

When Damascus opened its gates to the Muslim army of Abū 'Ubaidah ibn al-Jarrāh in 635 AD, three years after the death of Muhammad, its citizens little dreamt what a force they would eventually unleash upon themselves and their city – and indirectly upon the world that we have inherited from them.

FILLING IN THE BACKGROUND

By Paul Stenhouse MSC



HE TRAGIC random murder on October 2, of an innocent employee of the NSW Police based in Parramatta New South Wales, at the hands of a 15-year-old Muslim boy has shocked Australia. The Iranian-born boy of Iraqi Kurdish origin, who had seemingly been influenced by as yet unidentified Islamic extremists, died in an exchange of gunfire with police. He was evidently seeking death under the delusion that this would make him a martyr, and redound to the glory of Islam.

Mr Curtis Cheng, the innocent victim of this tragic murder, was one of countless millions who over the centuries have died at the hands of fanatics who have modelled themselves, or been modelled by others, on the life and example of Muhammad as described in Islam's sacred books and traditions.

Opening the Gates to Violence

When Damascus opened its gates to Abū 'Ubaidah ibn al-Jarrāh in 635 AD, three years after

the death of Muhammad, its mainly Christian citizens agreed to pay the *Jizyah* or poll-tax to the Muslim conquerors.

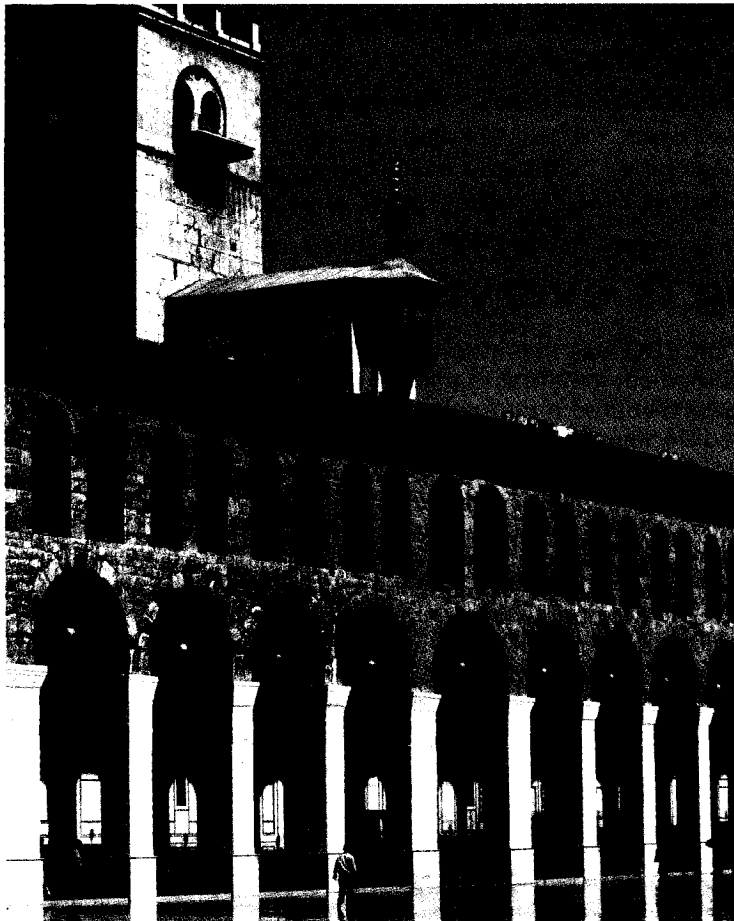
They also agreed to accept *Dhimmi* [or 'tolerated minority'] status, and received, in writing, guarantees of their religious freedom and political autonomy.

They little dreamt what a force they would eventually unleash on themselves and their city – and indirectly on the world we have inherited from them.¹

Yet the seventh century Damascenes had no choice. Surrender, in order to prevent a massacre of all the inhabitants by the

Muslim army, was their only realistic option. One of the commanders of the besieging Muslim forces was Khalid ibn al-Walid – nicknamed the 'unsheathed sword of Allah'.

