

# Omar, The Criterion

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When the enemies of Islam heard the name of Omar, their knees would tremble. When Satan saw Omar walking down the street, he would turn the other way. Even Omar's friends would sometimes find his presence intimidating, and they too feared his anger. However, this man of strength and power, cried easily, and had a soft and compassionate heart. Omar was humble without being weak. Omar combined two opposing character traits and that made him unique amongst the men around Prophet Muhammad. Omar's path to the truth began with a vehement hatred of Muhammad and the religion of Islam but that hatred soon turned into a fierce love. Omar ibn Al Khattab strengthened Islam.

Omar belonged to a middle class family, neither rich nor poor, of the Adi clan, part of the tribe of Quraish. He had a tough upbringing, his father was known to be a harsh man who worked his son to exhaustion and beat him when he considered it necessary. Despite this Omar is believed to have been literate, which was an uncommon skill in pre Islamic Arabia. Born approximately 11 years after Prophet Muhammad, Omar was a relatively fair-skinned boy who grew into a tall, well-built,

muscular man known for his fierce demeanour and wrestling skills.

Omar began his working life as a shepherd for his father and aunts, and he was paid a very small stipend, often only a handful of dates for a full days work. He supplemented his income by engaging in wrestling competitions but as he grew into manhood, he became a successful trader and respected businessman. Omar was known as a man of strength. His posture and bearing denoted strength and his voice was loud and commanding. When Mohammad's teachings became a problem for the men of Mecca, Omar pronounced his hatred for Islam openly and took part in the abuse and torture of many of the weaker converts to Islam.

### **The Two Omars**

Although not known by his given name of Omar, there was another strong, determined man opposed to Islam. This was the man originally known as Abu Hakim, (the father of wisdom), but history remembers him as Abu Jahl, (the father of ignorance), the avowed enemy of Islam. Prophet Muhammad, may the mercy and blessings of God be upon him, gave him the name Abu Jahl to denote his total ignorance in not recognising the truth of Islam. Traditional accounts reveal that Prophet Muhammad on one occasion raised his hands in supplication and begged God to strengthen Islam by whomever of the two Omar's he loved most. To the enemies of Islam and to the companions of Prophet Muhammad Omar ibn al Khattab embracing Islam was an unthinkable notion.

Omar's hatred of Islam was so strong that he volunteered to kill Prophet Muhammad. Without a second's hesitation, he strode down the streets of Mecca intent on drawing his sword and ending the life of the Prophet of God. One of the men of Mecca, who was secretly a Muslim saw the look on Omar's face and immediately knew that his beloved Prophet was in danger. Without fear for himself, he approached Omar and asked him

where he was going so quickly. Omar replied that he was going, “to the man who has disunited our people, cursed our gods and made fools of us”, and he said, “I am going to kill him”.

The young Muslim man named Nu’aim felt terror rush into his heart and tried to engage Omar in a discussion to divert him, but Omar was intent on his mission and continued to stride along the street. Nu’aim reluctantly spoke the words that lead Omar to Islam. He said, “why don’t you take care of your own house first’. Omar stopped short and asked him what he meant by those words. Omar’s beloved sister and her husband had secretly embraced Islam and Nu’aim revealed their secret in order to save the life of Prophet Muhammad.

Omar turned around immediately and walked with determination towards his sister’s house. As he approached, he could hear the sound of Quran being recited. Omar knocked on the door. Inside the inhabitants scrambled to hide their copies of Quran but Omar entered and demanded to know what the “humming” sound he had heard was. Omar’s sister replied that it was nothing, just the sound of them talking, but Omar knew the sound of Quran and asked menacingly, “Have you become Muslim?” Omar’s brother in law answered in the affirmative, whereupon Omar fell upon him, wrestling him to the ground. Omar’s sister tried to defend her husband and in the scuffle, Omar hit her face, drawing blood.

