

## Historical Review of Muslim Navy: Umayyad And Abbasid Period

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### ARTICLE INFO

**Keywords:** Naval force, Umayyad, Muawiyah, Muslim, Mediterranean Sea, History

*Received :* 24.03.2025

*Revised :* 29.05.2025

*Accepted:* 20.06.2025

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### ABSTRACT

This study analyses both primary and secondary sources of historical study that are relevant to Umayyad and Abbasid dynasty. It was found that the Arabs established a vast empire which extended from the Atlantic Sea in the west to the banks of the river Indus in the east and from the Caspian Sea in the north to the valley of the river Nile in the south. Muawiyah was the builder of the Muslim navy who are considered as one of the strong forces and they were able to defend themselves from any enemy threat. They attacked many islands of Africa, Sicily Crete, Cyprus and conquered these places. Besides the Muslim navy conquer many island, they control for a long period and certainly not under Byzantine rule as well. They attacked and conquest in the waters of the Mediterranean Sea and the Marmara Sea. The aim of this article is to offer a historical evaluation of military naval force during Umayyad and Abbasid dynasty.

## INTRODUCTION

The rise and growth of Islam has been regarded as one of the most important events of the world history. Prophet Muhammad (Sm.) (570-632 A.D) was the founder of Islam. Islam Inspired a warlike spirit and national consciousness among the Arabs who decided to spread their new religion and carry on military conquest all over the world. No other religion in the world could spread as fast as Islam spread. Prophet Muhammad (Sm.) established the Shanti Sangh for the purpose of establishing peace. It was through of his efforts that in 622 AD, peace was established between the different religions throughout Arabia through the Charter of Medina. After the death of Prophet Muhammad (Sm.), the caliphs of Khulafa-e-Rashideen came to power in Arabia (Ali, 1949).

People those spread Islam was Khalid Bin Walid, Abu Ubaydah, Amr Ibn Al-As, Saad Bin Abu Waqqas, Uqba-bin-Nafi and others. Africa, Syria, Egypt, Iran, Iraq came under Muslim rule in their brave and heroic campaigns. The Muslim kingdom spread from Sindh in Asia to Spain in Europe within 80 years of the death of Prophet Muhammad (Sm.).

The Arabian Peninsula is surrounded by three seas, the Persian Gulf in the east, the Indian Ocean and Red Sea in the south. The fertile and pastured territory in the Arabian Peninsula, Yemen, Hadramaut, Oman and Bahrain along the coast, usually became important as a centre of exchange. Most of the Arab inhabitants of this territory were interested to live as travellers and wished to become traders as well as great seafarers. Thus, the inhabitants of Saba (Sabaeans) of Yemen enjoyed valuable fertile coastal land which was developed by trading activities with India (Fahmy, 1966). After the revolt crisis against the Umayyad Empire, the centre of government shifted from Sham to Iraq. Thus, a naval expedition from Sham and Iraq against Constantinople was halted and the capital city was spared of the threat from the eastern Mediterranean. The 'Abbasid Kingdom was a superpower at odds with Byzantine and frequent wars (border wars) were waged between them annually. During the reign of the four caliphs of Khulafa-e-Rashideen, there was a well-developed army but no navy. But the Umayyad Caliph Muawiya formed the first army and sent an expedition to the island of Cyprus and achieved success in the first expedition.

The aim of the article is to reveal the establishment of Muslim navy, their warships, weapon, technology, and capturing port, tactics of attack, economic development and finally their rise and fall.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

During the period of early Umayyads the Arabs gave importance on sea power and superseded Byzantium from Mediterranean (Gibb 1958). In the Umayyad era, Arab vessels utilized Greek fire, a closely guarded weapon of Constantinople. The Arabs faced significant shortages of timber needed for building ships, particularly in the eastern Mediterranean (Lewis and Runyan, 1990).

Arab historian and philosopher Ibn-Khaldun (A.H. 732-84 / A.D. 1332-82) wrote later that: "... the Muslims gained control over the whole Mediterranean. Their power and domination over it was vast. The Christian nations could do nothing against the Muslim fleets in the Mediterranean. All the time, the Muslims rode its waves for conquest" (Ibn-Khaldun, 1974; Gabrieli, 1964).

