The Rightly Guided Caliphs

The rules of Abu Bakr, Umar, Uthman and Ali (632–661): how each was chosen, the main events and battles, their policies and administration, their achievements and difficulties, the examples of leadership they gave, and why their rule is a model for later times.

The Rightly Guided Caliphs

Caliph (*khalifah*) means "successor": the leader of the Muslim community after the Prophet (pbuh). The first four are called **al-Khulafa' ar-Rashidun** ("the Rightly Guided Caliphs") because they closely followed the Prophet's example.

Caliph	Rule	Chosen by
Abu Bakr	632–634	Chosen at **Saqifah** by the leading Companions (the **Ansar and Muhajirun**)
Umar ibn al-Khattab	634–644	**Nominated by Abu Bakr** and accepted by the community
Uthman ibn Affan	644–656	Chosen by a **committee of six** (*shura*) named by Umar
Ali ibn Abi Talib	656–661	Chosen by the people of Madina after Uthman's murder

NOTE

Shi'a Muslims believe **Ali** was the rightful first successor, appointed by the Prophet (pbuh), and honour him and his descendants as the **Imams**. **Sunni Muslims** accept all four Caliphs in order. In an exam answer, state each view **fairly**.

Paper 2, Questions 3 to 5 each have a (a) [10] and a (b) [4]. The (a) parts are usually "describe the main events", "write about one policy or battle", "the administration", or "what made them models of leadership". Learn each Caliph under these headings: election, main events, administration, achievements, difficulties, death.

Note Academy

Abu Bakr (632–634)

Election at Saqifah

While the Prophet's burial was being prepared, the **Ansar** gathered at the hall of the Banu Sa'idah (**Saqifah**) and were close to choosing **Sa'd ibn Ubadah** of the Khazraj as leader. **Umar**, **Abu Bakr** and **Abu Ubaydah** went there. Abu Bakr reminded them that the Arabs would only accept a leader from the **Quraysh**. A speaker for the Ansar then suggested **two leaders**, one from each group. Umar rejected this because the community needed **one head**, and Abu Ubaydah said to the Ansar: "You were the first to help Islam, so do not be the first to bring division into it." The Ansar withdrew their claim. Umar took Abu Bakr's hand and **pledged loyalty** (*bay'ah*), followed by others, and the next day there was a **general pledge in the Prophet's Mosque**.

In his first speech Abu Bakr said that he had been given authority although he was no better than anyone present, that the people should **help him if he was right and correct him if he was wrong**, that the weak would be strong in his eyes until they had their rights, and that they should **obey him only as long as he obeyed God and his Messenger**. He took the title "successor of the Messenger of God" (*khalifat Rasul Allah*).

Usamah's expedition

The Prophet (pbuh) had ordered an army under **Usamah ibn Zayd** to march towards Syria. Many tribes were now leaving Islam and some Companions urged Abu Bakr to keep the army at home. He refused: "How can I hold back an army the Messenger of God sent out?" He gave the soldiers rules that became a model for Muslim armies: **do not kill women, children or old men, do not cut down fruit-bearing trees, and do not harm monks in their places of worship.** The expedition succeeded and showed that Madina was still strong.

The Ridda wars (the wars of apostasy)

- **Refusal to pay zakat.** Tribes such as the **Asad, Ghatafan, Abs and Murrah** said their agreement had ended with the Prophet's death and refused zakat. Abu Bakr said that he would fight even for the smallest part of what had been paid in the Prophet's time. The tribes attacked Madina at night and were beaten back, then defeated at **Dhu Qissa** and **Abraq**, after which they submitted and paid.
- **Eleven columns.** Abu Bakr divided the army into **eleven columns**, each under an experienced commander, with orders to **invite the rebels back to Islam first** and fight only if they refused. Within about a year Arabia was under control again.
- **The false prophets:**