As it was – after a six-month siege² – they narrowly avoided a wholesale massacre. Damascus had seven gates and while the Byzantine commander was surrendering to Abū 'Ubaidah ibn al-Jarrāh at the Jabiyah Gate in the west, Khalid ibn al-Walid was fighting his way through the Sharqi Gate in the eastern wall. The street called 'Straight' referred to in *The Acts of the Apostles* 9¹¹, ran then, and still runs, between the two gates. When the two Muslim commanders met in the middle of the street called 'Straight,' Khalid insisted that he had won



The courtyard of the 'Umayyad Mosque in Damascus. In 391 AD, the Christian emperor Theodosius I commenced building a cathedral on the site of a Temple to Jupiter in Damascus. This was to be dedicated to St John the Baptist, and in its day was the longest church in the world. In 706 the sixth 'Umayyad caliph, al-Walid I, ordered the cathedral to be demolished and a mosque erected on its foundations.

the city by force. Abū 'Ubaidah, for his part, insisted that the surrender be honoured. Fortunately for the Damascenes, Abū 'Ubaidah prevailed.³

But as for the ambivalently phrased guarantee that the Damascenes were offered by Khalid that 'as long as they pay the poll tax [jizya], nothing but good shall befall them'⁴ – they must have wondered what weight could be attached to it, granted the fate of the Jewish tribes in Medina who had entered into a similar non-aggression pact with Muhammad himself.⁵

Medina's Jewish Tribes

The fate of the three Jewish tribes in Medina – the Banu Kainuka', the Banu al-Nadir and the Banu Kuraiza – would have been common knowledge throughout Arabia and beyond. It had taken four years for their fate to be settled, and the first tribe – the Banu Kainuka' – was exiled eleven years before Damascus fell.

Before Muhammad's flight from Mecca to Medina in 622 AD these three Jewish tribes and some smaller clans, constituted a powerful majority among the population of Medina – a fertile and wealthy oasis on the spice road from Yemen to Syria.

Many of the principal non-Jewish tribes in Medina, the Aws and Khazraj – originally from Yemen⁶ – were employed by Jews as agricultural labourers, or as watchmen in shops and warehouses. These two Yemeni tribes, according to 'Ali Dashti, a Persian Muslim scholar and journalist who died in 1982, were envious of their Jewish employers.⁷

'Ali Dashti notes that one of the reasons the Aws and Khazraj approached Muhammad to be Prince of Medina and took the oath of allegiance to him at al-'Aqaba, on the eve of the Hijra, was their desire to overcome Jewish dominance in Medina.

'As long as the Moslems were weak, no incidents arose. Not until a year and a half after the *hijra* did the Prophet Mohammad change the direction of Islamic prayer from ... Jerusalem to the Ka'ba (at Mecca).'⁸

Setting the Stage for Conflict

The Jewish tribes became alarmed at this change, and one of the leaders of the Banu al-Nadir – Ka'b bin al-Ashraf – approached the Quraish in Mecca for help against Muhammad and his supporters.

The anxiety of the Jewish tribes was further heightened by raids carried out by the Aws and Khasraj led by Muhammad, on Quraish trading caravans – especially the Muslim victory over the Quraish at the battle of Badr in March 624.

The formerly poverty-stricken Aws and Khasraj – now replete with booty – formed what Dashti called 'a strong, united front' against their former employers under Muhammad's leadership, and the Jewish Medinans were accused of having 'infringed the contract [with Muhammad] in various ways'.⁹ The stage was being set for confrontation with them.

Fate of the Banu Kainuka' and the Banu al-Nadir

The first of the Jewish tribes to be targeted some time after March 27, 624, was the Banu Kainuka' whose settlement was near the middle of the oasis of Medina.