Muslim sea power contributed greatly in this period towards making it a prosperous one for the commercial economies of various Muslim states and towards promoting Muslim maritime traffic throughout the Mediterranean (Pryor, 1988, Ahrweiler, 1975).

According to Kaegi 1992 the initial three Arab civil wars, A.D. 656-61, 680-92, 747-51 significantly hindered the Muslims' capacity to launch offensives and effectively carry out their strategic objectives. Their failure stemmed more from internal conflicts than from the resilience and military adjustments of their adversaries during the seventh and early eighth centuries.

### **METHODOLOGY**

This is a qualitative research employing descriptive analytical methods. The data collection technique used in this study was a literature study technique, the sources of data were books, journals, reports and trusted websites related to the object under study. This research does not incorporate field studies, interviews or ethnographic investigations. As a result, it depends entirely on interpretations and information available in the existing literature. Although this approach guarantees a comprehensive understanding of the subject, it might miss the immediacy and subtlety of current narratives or personal stories.

### **DISCUSSION**

Islam inspired a warlike spirit and national consciousness among the Arabs who decided to spread their new religion and carry on military conquest all over the world. Islam had a thousand-year-long battle with Christendom at sea in the Mediterranean. During the great naval assaults on Constantine in the early middle Ages the most serious threat from Islam emerged. Muslim proselytizing was the main impetus for the expansion of kingdoms outside of Arabia. In addition, the Cossacks had a desire for martyrdom. The role of the Muslim army in the expansion of the Islamic empire is also outstanding. When the Muslims occupied the pagan's areas, many people from the lower classes accepted Islam, impressed by the liberal attitude of Islam. Besides, Muslim conquerors never ill-treated their captives. This attracted them to Islam and helps more in the spread of Islam. Which helps more in the spread of Islam (Nicholson, 1921).

When the Arab Navy occupied the Mediterranean and various Gulf areas, many of the enemy's naval officers, engineers, commanders and shipbuilders were captured. These prisoners had terms with them and they would inform the Muslims of the various tactics of their naval attacks. In addition, captive artisans, especially shipbuilders and tradesfolk's taught Muslim artisans the use of modern shipbuilding and technology. Using the knowledge of the prisoners, the Muslims modernized the army. During the reign of the four caliphs of Khulafa-

e-Rashideen, there was a well-developed army but no navy. But the Umayyad Caliph Muawiya formed the first army and sent an expedition to the island of Cyprus and achieved success in the first expedition. As a result, he increased this force and later caliphs also followed the same policy. However, Khalifa Abdul Malik modernized the army and reorganized it. Abbasid caliph al-Mamun gave importance on navy system and this time Samaria was re-conquered. As a result, the entire waters came under Muslim rule. Incidentally, it should be noted that even though there was no opportunity for naval warfare in tribal wars, the Arabs were well versed in navigation. Besides, since the pre-Muslim era, merchants used to trade by sea-going vessels (Muir, 1983).

There were no rivers in the Arab countries, the birthplace of Islamic civilization. The tiny rivers that existed were only to maintain the fertility of the soil. In these countries rainfall is very insufficient. The city of Mecca is 50 miles from the east coast of the Red Sea. Hazrat Muhammad (Sm.) was born in the Quraish dynasty in this city. Almighty Allah revealed the Quran to Muhammad (Sm.) through Jibraeel (A.). The journey of Islamic civilization began with the revelation of the Quran. While the expansion of Islamic civilization in Mecca and Medina is actualized through Prophet Muhammad (Sm.), the expansion of Islamic civilization outside Arabia is contributed through the four caliphs of Khulafa-e-Rashideen. In such cases the military acts as the main controller. The army members carry out the work according to the decision of the caliphs. Each military force consisted of land forces (infantry and cavalry) and naval forces (Hitti, 1940).

