

# The Long Journey of Islamic Civilization: Traces of Its Triumphs and Setbacks

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## ABSTRACT

This article about the long journey of Islamic civilization, tracing its glory to the top position and its decline to the next period. Islamic civilization played an important role in the development of global knowledge, culture, politics, and economics especially during the Golden Age during the reigns of great caliphs such as the Umayyad, Abbasid and Andalusian dynasties. This article reviews the various internal and external factors involved in the establishment of the dynasty, including the intellectual contributions of Muslim scholars and a stable system of government. Instead, this article also discusses the causes of the decline of Islamic civilization, such as internal conflicts, intellectual stagnation, and colonialism. Through the approach of a story fund, this article aims to provide an understanding of the dynamics that shaped the course of Islamic civilization, as well as lessons that can be taken for potential revival in the current era. This study employs a historical-analytical approach by examining classical and contemporary sources to capture the continuity and transformation of Islamic civilization over time. The discussion highlights how religious values, scientific inquiry, and cultural openness became key drivers of civilizational progress. Furthermore, the article emphasizes the interaction between Islamic civilization and other civilizations, which contributed to mutual knowledge exchange and global development. By analyzing past successes and failures, this article underscores the relevance of Islamic civilization in addressing modern challenges.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Islamic civilization is one of the largest civilizations in human history that has had a great impact on various aspects of life, ranging from science, philosophy, art, to government systems. Since its emergence in the 7th century AD in the Arabian Peninsula, Islam has not only developed as a religion, but also as a civilizational force capable of uniting various nations and cultures under a single vision of justice, knowledge, and progress. The heyday of Islamic civilization was marked by the rapid development of science and technology. As well as the birth of Muslims who have had a great impact on modern Islamic civilization. However, this glory did not last forever. Over time, Islamic civilization began to show signs of decline marked by weakening political power, internal conflicts, intellectual stagnation, and pressure from foreign powers. This dynamic is an important thing in the long journey of Islamic civilization which is full of valuable lessons in it.

Therefore, this article aims to explore historically and analyze the traces of the triumphs and declines of Islamic civilization, in the hope of providing a deeper knowledge of the factors that shape the dynamics of Islamic civilization and their relationship in the context of the development of today's civilization. Islamic civilization developed through a strong integration of religious principles and

rational inquiry, making knowledge (*‘ilm*) a central pillar of societal advancement. This integration encouraged Muslims to engage actively in various fields such as medicine, mathematics, astronomy, philosophy, and architecture. Institutions like *Bayt al-Hikmah* in Baghdad and centers of learning in Andalusia became symbols of intellectual openness and scientific progress. As a result, Islamic civilization not only preserved classical knowledge but also expanded it through innovation and critical thinking.

One of the distinguishing characteristics of Islamic civilization was its inclusive and cosmopolitan nature. Muslims interacted with Greek, Persian, Indian, and Roman traditions, selectively adopting and transforming them within an Islamic worldview. This process of cultural and intellectual exchange allowed Islamic civilization to function as a bridge between the ancient world and the modern era. The transmission of scientific and philosophical knowledge from the Muslim world to Europe significantly influenced the Renaissance and the development of Western civilization. Despite its remarkable achievements, the sustainability of Islamic civilization depended on a balance between political stability, intellectual vitality, and moral integrity. When this balance weakened, the civilization faced serious challenges. Fragmentation of political authority, the decline of scholarly institutions, and reduced support for intellectual endeavors gradually undermined civilizational progress. These internal weaknesses were further exacerbated by external threats such as invasions, crusades, and colonial domination. Understanding the historical trajectory of Islamic civilization is essential not only as an academic exercise but also as a source of reflection for contemporary society. By examining both periods of advancement and decline, valuable insights can be gained regarding the conditions necessary for civilizational resilience and renewal. Such historical awareness enables a more critical and constructive engagement with present challenges, particularly in redefining the role of Islamic values in shaping a just, knowledgeable, and progressive global society.