### **Quran Enters His Heart**

Omar’s sister seemed to have the strength her brother was so famous for, she stood up and faced her angry brother saying, “You enemy of God! You would hit me just because I believe in God. Whether you like it or not, I testify that there is no god but Allah and that Muhammad is His slave and messenger. Do whatever you will!” Omar saw the blood running down his sister’s face, her words echoed in his ears, and he stood up. Omar demanded that

the words of Quran he had heard as he approached the house be recited for him.

“We have not sent down the Quran unto you (O Muhammad) to cause you distress, but only as a reminder to those who fear (God). A revelation from Him who has created the earth and high heavens. The Most Beneficent rose over the (Mighty) Throne (in a manner that suits His Majesty). To Him belongs all that is in the heavens and all that is on the earth, and all that is between them, and all that is under the soil. And if you (O Muhammad) speak aloud, then verily, He knows the secret and that which is yet more hidden. No one has the right to be worshipped but He! To Him belong the Best Names.” (Quran 20:2-8)

Omar’s eyes filled with hot tears. “Is this what we were against”, he asked. “The One who has spoken these words needs to be worshipped.” Omar left his sister’s house and rushed to Muhammad. Those with Prophet Muhammad were afraid, but they admitted Omar and restrained him until he was in Muhammad’s presence. Prophet Muhammad grabbed him and said, “Why did you come here, son of Khattab?”

Omar faced Prophet Muhammad with humility and joy and said, “O Messenger of God, I have come for no reason except to say I believe in God and his Messenger.” Prophet Muhammad was overcome with joy and cried out that God was Great! Within days, Omar led a procession of Muslims to the house of God where they prayed openly. It was on this occasion that Prophet Muhammad gave him the nickname Al Farooq – the criterion<sup>1</sup>. It denotes one who is able to distinguish truth from falsehood. Islam was strengthened with Omar, his fierce hatred melted into a love that knew no bounds. His life and his death were now for the sake of God and his Messenger.

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<sup>1</sup> Taken from the historical works of At Tabari, & The Life and times of Omar Ibn Al Khattab by Sheikh Ali Muhammad Salladi.

Omar ibn Al Khattab was a strong and assertive man, his heart filled with burning hatred for Islam. The supplications of Prophet Muhammad, may the mercy and blessings of God be upon him, and the sublime beauty of Quran changed his mind, his heart, and his life. When Omar accepted Islam he became a man devoted to the Ummah of Muhammad, as a Muslim, he was pleased when the Ummah was pleased and displeased when the Ummah was displeased.

Ummah is an Arabic word, roughly translated to mean nation, but as with many Arabic words, it does not translate well into English. The root of the Arabic word Ummah is amma, which means to go or to go see. The word imama means to lead the way, for example, the one who leads the prayer is the Imam. Also derived from this root is the word umm meaning mother, source or origin.

In English speaking and Western countries, the word nation usually defines the nation state, whose members live between a set of predefined borders often set by religious, racial or ethnic differences. This is not the definition of Ummah. Ummah means the community of believers bound together with a purpose - to worship God. Together they are strong, divided they are weak. Each member is united with all of the others in a spiritual way that can even have physical manifestations. When one part of the Ummah is in pain, the whole Ummah hurts.<sup>2</sup>

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2 Saheeh Al-Bukhari, Saheeh Muslim.

“And verily this Ummah of yours is One Ummah and I am your Lord and Cherisher: therefore fear Me (and no other).”  
(Quran 23:52)

To illustrate this we can look at images you may have seen on TV, Muslims decrying the abuse and mistreatment of their brothers in far off countries. In the Ummah of Muhammad when one member is hurting, the pain in the hearts of the other members is real. Muslims stand up for what is morally correct and inhumanity has no part in the religion of Islam. Omar ibn Al Khattab recognised this unique quality at once and declared himself a man of the Ummah.