In the beginning, the army was formed by the men of their respective tribes. This force was paid from land revenue and other source taxes. Initially, the Caliph appointed only the commander-in-chief, and the army chief was responsible for appointing other members. A permanent garrison was established from the time of Caliph Hazrat Umar (Ra). During this period, permanent military bases were formed in the regions conquered or where Islam was expanding. For example, the flag of Islam flew in places like Basra (Iraq), Kufa, Fustat (Egypt), Kairouan (Africa), Mansura (Sindu), Gaza, Edessa, Ispahan, Alexandria etc. Although the navy was not used in war, the concept of navy in the pre-Muslim era in naval science is evidenced by the verses of the Holy Qur'an. From the time of Khulafa-e-Rashideen, trade was carried on by sea-going ships. The Arabs were trading across the sea as early as the 7th century. Muhammad bin Qasim's conquest of Indus in the 8th century confirms this. Hazrat Nuh (A.) built the world's first boat. It was 450 feet long, 75 feet wide and 45 feet high and weighed 15,000 tons. In the 7th century BC, the Fenei people also built many large ships (Arnold, 1969). In these ships, they not only traded in the coastal cities of the Mediterranean Sea, but also went as far as Africa in the south and as far as the north. The inhabitants of the pre-Atlantic region of the Fenechee nation were especially famous for shipbuilding and sailing. Their naval base was on the island of Crete. Before them there was a famous race called Certegy. They were very skilled in the art of ship building. Their ships had eight stands each. They used to take boats to the Malay coast. Their speed was 9 miles per hour. Over time, iron has been used in

shipbuilding. Iron was first used in Iranian and Philippine wars (Imamuddin, 1965). The Iranians were the first to use iron in this war. Rulers used to travel in these ships. These ships were not used for the transportation and trade of common people. This situation changed with the introduction of Islamic civilization through Prophet Muhammad (Sm.). When the flag of Islam flew in Syria and Egypt and the Muslims gained naval experience in fighting the Romans. Islamic civilization expanded the most during the time of Hazrat Umar (Ra). There was no other way to conduct the war in Bahrain, a coastal area of Iran, except through the Persian Gulf, so he conducted the war by sea. When his campaign failed, Hazrat Umar (Ra) removed him from Bahrain and placed him under Saad Ibn Akkas of Kufa. The Caliph still did not attach importance to the formation of a navy. As a result, the navy was not formed during the time of Caliph Omar (Lewis, 1950).

### **Navy during the Umayyad period**

Umayyad Caliph Muawiyah was the commander-in-chief of the forces of Syria and West Jordan during the Umayyad period. He is an ambitious and skilled warrior commander. He often had to deal with Roman forces. So he requested Caliph Umar (Ra.) to form a navy and Caliph wrote a letter to Amr-Ibn-al-Aas, governor of Egypt, asking for accurate information about sea travel. Amr-Ibn al-Aas replied to the letter from his experience at sea that it was like a moth flying over a floating piece of wood. If the wood is overturned, the moth will sink and if the wood reaches the edge just right, the moth will fly away in self-delight (Imamuddin, 1970). During the reign of Hazrat Osman (Ra.), Muawiya requested the formation of this force but the Caliph allowed it on the condition that those who wanted to participate voluntarily in naval warfare could be taken and no one could be forced to do so. Amir Muawiyah built a Muslim navy and experimentally attacked the island of Cyprus. The Cypriots made a treaty in exchange for 7,200 gold coins. The success of this first campaign made the Muslim navy more organized and strengthened.

The Muslims used the knowledge of the captive Romans to rebuild the navy, resulting in their naval power surpassing that of the Romans. Originally they employed Roman naval prisoners for this work. It is pertinent to mention that in the first naval war, many Roman shipwrights and captains were captured by Muslims. It was these prisoners who built ships for the Muslims, created the navy and equipped with warships and taught the new recruits to board them. Muawiya left behind seventeen armed warriors and the Muslim army was further expanded after him. This naval base of the Muslims was in the Mediterranean Sea (Hitti, 1940).