They were goldsmiths and armourers but not agriculturalists. According to al-Tabari's *History*, Muhammad assembled around seven hundred of the men of the Banu Kainuka' in the Suq of Medina and called on them to make their Islam [submission]. They refused and rioting broke out, and they were besieged in their enclave for fifteen days. They surrendered and only after 'Abd Allāh bin Ubayy persistently pleaded with Muhammad for their lives, were they grudgingly permitted by Muhammad – 'he was so angry they could see shadows in his face' – to depart, taking with them only with what they could carry on camels

or other beasts of burden. Almost all their possessions, including their weapons, their tools of trade, their homes and their businesses, were forfeit.¹⁰

This enriched the *muhajirun* or Muslim emigrants from Mecca, and the *Aws and Khasraj*, and filled the other Jewish tribes with deep dismay.

In AD 625, sometime before August, Muhammad appealed for someone to rid him of Ka'b bin al-Ashraf from the Banu al-Nadir. Five people volunteered, including a foster brother of Ka'b. These tricked him into leaving his fortified residence and they murdered him.¹¹

Six months after the battle of 'Uhad in north western Arabia, i.e. around September 625, the Banu al-Nadir, were targeted. They were accused of trying to kill Muhammad, and after being besieged for fifteen days, surrendered and were allowed to leave Medina with their lives and whatever they could carry on their camels except coats of mail and armour. Muhammad took their land, all their palm trees, and coats of mail and armour.¹²

Compounding the Problems

ANGELA MERKEL was in Istanbul on Sunday, offering a deal in which Europe would agree to visa-free travel for Turks in Europe starting next year, along with quicker movement on Turkish membership in the European Union, if only Ankara will do more to resettle Syrian and other refugees in their own country. Europe would also foot the bill. This is *machtspolitik* in reverse, in which the chancellor is begging small favours from weaker powers on temporary matters in exchange for broad concessions with far-reaching ramifications. There are 75 million Turks, whose per capita income doesn't match that of Panamanians. The country is led by an elected Islamist with an autocratic streak, prone to anti-Semitic outbursts, who openly supports Hamas, denies the Armenian genocide, jails journalists in record numbers, and orchestrates Soviet-style show trials against his political opponents. Turkey also has borders with Syria, Iraq and Iran. These would become Europe's borders in the event of Turkish membership. This is the country Ms. Merkel proposes to bring into the bosom of Europe. Her apologists will say she's being disingenuous, but that only compounds the disgrace of her overture. It also compounds the danger. Could Europe's liberal political traditions, its religious and cultural heritage, long survive a massive influx of Muslim immigrants, in the order of tens of millions of people? No. Not given Europe's frequently unhappy experience with much of its Muslim population. Not when you have immigrant groups that resist assimilation and host countries that make only tentative civic demands. ... It says something about the politics of our day that this column will be condemned as beyond the moral pale. Such is the tenor of the times that it is no longer possible to assert without angry contradiction that Europe cannot be Europe if it is not true to its core inheritance. This is the marriage of reason and revelation that produced a civilization of technological mastery tempered by human decency.

— Bret Stephens, *The Wall Street Journal*, October 19, 2015

Fate of the remaining Jewish Tribe

By 627 the only Jewish tribe of significance remaining in Medina was the Banu Kuraiza. They were to come to a worse end than their exiled fellow-Jews.

After being falsely accused¹³ of helping a confederation of Quraish, Bedouin and Abyssinian mercenaries who attempted to take Medina by force, and defeat Muhammad, they withstood a siege of twenty-five days. Finally, they, too, were obliged to surrender and looked for terms similar to those that were extended to the other two tribes.

Muhammad refused to allow them to leave with their lives, and instead, appointed as arbiter of their fate an Aws tribesman, Sa'd ibn Muadh known to be hostile to them.¹⁴ Sa'd ordered that every adult male be executed, their women and children enslaved, and all their property and possessions divided among the Muslims.¹⁵

The numbers of men beheaded range from six hundred, to nine hundred depending on the source.¹⁶ Their wealth, their wives and their children were divided among the Muslims, and Muhammad selected one of the women of the Banu Kuraiza – Rayhanah bint ‘Amr bin Khunafah – as one of his concubines.