When Omar ibn al Khattab accepted Islam he wanted to be part of his community and wanted to proclaim his membership of this unique nation. Omar wanted to join the Ummah in their happiness and in their pain. At the time of his conversion, the weaker members of the Ummah suffered systematic abuse and oppression, often by Omar himself, but his heart now felt their pain and he wanted to experience it. Omar did not want his Islam to go unnoticed; he immediately informed the enemies of Islam that he was Muslim.

At first, the men of Mecca who had not embraced Islam were shocked and did not react to Omar’s conversion, but as word spread, they came together at the House of God and attacked Omar. Eventually Omar, the strong, muscular wrestler sat in the midst of his attackers and they beat him. Omar recovered from his beating and because of him, Islam became strong. Omar’s heart was filled with love for his brothers and sisters in Islam. Prophet Muhammad said, “if there was to be a Prophet after me it would have been Omar ibn al Khattab.”

### **More than Strength**

Abu Bakr As Siddiq, and Omar were the two companions closest to Prophet Muhammad. Ali Ibn Abu Talib is reported to

have said that Prophet Muhammad went out in the morning with Abu Bakr and Omar and he would return at night with Abu Bakr and Omar. The Prophet himself called Abu Bakr and Omar his eyes and ears, and said they were his advisors from the inhabitants of earth. <sup>3</sup> Omar stood beside Prophet Muhammad in all of the trials and tribulations that faced the Muslim Ummah.

When the Muslims of Mecca migrated to the city of Medina, all left in a well planned, secret migration, but not Omar. He was the only Muslim to make the migration openly, in fact, he proclaimed that he was leaving and invited any man who thought he was strong enough, to challenge him. Omar flung his sword around his neck and strode through the streets of Mecca with his head held high and his heart, which was no longer filled with hate, burning with a fierce love for God, His Prophet Muhammad and his fellow believers. As Prophet Muhammad created his Ummah, Omar stood by his side.

Although remembered for his strength, Omar was also known to be a pious and generous man. He would spend the nights in worship, often waking his family in the last part of the night to join him in his devotions. He was a staunch believer, confident in God's promise of Paradise and readily spent his wealth for the sake of God to benefit the believers. One of Prophet Muhammad's companions narrates<sup>4</sup> that Omar once distributed 22,000 dirhams to the needy and had a habit of giving away bags of sugar. When Omar was asked why he distributed the sugar he said, "Because I love it and God said in the Quran,

"By no means shall you attain piety, unless you spend (in God's Cause) of that which you love; and whatever of good you spend, God knows it well." (Quran 3:92)

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3 At Tirmidhi.

4 From The stories of the Rightly guided Caliphs by Imam Ibn Kathir

Omar was one of ten men to whom Prophet Muhammad gave the joyous news that they would be admitted to Paradise.<sup>5</sup>

However, this did not stop him from working tirelessly, all of his life to please God. He was a man of knowledge, a man known for his generosity and tireless devotion to the worship of God and perhaps above all he was devoted to the Ummah of Muhammad. Prophet Muhammad counselled us all when he said, “A man is not a true believer until he loves for his brother what he loves for himself”<sup>6</sup>. Omar wanted Paradise but he also wanted it for every man, woman or child who has ever believed that there is no god but God and Muhammad is His messenger. This was Omar, who distinguished truth from falsehood; he was a man of the Ummah.

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5 At Tirmidhi

6 Saheeh Al-Bukhari, Saheeh Muslim, & others.



Omar Ibn Al Khattab was the second Caliph of the Muslim Ummah (Nation), and the first Muslim leader to be called the Commander of the Faithful. After Prophet Muhammad's death, his closest friend Abu Bakr became his successor and led the Muslims for around two years. When Abu Bakr felt his own death approaching, he gathered his closest friends and advisors around him and informed them that their allegiance to him was over. Abu Bakr hoped that these men would choose his successor from among themselves. However, after much discussion Abu Bakr's companions returned to him and asked him to choose for them for they trusted his choice beyond question. Abu Bakr chose Omar.