Note Academy

Claimant	Where	What happened
al-Aswad al-Ansi	Yemen	Seized Najran and Yemen with tricks and force. Killed by **Fayruz**, a Persian Muslim, around the time of the Prophet's death. His followers rose again and were defeated
Tulayhah	The Asad and Ghatafan, northern Arabia	A famous warrior who accepted Islam in 630 and then claimed prophethood. Defeated by **Khalid ibn al-Walid** at **Buzakhah** (632). He later became a Muslim again and fought at Qadisiyyah and Nahawand
Sajah	The Tamim	A woman soothsayer who claimed prophethood, joined Musaylimah and married him. Her force was crushed. After his death she became a Muslim
Musaylimah	The Hanifah, in Yamama	Wrote to the Prophet claiming to share prophethood and was rejected. He taught a shorter prayer and no fasting or zakat. The most dangerous claimant

- **The Battle of Yamama (late 632 or 633).** Two early commanders (Ikrimah and Shurahbil) were beaten by Musaylimah. **Khalid ibn al-Walid** then led about **13,000** Muslims against a far larger army (accounts give about 40,000). After a hard fight Musaylimah's men fled into a walled garden, where the fighting was so bloody that it is called the **"Garden of Death"**. A Muslim soldier, **al-Bara' ibn Malik**, opened its gate, and **Wahshi** (who had killed Hamzah at Uhud) killed Musaylimah. Many **huffaz** died, which led to the **compilation of the Qur'an**.
- **Other campaigns.** Revolts in **Bahrain, Oman, Mahrah and Hadramawt** were put down by separate columns.

NOTE

Why was defeating the false prophets so important? Muhammad (pbuh) is the **last prophet**, which is part of the shahada. If new "prophets" had been accepted, the faith would have been changed and the **unity of the Muslim state** lost. This is why Abu Bakr is sometimes called the **"saviour of Islam"**.

Compilation of the Qur'an

After Yamama, Umar urged Abu Bakr to collect the Qur'an. Abu Bakr at first hesitated, saying he would not do what the Prophet had not done, but was persuaded. **Zayd ibn Thabit** was also reluctant ("it would have been easier to move a mountain") and accepted the task. He accepted a verse only if it was **written and also memorised**, backed by **two witnesses**, and in the order the Prophet had taught. The sheets were kept by Abu Bakr, then Umar, then **Hafsah** (see chapter 2).

Note Academy

Expansion

- **Iraq. Khalid ibn al-Walid** wrote to the Persian commander **Hurmuz** offering Islam, jizya or war. Hurmuz chose war and was beaten at **Kazimah (the Battle of the Chains)**, so called because the Persians were said to be linked together, which trapped them when they fled. Victories followed at Mazar, Walajah and Ullays, and **Hirah** and **Anbar** were taken (at Anbar, Khalid filled the moat with the carcasses of old camels so the army could cross).
- **Syria.** Abu Bakr formed four columns of about **7,000** under **Amr ibn al-As, Yazid ibn Abi Sufyan, Shurahbil ibn Hasanah and Abu Ubaydah**. Khalid made a fast march from Iraq to join them. **Busra** fell, and the Byzantines were beaten at **Ajnadayn (634)**. The Muslims were besieging **Damascus** when Abu Bakr died in **August 634**.

Abu Bakr's administration

- **Consultation** with leading Companions on all important matters.
- **Provinces** under governors who led prayer, commanded troops, collected taxes and judged, with officials for revenue and a judge (*qadi*).
- Officers chosen on **merit, not family or tribe**.
- A strict account of public money and a proper **treasury (Bayt al-Mal)**. At his death he asked that his small allowance be repaid from his property.
- **Non-Muslims** kept their religion and managed their own affairs.
- He was **simple and humble**, and his firmness saved the state.