Al-Tabari, quoting Ibn Ishaq, says that the attack on the Banu Kuraiza took place, either in March or late April 627. He also describes how Muhammad ordered that trenches be dug in the ground in Medina for the bodies of the Banu Kuraiza. Then Muhammad sat down, while ‘Alī his son-in-law and al-Zubair ibn al-Awam, one of his closest companions, beheaded the men in front of him.¹⁷



Damascus – Capital of the Islamic Empire

Within twenty-six years Damascus – the jewel in the crown of the Byzantine Empire’s Syrian territory – would become the Capital of an Islamic Empire, the centre of the ‘Umayyad Caliphate under Mu‘awiyah, the fifth Caliph, in AD 661.

‘Alī ibn Abī Tālib, Muhammad’s son-in-law and cousin and adopted son, the fourth Caliph or ‘successor’ to Muhammad, unlike his three predecessors Abū Bakr, ‘Umar, and ‘Uthman, had moved the capital of his Caliphate from Medina – where Muhammad had spent the last ten years of his life, and where he had died in 632, and was buried – to al-Kufa in Iraq.

In ‘Ali’s day, Al-Kufa, Basra and to a lesser extent Mosul were vast encampments of Islamic fighters strategically placed adjacent to the borders of the Byzantine, and the former Persian, empires.

These cities still exist in modern-day Iraq; and still are being fought over. Following on the ill-fated U.S. invasion of Iraq on spurious grounds in 2003, Mosul is occupied by, and Kufa and Basra are under threat from, the murderous followers

Misquoted

WASHINGTON POST: What’s it like to be an American Archbishop in the Francis era? Your remark from Rome about the ‘confusion’ was widely quoted, as well as your comment that the whole debate seemed stirred up by ‘enemies’ who hate the church. Why is this papacy confusing?

Chaput: Widely misquoted, you mean. What I actually said after the 2014 Erasmus Lecture, which was in New York not Rome, was videoed and transcribed. Anybody can look it up on the Web. My comments had nothing to do with criticizing the extraordinary synod or the Pope. Criticizing some in the media for encouraging confusion and conflict – well yes, that’s another matter and something this Pope is familiar with. His treatment by the government and media in Argentina when he was archbishop of Buenos Aires was anything but friendly, unless his being accused of running an inquisition on issues like marriage and sexuality is considered ‘friendly.’

If there’s anything confusing for people in their perceptions of this papacy, it’s a matter of style, not substance. And again, candidly, it’s hard not to see some in the media and blogosphere as fueling that confusion.

Finally, to state the obvious: Catholic belief and practice don’t depend on polls. People need to be respected and loved and met where they are. Mercy is an expression of love, and the Church needs to speak the truth with love. But she does need to speak the truth, which is not always what people want to hear.

— Archbishop Charles Chaput, interviewed by the *Washington Post*, September 22, 2015

of the self-styled Islamic State led by Ibrahim Awwad Ibrahim Ali Muhammad al-Badri al-Samarrai, who now calls himself Abū Bakr al-Baghdadi.

Kufa proved to be ‘Ali’s bane; he was murdered there in 661 – struck down by a sword coated with poison, wielded by ‘Abd al-Rahman ibn Muljam, a ‘Kharijite,’ one of his former supporters. ‘Abd al-Rahman was one of myriad Arab warriors disillusioned by Muhammad’s son-in-law’s agreeing to settle his differences with Mu‘awiyah by arbitration instead of on the battlefield. All this happened in the days before Muslims split into Sunnis and Shi’a.