Muslims from Syria, Africa and Spain were generally more interested in joining the Muslim navy. The Muslims of all these countries established large shipbuilding factories. They used to call these factories as 'Tarasana'. Each factory produced shipbuilding furniture and various parts. The largest Tarasana in the world at the time was built in Tunis during the reign of Abdul Malik Ibn Marwan. The purpose of building this Tarasana was to bring the Mediterranean and its islands under Muslim rule. On the instructions of Abdul Malik Ibn Marwan, the



governor of Africa, Hassan Ibn-Numan prepared and held various naval exercises in the port of Tunis. Tunis soon became one of the largest naval centres of the Muslims. This fleet secured the Muslim coastal areas and Mediterranean islands. During the reign of the Umayyad Caliph Abdul Malik, they need to rebuild the Muslim fleet arose. First of all, Fleets were needed to protect the Muslim-held Mediterranean African coast. For without rebuilding the fleet it was impossible to keep the coast of Africa in Muslim possession. Secondly, it was necessary to deal with the Roman naval power and on the other hand it was necessary to capture the two islands of Majorca and Menorca in the Mediterranean Sea because the Roman army was repeatedly attacking the coastal region of North Africa. Sardinia is a famous island in the Mediterranean Sea and the Muslim navy attacked the island and captured it without a fight. At the same time, the Muslim navy captured several other islands in the Mediterranean Sea. During the reign of Caliph Al Walid, new shipyards were established on the coast of Africa. Besides, old factories were reorganized in Egypt and Syria. During the reign of Caliph Hisham in one hundred and seventeen Hijri, naval expeditions were sent to various islands under the leadership of Ibn-Abi-Ubaydah and were successful. Only the island of Samaria was held by the Romans. The Muslim navy occupied the entire archipelago and established military camps there. During this time the victory flag of Islam was flying and the Muslim army was constantly patrolling the Mediterranean Sea in defence of the Islamic State (Muir, 1915).

#### **Navy during the Abbasid period**

As the Muslim empire expanded further during the Abbasid period, it became imperative to provide security and law and order in Muslim countries. Therefore, their attention was focused on the security and governance of the country. The greatest event of this period was the victory of Samaria. During the reign of Caliph Mamun, the Muslim navy attacked Samaria. Samaria was formerly in Muslim possession but the Romans attacked and recovered it. Constantine was the ruler of Samaria at that time. Femi was the naval captain of Samaria and later Femi was declared the independent emperor of Samaria. During this period Amir Ziadatullah became very famous in Muslim naval warfare. From Africa he raided Samaria in 312 AH/927 under the command of Asad-ibn-Furat and Femi suffered a crushing defeat. The Muslim fleet laid siege to Sarcasm and established Muslim rule over the whole of Samaria within a few days. Muslim naval power increased in the Mediterranean. After the conquest of Samaria, the Muslim navy also captured many small islands. Originally, the Abbasid rulers maintained their glory and dignity by keeping their fleet under control (Imamuddin S.M., 1970). But taking advantage of the weakness of the Abbasid rulers, their vast empire was divided among generals and the Muslim fleet began to disappear. As Islam spread, the expectations of Muslims increased.

Samaria, the largest island in the Mediterranean, was unsuccessfully attempted by the Muslims. But during the reign of Ziadatullah Aghlab (817-843 AD), the ruler of the Aghlabi dynasty (800-909 AD), Samaria Island came under the control of Muslims. After conquering this island, the Muslims attacked all the islands of the Aegean Sea from Malta, Sardinia and Crete kept them busy by attacking the

coast of Greece. Besides, Muslim colony was established in Athens. In short, there was no force left to deal with the Umayyad and Abbasid naval forces. At that time the head of the Muslim army was Asad-ibn Furad. He defeated the Roman army miserably. Over time, Muslims established numerous 'Tarasana' (shipbuilding factories) in Africa, Spain and Syria. During the reign of Abdur Rahman-al-Nasir (III), two hundred large warships existed in Spain alone and several shipyards/shipbuilding factories were established in Spain. Each dockyard/factory had its own fleet. Each fleet had a naval commander. Admirals controlled the armament and naval forces of the fleet, and the chieftains provided sailing and manning equipment to the warships. Naval power flourished during the rule of the Fatimid Caliph Al Mu'iz. During this time, honours and privileges were also extended to the navy. It should be noted that apart from their salary, they were given a place. They used to call these Jagirs as 'Abwab of Ghazis'. The caliph used to distribute the salary and property himself. The sailors felt more respected in this. During the reign of Caliph Mu'iz, the number of warships increased to 600 (Lambton, 1970). A separate office was also opened for each department in naval warfare. The name of this department was 'Diwanul Ustul'. All expenses of the Navy were handled by this Diwan. The role of the Muslim navy was immense in the spread of Muslim rule. With the help of this navy, the Muslim rulers occupied the large islands of the Mediterranean Sea such as Sardinia, Sicily, Malta, Crete and Cyprus. Also many coastal areas came under Muslim control. It is pertinent to note that Muslim fleets roamed the entire Mediterranean Sea and were capable of attacking European coastal areas at any time. It will not be an exaggeration to say that the Muslims became the absolute masters of the entire Mediterranean Sea. They became masters of water as well as land (Muir, 1915).