## 2. METHODS

This study employs a literature review method as the primary approach to examine the historical trajectory of Islamic civilization from its period of triumph to its subsequent decline. This method is conducted through the systematic identification, collection, and analysis of credible literature sources, including peer-reviewed journal articles, classical historical texts, and contemporary scholarly works that discuss various dimensions of Islamic civilization. In addition, a historical approach is used to understand events, institutions, and figures within their specific temporal and socio-political contexts. This approach allows the study to trace the continuity and transformation of Islamic civilization across different periods, such as the Umayyad, Abbasid, and Andalusian eras, while identifying key moments of progress and decline. The research also applies a descriptive-analytical method to interpret the collected data. Through this method, the study describes major developments in political, intellectual, and cultural life, and then analyzes the internal and external factors that contributed to both civilizational achievements and setbacks. This analytical process helps reveal patterns and causal relationships within the historical narrative.

Furthermore, a comparative approach is employed to examine similarities and differences between periods of prosperity and decline within Islamic civilization, as well as to compare Islamic civilization with other contemporary civilizations. This approach provides a broader perspective on how Islamic civilization interacted with global historical processes. Finally, the study utilizes a thematic analysis to categorize findings into key themes such as intellectual contributions, governance systems, socio-cultural dynamics, and factors of decline. This thematic organization

enables a more structured understanding of the long journey of Islamic civilization and highlights lessons that remain relevant for contemporary civilizational development.

### 3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The era before the advent of Islam is often referred to as the Jahiliyah period, a period marked by acute moral and intellectual decline. At this time, tribal fanaticism dominated the order of life, where blind loyalty to the tribe often overshadowed the values of truth and justice. The community's beliefs are dominated by the practice of animism and dynamism, with many idols being worshipped around sacred areas such as the Kaaba. In addition, social structures are highly discriminatory, placing women and children in a particularly vulnerable position without adequate human rights protections. Responding to the darkness of civilization, the Prophet Muhammad PBUH was present to bring the teachings of Islam as a fundamental agent of social change. Islam breaks down the barriers of group fanaticism and replaces it with the concept of universal brotherhood (ukhuwah) which is bound by the same faith. In this new view, a person's social status is no longer determined by lineage, but rather by piety before God, so that each individual has an equal position.

Before this reform took place, moral decay such as the consumption of khamr (liquor) and gambling had become ingrained in the culture of society. This activity, which is considered entertainment and tradition, has become a fatal social poison, often triggering structural poverty and bloody conflicts between individuals and groups, which further complicates security stability in the region. Injustice is also strongly reflected in the widespread and commonplace institution of slavery. Slaves were treated like commodity property that had no autonomy over themselves, completely subject to the exploitation of their masters. This exacerbates social stratification, creating a very deep and real dividing gulf between the ruling elite and the oppressed common people.

The harshness of the character of the people at that time was in line with the geographical challenges of the Arabian Peninsula, which was mostly in the form of barren deserts, except for the more fertile areas of Yemen. Extreme natural factors, isolation in the middle of the desert, difficult access to transportation, and the nomadic lifestyle of the Bedouins are the main obstacles to the formation of a solid central government and sustainable political stability in the region. It is in this historical and geographical landscape that Muhammad bin Abdullah was born in the city of Makkah on 12 Rabiul Awwal Year of the Elephant (August 571 AD) from the prominent tribe, Quraysh. His prophethood began at the age of 40, bringing with him a holy mission to repurify the teachings of monotheism inherited from the Prophet Abraham. Despite facing severe resistance and pressure, he persisted in distributing treatises for a total of 23 years, which was divided into 13 years of struggle in Makkah and 10 years of building civilization in Yathrib (Medina). The two phases of da'wah have different strategic orientations but complement each other. During his 13 years in Makkah, the Prophet's main focus was to instill a solid foundation of faith and faith, as reflected in the characteristics of the Makkiyah surahs. Meanwhile, the Medina period became a phase of actualization, where Islamic law, constitutional law, and economic principles began to be applied as the main pillars in building a civil and just society.