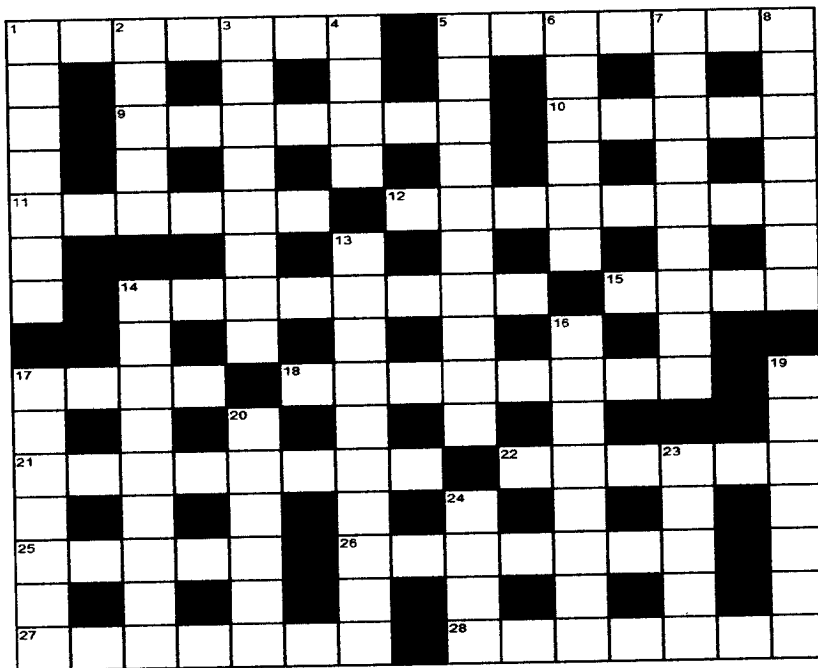
Return of the Kharijites

Abū Bakr al-Baghdadi and his criminal henchmen, and his deluded and murderous young followers, like the Wahhabis of Saudi Arabia and elsewhere, are modern-day Kharijites who prefer blood-letting to arbitration. They don’t understand the meaning of the word ‘mercy’ or ‘compassion’ when dealing with non-Muslims, so-called ‘infidels,’ or with fellow-Muslims who refuse to be conform to their puritanical regimes.

Like cowardly criminals they hide their faces behind masks, and don’t hesitate to shave their beards and lose themselves in crowds to avoid detection. Jihadists from Syria, Iraq and Libya have reportedly travelled with migrants to Europe because it meant they would have ‘no biometric data [in Europe] ... no fingerprints ...’.¹⁸

After ‘Ali’s death in Kufa, Mu‘awiyah transferred the Caliphate to Damascus. Moving the seat of Political Islam away from Medina and Mecca [and Kufa] meant removing it from all the tribal rivalries and

ANNALS CRYPTIC CROSSWORD NO. 42



Across Clues

- 1 Put last 100 into fund little Edward established (7)
- 5 Shoemaker, a learner, moves from fifth to second gear (7)
- 9 So, around morning time, five get a top Russian urn (7)
- 10 Where some northern Italian citizens may live in central Cardiff or Limerick? (5)
- 11 Let cat out with members of herd (6)
- 12 A student of Plato returns extra large containers (8)
- 14 Punch a gnu silly inside a single storey house (8)
- 15 Patron saint of Canada is boxed in by St. Brendan next door (4)
- 17 Scoundrel returns with head of European fresh water fish (4)
- 18 Infidels attending robberies (8)
- 21 Conservative follows corrupt boss with a tale of woe (3,5)
- 22 On edge, marine loses direction around midnight (6)
- 25 Patron of girls grows older around start of novena (5)
- 26 Occupy redesigned Thai bin (7)

- 27 Record he's before us in city where Timothy was visited by Paul (7)
- 28 Document writer in part of a baseball field (7)

Down Clues

- 1 Old French money is enough for this saint (7)
- 2 Annoy frequent flier clique? (5)
- 3 Media boss leaves dumped fish for fruit filled pudding (8)
- 4 Hindi goddess in some sad evil land (4)
- 5 Corinthians rob Noreen pointlessly in Aboriginal gathering (10)
- 6 Draught animal crossing university city (6)
- 7 Singers ban it before nose gets broken (9)
- 8 Corrupt treasuries, getting rid of rat, to redistribute book (7)
- 13 Teresa lies about blasts from the Orient (10)
- 14 Support platform at dog show, where minor members sit? (9)
- 16 Saint runs amok! Lets off bullets in city (8)
- 17 Underworld to alleviate pestilence (7)
- 19 Go on Ann! Make a polygon (7)
- 20 Assist with change to stagnation of blood (6)
- 23 Arise from bed with 5 across? (3-2)
- 24 Jonah, a biblical character, hugs an Old Testament king(4)

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vendettas infesting these places that had led to the civil war that brought Mu'awiyah and the 'Umayyad clan to power, and that ultimately led to the murder of 'Ali.