#### **Port Captured by Muslims**

The expansion of Islam was tremendous during the time of Caliph Hazrat Umar (RA). The Muslims crossed the Persian Gulf on one side and Syria and Palestine on the other and reached Alexandria. Iran's famous naval center was the port Al-Ubulla on the Persian Gulf and the port of Alexandria in the Mediterranean Sea was the naval center of the Romans. Port Al-Ubulla was the largest naval center of the Iranians. From there, Iranian traders used to travel to Hindustan and China. Similarly, Roman merchant ships used to sail from the port of Alexandria to the ports of Constantinople and West Africa (Hitti, 1940). It was this famous naval center that the Arabs occupied. The ports occupied by Muslim navy are as follows:

**Port of Al-Jar:** It is located near the port of Yanbu on the Arabian coast of the Red Sea. The Muslim group returned from Abyssinia (Abyssinia) in the 7th century. They landed at this port. This port was well-known since the pre-Muslim era and its importance increased after the conquest of Egypt and Syria during the time of Hazrat Umar (Ra). In addition, the importance of the Tsar increased further when the canal was cut to connect the Nile and the Red Sea. Goods from all around for the holy land of Medina landed here and from here the trade routes travelled to different countries including Egypt, Aden and China. In the middle of the sea on

the opposite side of Jar was an island called Karafu. Here people used to travel by boat. Like the Tsar, the island was also under Muslim possession and trade was carried on here (Hitti, 1940).

**Port of Al-Ubulla:** Uballa was the ancient Iranian naval port on the banks of the Dajla (Tigris) river, far from Basra. By capturing it in the 14th Hijri, the Muslims were able to fully occupy Iran. There were ships bound for China and Hindustan.

**Port of Basra:** This port was built between Jara and Shatil Arabia on the orders of Hazrat Umar (Ra). Its geographical importance made it a prominent hub for ships bound for China and India. By this the communication between Indus and Basra became closer.

**Port of Siraf:** It is located on the Persian Gulf and was used as a port by Arab trading ships on their way to China and India.

**Port of Aden:** The famous Aden on the coast of Yemen. Habsha, Mandar, Jeddah, India and China used to pass through this port. Aden was very famous, crowded and full of goods.

**Port of Sohar:** It was the capital and seaport of Amman. According to historians, the port was a very prosperous, opulent and colourful trading center. It is spread over the entire sea coast. High and beautiful houses, built of brick and timber and fresh water canals flow along the coast.

**Port of Jeddah:** It is a pre-Muslim port. Jeddah flourished with the expansion of Islam in Africa, Abyssinia, Sindh and Iran. Today it has become a port for pilgrims.

**City of Kuljum:** A large city and seaport located on the shores of the Red Sea. It was used as a food supply center. Merchants supplied grain from Egypt to Hejaz and Yemen. This port was their main trading center. Merchants and traders from different countries lived here.

**Port of Ayla:** Ayla is the former name of Aqaba and is a well-known seaport in Syria. It was a prosperous city on the shores of the Red Sea. The trader of Syria, Egypt and North Africa used to travel here. Ella was a trading center for various commodities. The Mediterranean Sea extends from the coast of Syria to Jabatul Tariq in North Africa. There was always a fear of Roman attacks on Muslims. With this in mind, the Muslims established a shipbuilding factory at a place called Sur on the coast of Syria. As the sea conquest of the Arabs increased, the Romans also retreated. After the Umayyad rule, the Abbasids gained control of Muslim naval power. Ubaidullah Al Mahdi became the ruler of North Africa after them. Besides, the kingdom of Fatimid's was very strong. Their kingdom extended to the coasts of Sicily, Syria and Egypt. Most of their routes were by sea. That is why they enrich the old boatyard of Tunis. Masina, Palermo, Bijaya, Sabta, Mahdia, Tunis, the city of Rashid, the city of Kaos, Damiat and Alexandria were famous seaports (Hitti, 1940).