> **Abu Bakr: elected at Saqifah → Usamah's army → Ridda wars (zakat, false prophets, Yamama) → Qur'an collected → armies to Iraq and Syria. As-Siddiq ("the one who confirms the truth") because he stood by the truth: the finality of the Prophet, zakat as a duty, and the preservation of the Qur'an.**

Umar ibn al-Khattab (634–644)

Main events

- He took the title **Amir al-Mu'minin** ("Commander of the Faithful").
- **Persia.** After the Muslim defeat at the **Battle of the Bridge** (634, where the commander Abu Ubayd was trampled by a war elephant), the Muslims under **Musanna** won at **Buwayb**. Umar then sent **Sa'd ibn Abi Waqqas** with about 30,000 men, who defeated the Persians and their commander **Rustam** at **Qadisiyyah (about 636)**, in a three-day battle in which archers dealt with the elephants. The Persian capital **Mada'in (Ctesiphon)** was taken and the Persians were beaten again at **Jalula**. The last great

Note Academy

Persian army was destroyed at **Nahawand (642)**, called the **"victory of victories"**, and the Sasanian king **Yazdgird** fled.

- **Syria and Palestine.** Damascus fell, the Byzantines were beaten at **Fihl (Jordan)** and then at the great **Battle of Yarmuk (636)**, which lasted six days. **Khalid** used feigned retreats and small squadrons, and a dust storm helped. The Muslims (about 40,000) defeated a much larger Byzantine army, and Heraclius moved back to Constantinople.
- **Jerusalem (637).** The patriarch **Sophronius** agreed to surrender to the Caliph in person. Umar travelled with **one servant and one camel, taking turns to ride**. The treaty guaranteed the **safety of life, property and churches**, in return for jizya, and allowed Jews to live in the city again. Umar refused to pray in the Church of the Resurrection, so that Muslims would not later claim it as a mosque, and prayed elsewhere. A mosque was later built on the Temple Mount.
- **Egypt. Amr ibn al-As** took the fortress of **Babylon (Fustat)** with Zubayr's help after a long siege and then **Alexandria** (about 639–642).
- **Death.** In **644** he was stabbed during morning prayer by **Abu Lu'lu'ah**, a Persian slave who had asked him to reduce his tax. Umar was buried beside the Prophet. Before dying he appointed a **committee of six** to choose his successor.

Administration and achievements

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Area	Reforms
Government	A council of leading Companions (**Majlis-i-Shura**) and a larger body of Emigrants, Helpers and tribal representatives for special occasions. The empire was divided into **provinces** under **governors** (*walis*), with districts under officials (*amils*). Appointees had to write a promise to live simply and list their property, so it could be checked when they left office, and secret reports were kept on officers. Governors could be dismissed
Treasury and the diwan	The **Bayt al-Mal** (public treasury) and a **register (*diwan*)** that paid **salaries and pensions**, ranked by closeness to the Prophet, early conversion and service. Women, children and slaves also had a share. The diwan also handled the revenue from **jizya, kharaj (land tax), fay and ushr**
Justice	**Judges (*qadis*)** appointed separately from governors and independent of them. Umar was displeased when a judge stood up out of respect for him as a defendant
Taxation	Land tax (*kharaj*), **jizya** from non-Muslims who were protected and exempt from military service, and zakat from Muslims. **Conquered lands** were left with their farmers and taxed, not shared among soldiers
Cities and roads	**Basra, Kufa** (Iraq) and **Fustat** (Egypt), as garrison cities for the army and centres for spreading Islam. Roads, outposts, mosques and schools were built and teachers sent to villages
Calendar	The **Hijri calendar** (from the Hijrah, 622)
Welfare	**Pensions** for the old, **allowances** for the poor and children, and a **census**. Food was arranged in the **Year of Ashes** famine (639)
Prayers	Introduced congregational **tarawih** prayers in Ramadan
Army	Cavalry and infantry kept in **cantonments**, away from the settled population
Non-Muslim subjects	Looked after, and their affairs settled with their own representatives. Umar expelled the Jewish and Christian communities of Najran and Khaybar, who refused to follow his order (as part of his policy for Arabia)

Style of leadership. He was **just, strict and humble**. He walked the streets at night to find the needy, lived simply ("only a dress for summer and one for winter, and the income of an ordinary Qurayshi") and called himself *Amir al-Mu'minin*. He insisted that governors be **honest** and not live in luxury. He **punished his own son** for drinking wine.