Moving to Damascus, however, did nothing to stem the killing and violence that accompanied the spread and expansion of Islam. And the 'Umayyad dynasty – for all its broadmindedness and tolerance of non-Muslims in the Empire – was to be exterminated root and branch, less than one hundred years later, in a terrible bloodbath in AD 750.

The first Caliph of the Abbasids – the new dynasty that arose from the

ashes of the 'Umayyad – was Abū al-Abbās, a cousin of Muhammad, whose preferred nickname was *al-saffāh*, 'the killer'.¹⁹

Violence in Context

Muhammad, the Caliphs who succeeded him as Princes of Medina, and the Arab tribesmen who fought their jihads with such reckless abandon, were children of their times and of their desert milieu and tribal and nomadic customs.

Acknowledging this as an indisputable fact helps put the violence of their eras in perspective, but as the noted Egyptian Arabist Father Samir

Khalil Samir SJ comments, and as *Annals* stated last month, it also poses grave problems for 21st century Muslims – whether they live in Islamic societies or Western non-Muslim host countries that have welcomed them as refugees or migrants.

'Violence was definitely a part of the rapid rise and expansion of Islam. At the time no one found anything blameworthy in Muḥammad's military actions, since wars were part of the Arab Bedouin culture. Today the problem is that the fiercest Muslim groups keep adopting that model. They say: 'We have to take Islam to non-Muslims as the Prophet did, through war and violence,' and they base their statements on some verses of the Qur'ān.'²⁰

It is not true to say – as our politicians and media and some Catholic and Protestant priests and pastors, and Islamic polemicists keep repeating – that violence in Islamic societies and communities has nothing to do with Islam. It is also not true to say that nothing can be done to stem the violence.

Next month: Islam and the West: the first five hundred years.

1. Some sources say that Damascus fell in AD 634. Philip K. Hitti, *The History of the Arabs*, London, MacMillan 1968, p.150, favours 635.
2. Hitti, *loc.cit.*
3. Al-Baladhuri, *Kitab Futuh al-Buldan*, translated by Philip Khuri Hitti, Columbia University, 1916 [reprint Gorgias Press, 2002] pp.186ff.
4. *ibid.*, p.187.
5. The History of al-Tabari, State University of New York Press, 1987, Vol. 7, p.85.
6. Hitti, *op.cit.*, p.104.
7. 'Ali Dashti, *23 Years : A Study of the Prophetic Career of Muhammad*, Mazda Publications, 1994, p.87.
8. *ibid.*, p.88.
9. Al-Tabari, *loc. cit.*
10. *ibid.*, pp.85-87.
11. See *The Life of Muhammad* by Ibn Ishaq, trans. A. Guillaume, OUP, 2001, pp.367-369. See also entry under *Ka'b bin al-Ashraf*, by W. Montgomery-Watt, in the *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, Leiden, 1978, E.J. Brill, vol. iv, p. 315.
12. Al-Tabari, *vol.cit.*, pp.156ff.
13. See 'Ali Dashti, *op.cit.*, p.90; and Hitti, *op.cit.*, p.117. Al-Tabari, *op.cit.*, vol. 8, pp.14-15 describes how one Jew, Ka'b bin Asad, broke the treaty with Muhammad; but not the Banu Kuraiza as such; and pp.23-25ff describe how Muhammad played the Banu Kuraiza and the Quraish and their allies, against one another: tempting the former to break the treaty, and tricking the latter into calling off the siege.
14. See 'Ali Dashti, *op.cit.*, p.90.
15. See Q33²⁶⁻²⁷.
16. Al-Tabari, *op.cit.*, vol.8, p.35.
17. Al-Tabari [Arabic], 2 vols., Dar Ibn Hazim, Beirut, Lebanon, vol. 1, p.700.
18. *Daily Mail*, May 18, 2015. See also UNHCR Refugees Daily, June 17, 2015.
19. Hitti, *op.cit.*, pp.285-290.
20. Samir Khalil Samir SJ, *111 Questions on Islam*, Ignatius Press, San Francisco, 2002, p.66.