Some of the men around Abu Bakr voiced their concern that Omar, known to be a very harsh and tough man would be too hard on the people. Abu Bakr responded by saying that he considered Omar to be the best among them. Despite these initial reservations among some men of Medina, Omar was appointed as the second Caliph of the Muslims. He began his reign by addressing the people and immediately explaining his expectations for himself.

Omar knew the people were wary of his reputation for toughness and he addressed this issue.

He said, “Oh people, know that I have been appointed to govern your affairs, so recognise that my roughness is now weakened, but I will continue to be rough and harsh on the people of oppression and transgression and will put their cheeks into the dirt<sup>7</sup>. Know also that I will put my own cheek into the dirt to defend the people of piety.”

Omar went on to explain to the people that he would take nothing from what their land produced or from the spoils of war except what God ordained and that he would only spend that money in a way that was pleasing to God. Omar was acutely aware of the importance of financial justice, and that he would be held accountable for every penny or dirham that belonged to the Muslim Ummah. Omar also informed the people that he would increase their salaries and provisions and guard their borders.

The young Muslim nation that Prophet Muhammad, may God praise him, and his companions had worked so hard to establish was an Ummah unlike no other. Benefits were paid to every member of the Ummah from the Muslim treasury; it was not necessary to be a government employee, the wealth of the ever-expanding nation was shared equally. Omar did not institute this, he was merely following the already established way of his predecessors, but he did promise to increase the payments.

Omar also promised not to send the Muslim armies “into destruction”, meaning that he would not send the armies out unless the risks were evaluated and deemed acceptable. He promised not to keep the soldiers away from their families for an extended period and reassured the men that while they were away fighting for the Muslim Ummah, and if they did not return, he, the Caliph

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<sup>7</sup> This was an expression used by the Arabs of that time, to denote a harsh response, one that leaves no doubt that oppression of others and the transgression of their rights will not be tolerated.

would be the father of their children and the caretaker of their wives. Omar believed the role of the leader was to protect the people.

This concept seems very unusual now days when we see Presidents and Prime Ministers surrounded by bodyguards and willing to trample over anyone to protect themselves and their power. Omar Ibn al Khattab, although he was the leader of an Empire, never felt it necessary to have a bodyguard. He walked the streets of Medina like any ordinary citizen, even at night. In fact, it was during the nights that he roamed the streets checking up on those under his protection and anonymously distributing charity.

One of the years of Omar's reign came to be known as the Year of Ashes. This year was a great test for the Muslim Ummah. It was a time of drought and famine, when the wind was so hot it burnt the skin as if with hot ashes. Meat, butter, and milk became unavailable, and the people existed on little more then dry bread sometimes dipped in oil. Omar took an oath that he would not eat or drink anything that was not available to the people. Even when foodstuffs became available in the markets again, Omar refused to buy them for inflated prices. He was heard to say, "How can I be concerned about and understand my own subjects if I am not going through the same trials that they go through?"

More then fourteen hundred years after his reign Omar, is still remembered as a man of justice. Drawing on the principles of justice, mercy and compassion inherent in Islam, Omar treated all those under his care equally, whether they were rich or poor, black or white, powerful or weak. He constantly feared that God would question him about his actions. He worried that there may be sick or poor people among the believers that he had not cared for correctly. Omar ibn Al Khattab never appointed judges or governors who expressed a desire for such a job but chose wisely from the most pious members of the Ummah.

Omar considered himself an *ordinary Muslim* but history has recorded that he was anything but ordinary. Omar was strong, physically and spiritually, he was generous, noble and lived a life of humility. Omar followed in the footsteps of his beloved Prophet Muhammad, may the mercy and blessings of God be upon him, he followed his example and upheld his traditions. Omar's whole being was focused on pleasing God; he feared God's punishment but hoped for Paradise. Omar was able to distinguish between the truth and falsehood, he felt pain when the Ummah or any member of it was hurting, and he felt joy when those under his care were content and happy worshipping their Lord. Omar was one of four rightly guided Caliphs. Even today, he continues to be a role model for strength, justice, love, and mercy.