Umar: conquests (Syria, Persia, Egypt, Jerusalem) + administration (provinces, diwan, qadis, taxes, cities, calendar, welfare) + simple life. For the "[10] describe five reforms and say how they made his rule admirable", pick five from the table and give the effect of each (justice, honesty, welfare, order).

Note Academy

Uthman ibn Affan (644–656)

Election

Umar named six senior Companions: **Ali, Uthman, Zubayr, Abdur Rahman ibn Awf, Talha and Sa'd ibn Abi Waqqas**. Abdur Rahman withdrew and consulted each of them and many others in Madina. He asked both Uthman and Ali whether they would rule by the Qur'an, the Sunnah and the example of the first two Caliphs. Uthman said yes, and Ali said he would follow the Qur'an and Sunnah but use his own judgement. Most people favoured Uthman and he was chosen in **644 (24 AH)**.

Expansion east and at sea

- Persia and the east: revolts in the first years were put down by the armies of **Kufa and Basra**, and by about 650 Muslim forces had reached **Herat, Merv, Balkh and Kabul**. **Armenia** and **Azerbaijan** came under Muslim rule.
- **Egypt** revolted with Byzantine help (Alexandria was retaken by Amr in 646), and **North Africa** was raided as far as Tunisia (647).
- **Navy. Mu'awiyah**, governor of Syria, built the first Muslim fleet. **Cyprus** was taken in **649** and the Byzantine fleet was beaten at the **Battle of the Masts (655)**.

Achievements and administration

- **The standard Qur'an.** After **Hudhayfah ibn al-Yaman** reported different readings in the armies fighting in Armenia and Azerbaijan, Uthman had Hafsah's pages copied by a committee headed by **Zayd ibn Thabit** (with Abdur Rahman ibn al-Harith, Abdullah ibn al-Zubayr and Sa'id ibn al-As). Where they disagreed the **Quraysh dialect** was followed. The copies were read aloud in the Prophet's Mosque, **sent to the chief cities with teachers**, and other versions were burned. He is called **Jami' al-Qur'an**, and the text is the **Uthmanic text**.
- **Public works.** The Prophet's Mosque was enlarged; a dam and flood banks protected Madina; wells, markets, guest houses and pasture land were provided; a port was built at **Jeddah**.
- **Administration.** He kept Umar's system, added officials for finance and an inspector of markets, held public hearings after Friday prayers, and raised allowances. He **allowed Arabs to buy land in the conquered provinces**, which Umar had restricted.
- **Character. Generous, gentle and modest**, and one of the richest Companions.

Difficulties and the revolt

Causes.

Note Academy

- His **gentle nature**: he did not always check his governors, who sometimes ignored him.
- **Appointments of relatives** from the **Umayyad** clan as governors (**Mu'awiyah** in Syria, **Abdullah ibn Sa'd** in Egypt, **Abdullah ibn Amir** in Basra and **Walid ibn Uqbah** in Kufa; **Marwan ibn al-Hakam** as secretary). Critics called this favouritism. (Umar had already appointed Mu'awiyah.)
- Anger over **gifts and shares of state money** to relatives.
- Complaints over the **burning of other copies of the Qur'an**.
- **Rivalry between the Hashimite and Umayyad clans**, tension between Arabs and non-Arabs, and agitators such as **Abdullah ibn Saba'**.
- Some also felt he was too old and was badly advised.

Uthman's defence was that his appointments were for the sake of loyalty and unity, that the Qur'an had to be protected from disputes, and that he had acted openly and with the Companions' agreement.

The revolt (656). Groups from **Kufa, Basra and Egypt** came to Madina, nominally for the pilgrimage. **Ali** mediated, and Uthman agreed to replace the governor of Egypt with **Muhammad ibn Abi Bakr**. On the way home the Egyptians were said to have caught a messenger carrying a letter with Uthman's seal ordering their punishment. Uthman denied knowing about it, but the rebels returned and **besieged his house** for about fifty days. **Hasan and Husayn** (sent by Ali) and **Abdullah ibn al-Zubayr** guarded the door, but he **forbade fighting** so that no Muslim blood would be shed. He was killed on a Friday in **Dhu'l-Hijjah 35 AH** while reading the Qur'an, and his wife Na'ilah was wounded trying to protect him. This began the first **civil war (*fitnah*)**.

