibn Abi Sarh to conquer the Maghreb (27 AH / 647 CE), through the invocation of Uqba ibn Nafi, "O Allah, bear witness," the construction of the civilizational edifice during the time of Hissan ibn al-Nu'man, and its completion under Musa ibn Nusayr, the Maghreb lived through a moment of conquest, responding to the significance of the event and engaging with its goals. With the fall of the Umayyad state at the hands of the Abbasids in the East, the central Maghreb politically detached itself

while continuing to thrive culturally, intellectually, and socially with the East, without losing its historical legitimacy.

The geography of the Maghreb reveals it as a collection of regions penetrated by a series of mountains, which have always formed difficult-to-access areas. This explains why ports became the primary and essential stations for various incoming civilizations (Romans, Vandals, Byzantines). Geographically, the Maghreb was positioned strategically during the Islamic medieval period, making it a critical junction in the trade routes connecting the East with Africa, the East with Europe, and Europe with the East. Geography played a fundamental role in shaping the profound characteristics of the Maghreb, contributing to its identity and even influencing its future contours, as the topographical situation imposed forms of isolation on the inhabitants, complicating social communication in ways not seen in the Levant, Iraq, and Egypt.

Furthermore, the geographical location of the Maghreb influenced the behavior of its people, who were characterized by resistance, strength, rigor, confrontation, and austerity in certain areas and historical periods. This location also facilitated assistance to the stranger, the passerby, the oppressed scholar, and the dissenting voice. Consequently, the Maghreb became a refuge for every politician, dissident, oppressed individual, religious figure, or sect leader, due to its climate of freedom and the distinctive mentality of the Maghrebis, as well as its distance from the East, the center of the caliphate.

The researcher notes that many historians and thinkers have dealt with the Islamic conquest of the central Maghreb, each according to their own orientations, ideas, inclinations and ideologies. Perhaps the most deeply rooted aspect of the conquests is the cultural one. Among the most important eastern figures who contributed to the cultural conquest and the civilisational link between the East and the Maghreb are Abu al-Muhajir Dinar, the first conqueror of the central Maghreb, Hissan ibn al-Nu'man, the civilisational conqueror, and Musa ibn Nusayr, who completed the Islamic conquest.

Amr ibn al-As led an eastern Islamic army that conquered Barqa, with contributions from various eastern tribes who had participated in the conquest of Egypt, especially those who came with al-Zubayr ibn al-Awwam, known as the Medinans. Among them were intellectuals and men from various tribes of the Hijaz, including Uqba and his father Nafi ibn Qays al-Fihri, who were part of al-Zubayr's army (Ibn Khaldun, 1971, vol. 6, p. 173). When the task of Islamic conquest of the Maghreb was assigned to Abdullah ibn Abi Sarh, who was part of the army of Amr ibn al-As on behalf of the third caliph Rashid, his army included intellectuals and notable figures from Quraysh, such as Abdullah ibn Abbas, Abdullah ibn Umar, Abdullah ibn Abi Bakr, and Marwan ibn al-Hakam, among many others (Ibn Abd al-Hakam, 1961, p. 229).

The conquest continued under the leadership of Uqba ibn Nafi, who planned the city of Kairouan. He first built the Great Mosque and the headquarters of the emirate, after which the remaining members of the eastern tribes built their houses. The construction of the city of Kairouan took almost five years (al-Maliki, 1951, vol. 1, p. 17). What is significant is the cultural role played by the Kairouan mosque in transmitting the Islamic message of civilisation and promoting intellectual development.

After Uqba ibn Nafi, the leadership of the conquest was taken over by Abu al-Muhajir Dinar (55 AH / 676 CE) (Alaoui, 2013). It seems that he was the one who opened up the central Maghreb, from Mila to Tlemcen. In Mila, he built the first mosque in the central Maghreb, known as the Sidi Ghanem mosque, the remains of which can still be seen in old Mila. In Tlemcen there are springs known as the Springs of Abu al-Muhajir (Sam'i, 2013). It seems that Abu al-Muhajir Dinar was well informed about the Moroccan tribes and their conditions, which enabled him to deal with them successfully. Within his army there was a group of non-Easterners, especially Egyptian labourers, who accompanied him to build a fleet in the central Maghreb, although this was not achieved until the time of Hissan ibn al-Nu'man (al-Baladhuri, 1991, p. 214). Abu al-Muhajir was aware of the situation in the Maghreb and the nature of the relationship between the Moroccans and the Byzantines, as well as the weaknesses of the Byzantines (Abid, 2013).