The majesty and glory of Islamic civilization actually stands firmly on two fundamental pillars that support each other, namely: (1) a massive wave of scientific activity (2) the evolution of science that is developing rapidly. The first element, namely scientific activity, does not only appear spontaneously but is clearly reflected in the methodology for the preparation of papers that is very systematic and organized. As described by Ahmad Syalabi, this intellectual tradition undergoes a gradual maturation process through three crucial evolutionary phases. This phase began with a simple step in the form of recording the basic ideas or hadiths of the Prophet on a sheet of paper to be duplicated, then developed into an effort to collect the scattered records into a more complete book.

At its peak, this tradition reached a stage of maturity where knowledge materials were carefully rearranged, neatly structured based on certain chapters and systematic classifications, indicating the high level of academic discipline that was built at that time.

However, this intellectual activity does not stop at just compiling or compiling data. Scientific activity penetrated into a much more critical and in-depth area, namely the *tahqiq* stage or in-depth investigation that included explanation and critical editing, which was ultimately able to give birth to various original theories that never existed before. One of the most monumental examples of this phase is the contribution of Muhammad bin Musa al-Khawarizmi, a genius who managed to make a revolutionary breakthrough by separating algebra from its old parent, hisab (arithmetic), and transforming it into a stand-alone discipline. Along with these new discoveries, the translation movement emerged as the main gateway for the global transfer of knowledge that enabled inter-civilizational dialogue. The intellectual treasures of great civilizations such as Greece, Persia, and India began to be translated massively into Arabic, a pioneering effort one of which was carried out by Muhammad bin Ibrahim al-Fasasi, the accomplished astronomer who translated the Indian astronomical book, *Sindhind*, at the direct command of Caliph al-Mansur.

This remarkable intellectual movement found its golden momentum in the era of Abbasid rule, known as the time when science was glorified above all else. During the reign of Sultan Harun al-Rashid, the project of translating ancient manuscripts, especially from Greek, took place with great intensity, although this process often had to go through the intermediate language of Syriac before it was finally translated into Arabic. The culmination of all these efforts occurred under the visionary leadership of Caliph al-Ma'mun with the establishment of *Baitul Hikmah* (House of Wisdom), a legendary research institution and library that became the center of intellectual gravity of the world at that time. Al-Ma'mun wisely appointed Hunain ibn Ishaq, a Christian scholar who had an outstanding fluency in Arabic and Greek, to lead this gigantic project. Through the dedication and cold hands of Hunain and his team, the monumental works of the world's giants such as Plato, Aristotle, Galen, and Euclid were successfully transferred into Arabic, enriching the insights of the Islamic world with the priceless legacy of human thought. The flood of thousands of translated manuscripts served as a catalyst that triggered an explosion of development in various branches of science, stretching from mathematics, astronomy, to geography and medicine. In the midst of the growing diversity of disciplines, philosophy occupies a very special position and is respected as the "mother of all sciences". Its central and fundamental position made philosophy the focus of the main study that was very much loved by Muslim scholars at that time. They not only translated, but also commented, criticized, and synthesized these philosophical thoughts with religious teachings, paving the way for the birth of the harmony between rational reason and religious revelation that characterized Islamic thought.

In addition to scientific activities that focus on methodology, the second element that is the pillar of the glory of civilization is the development of the substance of science itself, which includes both religious science (*naqli*) and general science (*aqli*). In the realm of religious science, there is a very deep and serious process of specialization, especially in the field of Qur'an interpretation and hadith science. These disciplines are no longer studied randomly or simply by rote but are developed with a rigorous and critical scientific methodology to maintain the purity of Islamic teachings from historical distortions and misunderstandings. Scholars work hard to formulate rules for interpreting and validating history in order to ensure the authenticity of Islamic legal sources. The evolution in the science of interpretation is very evident from the attempt to separate the method of interpretation that had previously been mixed with the hadith history, a methodological step pioneered by great figures such as Al-Farra. Since then, tafsir has developed into a much more systematic and structured

study, in which the interpretation of sacred texts is carried out with a sharp analytical knife. Interestingly, the diversity of theology that existed at that time also colored the treasures of interpretation; Each theological school – be it Ahlussunnah, Shia, or Mu'tazilah – has its own interpretation experts who interpret the verses of the Qur'an according to their framework of thought and madhhab principles, thus enriching the intellectual discourse of Islam with a variety of dynamic perspectives.