### **Muslim Ship Factory**

Arab Muslims used to call shipyards as 'Darulsana'. Arabs are the originators of modern warship industry. Modern Europeans learned this from the Arabs of Sicily, Spain and Africa. Earlier (before the Arabs) the Romans were the shipbuilders and sailors. They (Romans) could only build small warships. Muslims invented new models and techniques. They established the first 'Darulsana' (factory) in Fustat, Egypt. Ahmad Ibn Tulun tried his best to improve this factory. The Fatimid rulers moved it from 'Fustat' to Makas and gave it further growth and expansion. The real kingdom of Muslims was in rivers and oceans. As the Muslim warships were engaged in the defence of the country, their merchant ships carried the goods of the eastern countries and delivered them to the western countries. The Fatimid caliphs built two types of ships. 1. War ships which were called 'Ustul'. These ships housed various armies and navies and were used during wars. 2. Tejarati ship- These ships used to transport goods from one country to another and hence these are connected to business. These were called blue ships. These ships were relatively small and could navigate small rivers. At that time, various warships with different names were manufactured in 'Darulsana'. The size, shape and structure of these ships were also different. The sum of these was called Ustul. The names of some of the major warships built by Muslims are mentioned (Imamuddin, 1970).

**Shuna:** It was a very large ship. Big towers and forts were built on these ships to protect Muslim army from enemy attacks.

**Harraqa:** These ships were equipped with Minjanic. Note that explosives were thrown at the enemy by Minjanic.

**Tarrada:** It is a type of fast small boat.

**Ushariyat:** By this ship the navies used to patrol the Nile.

**Shalandiyat:** It is like a kind of boat. Various messages were conveyed by this type of boat.

**Mishtahat:** This boat was used for general warfare. Arab ships were similar in shape to Greek and Roman warships and it was because they learned this technology from the Romans.

Arab warships used new technologies and the navy was equipped with whatever weapons were discovered. Incidentally, the ships of the Arabs were covered with leather, woollen cloth, and during the construction of the ships, a material was inserted with the wood to prevent them from catching fire. On board ships they used more advanced techniques such as: Silent drills were arranged during the war. Ducks, chickens and other animals were not kept on board. For extra precaution, blue cloth was spread over the ship, so that the enemy could not see the ship from a distance. Moreover, they used to attach long, pointed pieces of iron around their ships so that the enemy would leak and sink into the water as soon as they approached the ship. As soon as vapour was discovered in Europe, Muslims started using it in ships.

### **Muslim Lighthouse**

Lighthouses constitute an important part of the Navy. The oldest and first lighthouse in the world was built in Alexandria. These lighthouses were built in dangerous places. Alexandria was built by burying large pillars. In these lighthouses, there were some people to light the lamp, these people's job was to light the lamp when it went out. It is 275 feet high and stands in front of the harbor of Alexandria. Many lighthouses similar to this lighthouse were built during Muslim rule. Originally, with the expansion of Islam, many lighthouses were built along the waterways that came under Muslim control. England, America and other countries of the world got the idea of this lighthouse from the Muslims. At first, the lamp was lit with oil, but later after the discovery of electricity, that was connected to these lighthouses.

### **CONCLUSION**

Finally, it can be said that Navy is the measure of excellence of a country. The country with the strongest navy has the greatest power in the sea. The defence of the country can be strengthened by the navy, the way to be strong in the economic field is kept in their hands. International business trade between major countries of the world is carried out by sea. Therefore, they get the opportunity to get trade duty for the passage of merchant ships on this route. Seaport facilities remain in the hands of the occupying power, so naval power also controls the economic fortunes of each country. The navy of the Umayyads and Abbasids was the source of financial and naval power of the Arab nation. As long as the Umayyad and Abbasid navies were strong, the Byzantine Roman forces could not weaken the Arabian Muslim forces despite repeated attacks. They were defeated by the Muslims as the Muslims used new tactics to hit and damage the Roman ships. Most of the time the majority of the water bodies were in the exclusive possession of Muslims.

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