Abu al-Muhajir was able to treat Ksilah kindly after his conversion to Islam, recognising him as the leader of his tribe, and he sought to improve integration between the Moroccans and the Easterners. He understood that the strength of the Muslims in Egypt was limited and insufficient to control the lands of the Maghreb. Therefore, they had to cooperate with the Moroccans against the greater and more urgent threat of the Byzantine colonisers (al-Maliki, vol. 1, pp. 21-22; Ibn Khaldun, vol. 6, p. 267).

Through his positive policies, Abu al-Muhajir aimed to establish a local Moroccan army to confront the Byzantine threat. However, his plan was thwarted by the reappointment of Uqba ibn Nafi. Nevertheless, those who succeeded him in the conquests were forced to adopt his policy of integrating Moroccans and recruiting them into the Islamic armies. The end of Uqba ibn Nafi, together with Abu al-Muhajir and a select group of men, was tragic in the battle of Tihuda as a result of military mistakes (Ibn Adhari, vol. 1, p. 34).

### **Continuation of the Islamic conquest of the central Maghreb**

The Islamic conquest of the central Maghreb did not stop; rather, it perhaps evolved during the time of Hissan ibn al-Nu'man (74-85 AH / 693-704 CE) into another type of conquest that was more effective, known as the civilisational conquest. Most historians believe that the real conquest of the central Maghreb took place during the era of Hissan ibn al-Nu'man and is referred to as the civilisational conquest, characterised by cultural communication and administrative integration between the East and the Maghreb (al-Raqiq, 1968, p. 67).

Hissan ibn al-Nu'man was a great man, known as the "Trustworthy Sheikh" (al-Dhahabi, 1990, vol. 3, p. 125), indicating his noble honour and high status. His achievements suggest that he was an excellent administrator as well as an experienced military leader. Hissan realised that the positive approach was to follow the policy of Abu al-Muhajir, which aimed to increase interaction, integration and fusion between the Easterners and the Moroccans.

Hissan directed his efforts towards conveying the message of Islam in a methodical way, not improvised or through impulsive mysticism (Wahba, 1981, p. 92). He sent preachers, teachers and intellectuals to distant and remote areas of Morocco, pursuing a policy of cultural and civilisational advocacy rather than that of military leaders and fighters. This

policy resulted in the loyalty of the Moroccans to the civilisation of Islam without fighting (Shukri, 1974, p. 7; Kashif, 1994, p. 78).

It is noteworthy that the dismissal of Hissan ibn al-Nu'man from leading the completion of the Islamic conquest of the central Maghreb was not due to his failure in the region or to poor strategic policies, and there were no complaints against him from the people of the Maghreb (al-Asli, n.d., p. 73; Abdul Mun'im, n.d., p. 83). Rather, his dismissal was ordered by Abdul Aziz ibn Marwan, the governor of Egypt (Awdat, 1989, p. 22), because they disagreed on several strategic points. One of the main issues was that the Umayyad state was seeking an inexhaustible source of wealth and gifts rather than building a cultural and civilisational foundation based on integration and respect for others (al-Asli, n.d., p. 84).

There was also a misunderstanding between Hissan ibn al-Nu'man, a Syrian from the Ghassan tribe, and the father of Umar, the fifth caliph, and the brother of the Umayyad caliph Abdul Malik ibn Marwan. This was evident from Abdul Aziz's behaviour towards Hissan after his dismissal. When Hissan returned to Damascus via Egypt, he was stripped of all the booty and gifts he had intended to take to his brother, the caliph in Damascus. It is likely that Abdul Aziz wanted to rule the Maghreb through one of his own men (Bouqara, 2001, p. 114).

Thus, Abdul Aziz ibn Marwan was able to influence his brother to appoint one of his loyalists, and the caliph was indeed forced to agree to the appointment of the new governor of the Maghreb, Musa ibn Nusayr (Baghdad, 2003, p. 32). When Musa arrived in the Maghreb, he found the administrative nucleus already in place, but in urgent need of stability and consolidation. He therefore opted for a policy of integration and cooperation with the Moroccans, avoiding confrontation and conflict. This was the same successful policy that Abu al-Muhajir Dinar and Hissan ibn al-Nu'man had followed and from which he had benefited (Ibn Abi Dinar, 1378 AH, p. 23).