Meanwhile, the effort to codify hadith reached its glorious climax with the compilation of *Al-Kutub Al-Sittah* (The Six Books of Wisdom), a monumental achievement made by the great imams of hadith scholars such as Bukhari, Muslim, Ibn Majah, Abu Dawud, At-Tirmidhi, and An-Nasa'i. On the other hand, the intellectual arena, theological science or *Kalam* was born and developed rapidly as an intelligent defensive response to fortify the Islamic creed from the attacks of outside thoughts, such as criticism from Christians and Jews, using logical philosophical arguments. This fierce but productive intellectual debate ultimately gave birth to brilliant theologians from various camps, both from the Mu'tazilah such as Al-Jahiz and Al-Nazzam who put forward ratios, and from Sunnis such as Al-Ash'ari and Al-Ghazali who tried to balance the postulates of revelation with logic. Turning to the spectrum of general science, the progress achieved by Islamic civilization is no less brilliant and amazing, covering crucial fields such as philosophy, medicine, and exact science. The Islamic world at that time succeeded in giving birth to a series of world-class philosophers whose ideas still resonate today, ranging from Al-Kindi the "Arab Philosopher", Al-Farabi who was nicknamed the "Second Teacher" after Aristotle, Ibn Sina, to Ibn Rushd who became the main bridge of Aristotelian thought to Europe. In the medical field, legendary figures such as Ar-Razi, Ibn Sina, and Hunain bin Ishaq laid the foundations of clinical medicine, diagnosis, and pharmacology whose sophistication far exceeded the medical standards of their time, making hospitals in the Islamic world the main reference for world medicine.

The progress of this civilization was also accompanied by extraordinary achievements in the exact science and exploration of earth mapping. Muslim astronomers such as Al-Battani and Al-Biruni performed celestial observations and calculations of celestial bodies with astonishing precision, correcting much of the ancient astronomical data. In the field of mathematics, Al-Fazzari and Al-Khawarizmi made a lasting contribution by introducing the Arabic numeral system—including the revolutionary concept of the number zero—and algorithms, which would later become the basis for all modern computing. The high spirit of exploration also encouraged Muslim geographers to go on expeditions far beyond known boundaries, penetrating into East Asia, the interior of Africa, and Europe, with figures such as Ibn Khurdazabah and Al-Muqaddasi mapping the world in accurate detail. Among the many scientific stars that shone in the skies of Islamic civilization, Ibn Sina (known in the West as Avicenna) stands tall as the most brilliant and influential icon of scholarship. With a remarkable prolific output of more than 60 works, his magnum opus entitled *Kitab ash-Shifa* (The Book of Healing) became a comprehensive encyclopedia of philosophy and science. In this gigantic work, Ibn Sina cleverly divides the structure of science into practical knowledge that includes ethics, economics, and politics, as well as theoretical knowledge that includes physics, mathematics, and metaphysics. This systematic classification shows how broad and structured the thinking framework of Muslim scientists of the time was in looking at the reality of the universe.

Ibn Sina's contributions to the medical world were even more phenomenal, earning him the enduring title of "Father of Modern Medicine" recognized by both East and West. He succeeded in performing a brilliant synthesis that combined the classical Greek medical heritage of Hippocrates and Galen, the ancient medical traditions of Persia and India, as well as the results of his own personal



clinical observations and experiments. His most famous work, *Al-Qanun fi at-Tibb* (The Canon of Medicine), became the "holy book" of medicine that became the main reference textbook in leading European universities for centuries, proving that the validity of the scientific methods and medical diagnoses he developed remains relevant through the ages. In the end, Islamic civilization not only succeeded for itself in isolation, but served as a vital transmitter or golden bridge for global civilization. Through strategic cultural meeting points such as Andalusia (Spain), Sicily, and intensive interaction during the Crusades, there was a massive transfer of knowledge from East to West. The rich intellectual heritage of Islam, especially in the fields of philosophy, science, and medicine, flowed rapidly to mainland Europe which was then still asleep in the "Dark Ages". This school of knowledge then led to the birth of the Renaissance era, revived Western rationality, and shaped the face of modern civilization as we know it today.