> **Uthman: election by the six → standard Qur'an → navy and Cyprus → expansion east → criticism over relatives and money → murdered 656.**

Ali ibn Abi Talib (656–661)

Election and first policies

After Uthman's murder, Ali at first **refused** the office. Talha, Zubayr, the Ansar and the people of Madina urged him until he accepted, and there was a general pledge in the Prophet's Mosque on **25 Dhu'l-Hijjah 35 AH**. He tried to **restore order**: he **dismissed the governors** Uthman had appointed (despite advice to wait) and moved the capital to **Kufa**. **Mu'awiyah** refused to step down and demanded that Uthman's killers be punished first. Ali answered that he would deal with them once order was restored.

The Battle of the Camel (656)

Aishah, Talha and Zubayr demanded justice for Uthman's murderers and raised a force at Basra. Ali (with Hasan raising troops at Kufa) tried to negotiate, and peace was close, but extremists on both sides

attacked at night and the battle began. Aishah's **camel** was the centre of the fighting. **Talha and Zubayr were killed**, and Ali's army won. He treated Aishah with honour and sent her safely to Madina, escorted by her brother **Muhammad ibn Abi Bakr**. She withdrew from politics. This was the **first battle between Muslims**.

The Battle of Siffin (657) and the arbitration

- Mu'awiyah (who showed Uthman's bloodstained shirt and Na'ilah's severed fingers) raised a large army. The two armies met at **Siffin**, on the Euphrates, for months of skirmishes and then a major battle in **Safar 37 AH (657)**.
- When Mu'awiyah's side was losing, on the advice of **Amr ibn al-As** his soldiers **raised copies of the Qur'an on their spears** and asked that the Qur'an decide. Ali's soldiers insisted on a halt.
- **Arbitrators** were chosen: **Abu Musa al-Ash'ari** (for Ali) and **Amr ibn al-As** (for Mu'awiyah). They met at **Dumat al-Jandal**. Abu Musa announced that both rivals should be set aside, but Amr then confirmed Mu'awiyah. Many saw this as a trick, and Ali's authority was weakened.

The Kharijites and Nahrawan (658)

Some of Ali's army, **about 3,000 to 4,000**, said that arbitration was wrong because "judgement belongs to God alone". They left (*khawarij*, "those who go out") and gathered at **Nahrawan**. Ali first appealed to them and many returned. He then fought and defeated the hard core at **Nahrawan (658)**, but his army was tired and refused to march on Syria. Mu'awiyah captured **Egypt**, and the empire was divided between the two rivals.

Death (661)

Three Kharijites planned to kill Ali, Mu'awiyah and Amr ibn al-As. **Abd ar-Rahman ibn Muljam** struck Ali with a poisoned sword in the mosque at **Kufa** during prayer in Ramadan, and Ali died two days later (**661**, aged about 63). His son **Hasan** made peace with Mu'awiyah and the **Umayyad** dynasty began.

Ali's administration and character

Ali kept Umar's system, watched the treasury closely, checked the markets, built cantonments and treated non-Muslims with care. He was known for his **knowledge of the Qur'an and law, bravery, justice, simplicity and honesty**. Shi'a Muslims regard him as the **first Imam**.

> **Ali: elected 656 → dismissed governors → Camel (656) → Siffin (657, arbitration) → Kharijites, Nahrawan (658) → murdered at Kufa 661.**

Note Academy

Leadership: what the four had in common

- **Consultation (*shura*)** and choice by the community or nomination after consultation. Caliphate was **not inherited**.
- **Justice and equality** under law; the Caliph was **accountable** to the people.
- **Simple living** and no royal court.
- Rule **according to the Qur'an and Sunnah**; when these were silent they asked leading Companions.
- **Expansion** and defence, with the protection of **non-Muslim subjects** (*dhimmis*), who kept their religion, courts and property.
- Care for the **poor and widows** through the treasury.