To continue this positive policy, Musa focused on intellectual advocacy and the gradual establishment of the principles of Islam through gentleness, persuasion and respect for the customs and traditions of the Moroccans. He fostered bonds of brotherhood, which he then invested in his work by opening up new Moroccan territories, particularly along the coast. His early campaigns focused on liberating large areas and sending the Caliph's share of the spoils to both Egypt and Damascus (Bouqara, 2001, p. 121).

### **The Historical End of the Islamic Conquests in the Maghreb**

Musa ibn Nusayr benefited from the failures, successes, mistakes, shortcomings and virtues of those who preceded him in the conquest of the central Maghreb. However, he was somewhat self-serving in that he saw his work in the Maghreb as a strategic opportunity to demonstrate the balance of his character and to absolve himself of the mistakes attributed to him during his time in Iraq.

It is well known that the period of Musa ibn Nusayr marked the historical end of the Islamic conquests in the Maghreb from the perspective of military confrontation and the practical beginning of cultural movement and intellectual interaction between the East and the Maghreb.

In particular, the Islamic conquest of the Greater Maghreb, especially the Central Maghreb, differed from other regions in that it lasted for over seventy years. This prolonged period can be attributed to several well-known reasons, including the fierce resistance of the Moroccans, the circumstances of the Islamic state in the East, the distance of the Maghreb from the East, the vast area of the Maghreb, the diversity of its tribes, and the historical animosity of the Moroccans towards foreigners due to past experiences (Romans, Vandals, Byzantines). The lack of knowledge of the geography, environment and climate of the Maghreb on the part of the Easterners also added to the challenge. As a result, the Islamic conquest of the Maghreb was considered to be more arduous and prolonged, with some sources stating that more than 375 military battles took place between the Easterners and the Moroccans during the course of the Islamic conquests.

## **Conclusion**

In concluding this research paper, we have reached a number of important findings:

The Islamic conquest of the Maghreb and its liberation from Roman-Byzantine control was an inevitable outcome driven by the nature of the Islamic movement to eliminate the power of the Byzantine Empire, which was hostile to Islam. The conquest of the Maghreb lasted for a long time, nearly seventy years, due to the fierce resistance of its people, the distance from the capital of the Islamic caliphate, and the difficulties of communication. However, when Uqba ibn Nafi established Kairouan, it facilitated the conquest for the leaders, especially after Hissan ibn al-Nu'man defeated al-Kahina at the Battle of Babbagh in 701 CE, leading to security and the organization of the region under Musa ibn Nusayr. Most Muslim leaders responsible for the military campaigns in the Maghreb were highly competent and experienced regarding the affairs of these regions, possessing extensive knowledge of its geography, demographics, and social customs. Undoubtedly, the flexible policies adopted by some leaders towards the tribes of the Maghreb won the favor of their chiefs and members, rapidly integrating them into Islam, thereby becoming part of the Islamic army in the Maghreb.

Hissan ibn al-Nu'man applied a policy of equality between the conquerors and the inhabitants of the Maghreb by assigning administrative and military tasks, achieving a good reputation, promoting Islam in the region, and facilitating its spread among the tribes. He also expanded the construction of mosques and deepened Arabic customs, traditions, and dialects among the inhabitants.

Perhaps the most significant point that can be drawn from this research is that the Moroccan resistance to the Easterners was legitimate and cultural, stemming from their unfamiliarity with the new religion's civilization and their bitter experiences with the Romans, the Vandal military incursions, and Byzantine control. However, when they recognized the truth of Islam and its civilization, they embraced it willingly and with readiness. Thus, we can say that the Islamic conquest of the Maghreb was a conquest of hearts before it was a conquest of territories.



The Muslim conquest of the Maghreb led to the liberation of its inhabitants, the establishment of security and Islam, and the achievement of equality among the population, which united their ranks and helped the Muslims to open up Andalusia. Thus, the Islamic conquest of the Maghreb was achieved after sacrifice and resistance, with the population integrating into the new ideology, making their cultural heritage part of their lives and a guide in their relationships. The Maghreb was integrated with the East within the authenticity of Islamic civilisation, and the Moroccans distinguished themselves from other peoples by contributing to the conquest of Andalusia and spreading the message of Islam to the Sudan.

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