Historically, the Abbasid dynasty is remembered for the various advances it made, especially in the field of science. Here are some of the key advances made during the Abbasid era: (1) Social and Cultural Field. Similar to the Umayyad dynasty, this period was also characterized by a blend of cultures and the absorption of foreign elements, which was seen in architecture and buildings. (2) Political and Military Fields. They expanded their territory and established the *Diwan al-Jundi* (Council of Ministers) as a special institution for defense and security affairs. (3) Government System. In an effort to strengthen effective state governance, the Abbasid Dynasty designed a complex bureaucratic structure by establishing various strategic councils or departments. This structure is led by the position of *Amir al-Umara* who acts as the highest authority of the government, supported by an internal supervisory body called *Az-Zimani*, as well as the *At-Taqwi institution* which is fully responsible for the management of the country's archives and political documents. In addition, the security and public order aspects are closely guarded by *Al-Akhdas Wasy Shurthah* which functions as the police, while the efficiency of inter-regional communication is facilitated by the state postal service or *Al-Barid*, and law enforcement is carried out independently through the judiciary headed by a *Qadli*. (4) Facilities and Infrastructure. In addition to the bureaucratic system, the Abbasid Dynasty government also paid great attention to physical development and public facilities in order to improve the standard of living and welfare of its people as a whole. The focus of this infrastructure development is manifested in the provision of various vital facilities, ranging from the establishment of health service centers such as hospitals and medical schools, to public sanitation facilities in the form of public baths. In the economic and agricultural sectors, they strengthen logistics and food security networks by building water infrastructure such as irrigation dams, as well as operating dozens of formidable trade and naval fleets to secure trade routes and territorial expansion.

In the intellectual sector, the Abbasid dynasty succeeded in transforming Baghdad into the world's most influential beacon of civilization and scientific center, a reputation that led historian Philip K. Hitti to dub it an "intellectual city" and a major educational center for the Islamic community. The education ecosystem in this period thrived through a complete and leveled institutional level, starting from *Kuttab* for children's basic education, continuing to secondary schools, until reaching *Madrasah Nizhamiyah* as a leading university. The culmination was the existence of *Baitul Hikmah*, a prestigious institution that combined the functions of a giant library and an astronomical observatory, becoming a symbol of the supremacy of science at that time.

In 1258, Mongol forces under the command of Hulagu Khan invaded and destroyed Baghdad, the seat of power of the Abbasid Dynasty and the heart of Islamic civilization. This event marked the beginning of the decline of the Islamic world. After Caliph Al-Mu'tasim refused to surrender, an attack ensued, resulting in the deaths of more than a million people in Baghdad. This brutal act brought permanent destruction to Islamic civilization in all aspects, from cultural and

political to physical and psychological. In addition to ending the Abbasid Caliphate, the destruction of Islamic learning centers in Baghdad by the Mongols was a major factor in the decline of Islamic civilization. After successfully capturing Baghdad and Persia, the Mongols continued their invasion of Egypt to defeat the ruling Mamluk Dynasty. However, their efforts were completely defeated at the Battle of Ain Jalut on September 13, 1260, or the 15th of Ramadan. Subsequently, the Mongols ruled Arabia for the next 85 years under the rule of the Ilkhan Dynasty, an era full of great changes. The period of Islamic decline between 1700 and 1800 AD was marked by the lack of a strong sultan in the Ottoman Empire after Suleiman the Great. In Syria and Lebanon, internal rebellions emerged during the reigns of Jumbulat of the Kurds and Amir Fakhr al-Din of the Druze. Clashes with neighboring countries such as Venice and Persia, plus revolts by the Ottoman forces, further weakened the kingdom.