Examples to use in an answer

Principle	Example
Accountable to the people	Abu Bakr's first speech ("correct me if I am wrong"). An old woman asked Umar how he had made a shirt from his share of cloth, and he explained that his son had given his own share. A woman corrected Umar when he wanted to limit dowries, citing the Qur'an (4:20), and he thanked God that there were people who would correct him
Accessible	Umar forbade governors to keep doorkeepers. Uthman heard complaints after Friday prayers. Ali walked the streets of Kufa
Treasury as a trust	Umar took only a summer and a winter garment and an ordinary income. Abu Bakr asked for his allowance to be repaid from his property at his death. Uthman took nothing
Independent judges	Umar rebuked a judge who stood up when he appeared in court. Ali took a Jew to court over a stolen armour, and the judge refused his son's evidence
Equality before the law	Umar made the Ghassanid chief Jabalah accept the consequences of striking a pilgrim at the Ka'bah rather than be treated as a king
Gentle but firm	Abu Bakr and zakat; Umar and the governors; Uthman refused to fight Muslims; Ali spared the Kharijites until they attacked

Note Academy

Difficulties they met

Caliph	Main difficulty
Abu Bakr	Revolts of tribes and false prophets; a short time
Umar	Managing a rapidly growing empire; plague and famine; the problem of paying armies
Uthman	Criticism of favouritism, discontent in the provinces, and murder
Ali	Civil war, rebels, and the Kharijites; the failure of the arbitration, which weakened his position

Importance as models today

- A model of **just, accountable government**, **consultation** and **humility in office**.
- Their **policies** (treasuries, welfare, courts, the calendar) show how Islamic principles can build a state.
- **Relations with other states:** treaties (for example with the people of **Jerusalem**), protection of non-Muslims, and the rules of conduct in war (not to harm civilians, crops or places of worship), which Muslim communities use as an example for fair dealings with other states.
- **Their difficulties** are lessons about **unity**, and the dangers of **favouritism and division**.

For each Caliph, remember three facts: Abu Bakr (Ridda wars, Qur'an collected, expansion started), Umar (conquests of Syria, Persia and Egypt, administration, diwan, Hijri calendar), Uthman (standard Qur'an, navy, criticism of nepotism, murdered 656), Ali (Camel, Siffin, Kharijites, murdered 661).

Model answers for the (b) [4] questions

- **How did Abu Bakr live up to the title "as-Siddiq"?** He upheld the truth of the Prophet's message: he fought the false prophets, insisted on zakat and had the Qur'an collected.
- **How does Umar's conduct at Jerusalem set an example?** He came simply, with one servant and one camel, guaranteed life, property and churches, refused to turn a church into a mosque, and showed respect for all faiths.
- **What can be learned from Umar's murder?** A leader must do what is right despite danger, refuse unjust demands and trust God as the giver and taker of life.
- **How justified was the criticism of Uthman for burning the copies of the Qur'an?** Not justified: he protected the text from errors and disputes and kept the community together.
- **Why did Uthman face difficulties?** Favouritism towards relatives, leniency with governors, discontent in the provinces and the forged-letter affair.

Note Academy

- **What was the most serious consequence of the arbitration?** It weakened Ali, led to the Kharijites and left Mu'awiyah stronger and ruling Egypt as well as Syria.

> **TRY IT**
>
> Describe the main achievements of Umar as Caliph. How far was he a good example of a leader?

Outline. *Achievements:* conquests (Yarmuk, Qadisiyyah, Jerusalem, Egypt); provincial government, the diwan and Bayt al-Mal, qadis, Hijri calendar, garrison cities, welfare. *Leadership:* just, humble, strict with governors, consulted others, equality before law. *Limits:* the rapid growth strained the state, and his death was followed by problems under Uthman. *Judgement:* an excellent model of just and accountable leadership.

Note Academy