The harem had a significant impact on the sultan, while Europe witnessed the rise of new powers, including Russia, led by Peter the Great. The Ottoman Empire suffered defeats in battles against these powers, resulting in the reduction of its territory in Europe. Romania gained independence in 1856, while Muntenia achieved it earlier in 1829. Until after World War I, the remnants of the Ottoman Empire were concentrated only in Asia Minor and a small part of Eastern Europe. The factors that contributed to the decline of Islamic civilization and culture began to emerge along with the fragmentation of Islamic power, as evidenced by the many separate kingdoms. In general, several reasons contributed to the decline of Islamic civilization, including: (a) Lack of attention in managing large areas (b) Population diversity hinders unity. (c) Rulers who lack strong leadership skills. (d) Uncontrollable moral deterioration. (e ) Regression and stagnation in science and technology. (f) Dissension within Islamic kingdoms. (g) Ibn Khaldun, a Muslim historian and classical social scientist of the 14th century, argued that the decline of Islamic civilization, similar to that experienced by earlier societies, was caused by a variety of internal and external factors. His analysis is often cited as a reference because he lived in that period of civilization. Classical Islam has regressed (Sihilun, 2010:5). One of the internal factors is the tendency of leaders to live in luxury, coupled with increasing corruption, collusion, nepotism, and moral decay in government.

The Crusades (1096-1270) and the Mongol invasion were two important external events that contributed to the decline of Islamic civilization. The Crusades are considered to be the earliest examples of Western imperialism aimed at expanding power, with religion serving as a psychological tool. The Mongol invasion covered eastern regions such as Samarkand, Bukhara, Khawarizm, Persia, and Baghdad in 1258, which ended the Abbasid Caliphate. Although the Mongol invasion marked the peak of significant external influence, various other internal and external factors, such as political, social, economic, and religious understanding, also contributed to the decline of Muslim communities. Indications of this decline, particularly in the field of knowledge and attitudes towards science, began to appear after the 13th century.

#### 4. CONCLUSION

Islamic civilization has undergone a long evolution, starting from the condition of the Arab society before the existence of Islam which was filled with injustice and declining morals, to undergoing a major transformation through the teachings of Islam brought by the Prophet Muhammad PBUH. The peak period of Islamic civilization occurred during the Umayyad, Abbasid Dynasty, and the glory of Andalusia. This success is inseparable from two main factors, namely the high level of activity in the scientific field and the rapid progress in the world of knowledge. The broad translation movement, the emergence of many scholars from various disciplines, and the development of educational institutions such as Baitul Hikmah. Innovation also occurs in various branches of science, including philosophy, medicine, mathematics, astronomy, geography, as well

as religious sciences such as tafsir, hadith, kalam, and jurisprudence. Islamic civilization also played an important role as a liaison for distributing knowledge to the West which triggered the emergence of the Renaissance in Europe. However, this success began to decline significantly since the 13th century. External threats such as the Crusades and the Mongol invasion, coupled with internal problems such as weak leadership, political fragmentation, intellectual stagnation, economic crisis, and moral decline, were the main causes of the decline of major centers of Islamic culture. In the following period, especially towards the end of the Ottoman era, various internal conflicts, administrative declines, the emergence of the great European powers, and colonial practices further accelerated the decline. Ibn Khaldun's analysis shows that the decline of a civilization is the result of a combination of internal and external factors, which proves relevant in explaining the dynamics of the decline of the Islamic world. Thus, the long history of Islamic civilization offers valuable lessons for the development of civilization today. Revival and glory have been achieved through dedication to knowledge, strong leadership, political stability, and openness to other cultures. In contrast, a decline occurs when these values are ignored. Understanding these dynamics is very important to formulate a strategy for the revival of Islamic civilization that is appropriate for the modern era.

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