

# Changing Cordoba: An Essay on the first Cordoban Caliph

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DOMINIK CHOLEWSKI, MAY 17 2010

*“With him the age gone by has returned, and the worn-out reign has been renewed.”*  
-Ibn ‘Abd Rabbihi

The second Umayyad Caliphate faced many struggles during its time in the Iberian Peninsula, from internal power conflicts among Muslim factions to the external pressures from the Christian north. Warring Arab and Berber Muwallad factions plagued the Iberian Peninsula while the emirate encountered constant Christian incursions from the northern kingdoms. These internal and external pressures caused great unrest in the dominion of the Umayyad caliphate. Through a methodical and systematic approach of pacifying the rebel leaders, ‘Abd al-Rahman III restored much of the previous emirate, and provided a springboard for his assertion of caliph. The following will focus on the rule of Caliph ‘Abd al-Rahman III, under whom scholars believe the Umayyad Caliphate achieved its Zenith in al-Andalus[1], and will analyse ‘Abd al-Rahman III’s military conciliation of the Iberian Peninsula, using primary and secondary sources to examine and explain the securing of Umayyad rule by pacifying the rebellious Muslim factions. It will also explore the pivotal moment of ‘Abd al-Rahman III’s assertion as Caliph of the Umayyad Caliphate and how preceding events had enabled and justified him to do so, despite the fact that no ruler before him in al-Andalus had bestowed upon themselves the title of Caliph.

‘Abd al-Rahman III came to power in 912 at the age of twenty, to find the Umayyad emirate in a state of complete chaos and disrepair.[2] The area under the emirate’s control amounted to only the city of Cordoba and its immediate surrounding areas.[3] Rebel forces and warlords had seized control of most of the peninsula. In order to restore the emirate to its former glory, ‘Abd al-Rahman III initiated a series of campaigns. Diplomatically, ‘Abd al-Rahman III began by sending out letters to the governors and lords of certain areas across the peninsula, asking them for their allegiance, to which the response was mixed, with some dedicating forces and provisions to the emir, while others refused any type of response.[4] This diplomatic action was necessary in order to determine which governors the emir would be able to depend on, and which ones disregarded his rule. These letters were then followed by systematic and methodical campaigns against those leaders who rebelled, regaining control over the former Umayyad Caliphate territories.

‘Abd al-Rahman III began his first successful campaign in the winter of 913 against the rebels to the north of Cordoba, in Calatrava. At the beginning of Ramadan in 913, the emir set out towards Granada in the south. During this campaign it was reported that over seventy fortresses had been surrendered or overrun. A contemporary source remarked that this was an unprecedented amount of occupied fortresses.[5] These victories all contributed to ‘Abd al-Rahman III’s justification of the title Caliph, and his campaigns against ‘Umar ibn Hafsun in particular were of great importance, as it was during this campaign that the emir first encountered this notorious rebel leader. ‘Umar ibn Hafsun was an agile leader who was able to organise many counterattacks, one of which reached the way to Granada[6], and would prove to be one of most difficult enemies the emir was to face during his period of conquests

Abd al-Rahman III led many campaigns against the rebel leader ‘Umar ibn Hafsun. In 914, with an overall goal to cut off the rebels’ access to North Africa, the emir set out specifically against ‘Umar ibn Hafsun. In this campaign, described as cruel by sources at the time, ‘Abd al-Rahman III and his forces cut off Ibn Hafsun from the sea,

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destroying his fleet and depriving the rebel leader of supplies from the North African continent, which was under the rule of the emirate's ideological enemy, the Fatimids.[7] The Fatimid Empire was ideologically different as they were Shi'a Muslims with claims of being directly related to the Prophet, in contrast to the Umayyads. The Fatimids believed that because of this tie, they were endowed with supernatural powers and knowledge.[8] 'Abd al-Rahman III feared that if the Hafsun rebel and the Fatimid Empire were to successfully become allies, his rule would be severely compromised. Fortunately for 'Abd al-Rahman III, many governors and castle lords living in the area submitted their allegiances to him, while many of the Muslims demonstrated that they preferred the emir to the now Christian 'Umar Ibn Hafsun.[9] This increased the emir's taxable population, which in turn meant he was able to continue his campaigns against 'Umar Ibn Hafsun.

In 915 the rebel leader asked for peace from 'Abd al-Rahman III, as due to a severe drought with a high death toll and a substantial decrease in food supplies,[10] Ibn Hafsun no longer had the strength or resources to continue his campaign against the emir. This truce was upheld until Ibn Hafsun's death in 917. However, as the contemporary chronicler Ibn 'Abd Rabbihi wrote, Ibn Hafsun's sons ignored this truce and continued to wreak chaos on the Iberian Peninsula.[11] In 'The Unique Necklace', written after the death of 'Umar Ibn Hafsun, Rabbihi explains that Ibn Hafsun's sons "wrote [to the caliph] proffering their submission and [announcing] their entry into the [Islamic] community"[12] and that the emir "chose [to comply with] that".[13] This submission to abide by the emir's rule had the promise of securing a peaceful Peninsula. However, the eldest Hafsun son broke this treaty and "adopted discord and apostasy, embracing pact-breakers and lawbreakers"[14] Apostasy, the act of completely deserting one's religion, was a severe crime in the Islamic religion, and the majority of the Hafsunids were Christians or Muslims who had recently converted to Christianity. Because of this, the next campaign against Ja'far was to stop the sedition and promotion of apostasy. These campaigns against the Hafsuns were in a way a holy war, and one that would be used politically in favour of the emir when it came time to justify his assertion to the title of Caliph.

Throughout all of his campaigns, the emir spared a high majority of the Muslims that surrendered, even those of the Hafsun family. The court poet of the Umayyad emirate, Ibn 'Abd Rabbihi, chronicled the later campaigns against the sons of 'Umar Ibn Hafsun, and 'The Unique Necklace' provides a prime example of the emir's pardoning of a Muslim Hafsun leader in the campaign of 919-920:

"He humbly submitted to him and requested that he might be spared, with his permission, and that he may be [recognised] governor under his suzerainty in exchange for his payment of the land tax out of the tribute [he collected]. Hence the imam bound him by taking hostages, so that he would not become blind to his conditions, and the imam accepted his [terms] of his own graciousness and inclination to do good, and departed from him."[15]

By granting the rebel a pardon in exchange for submission, 'Abd al-Rahman III demonstrated the compassion that religious teachings asked of him. By being compassionate, he was looked upon by his subjects not as a warmonger but as a defender of the faith, and as a ruler who did not need to kill a rebel so long as the rebel submitted to his rule and acknowledged his sovereignty, thus securing the faith.

'Abd al-Rahman III continued his campaigns against the rebels, destroying fortress after fortress, year after year, with each son of 'Umar Ibn Hafsun acting as another broken treaty and thus causing another campaign.[16] 'Abd al-Rahman III's final campaign in 927 was against the formidable Hafsun fortress of Bobastro, where the last Muslim son of Ibn Hafsun, Hafs, was overwhelmed by the battle and consequently surrendered. Ibn 'Abd Rabbihi chronicled this final campaign and 'Abd al-Rahman III's good manner was again exemplified by his sparing of Hafs Hafsun's life. Rabbihi illustrates this:

"Until Hafs perceived the path leading to his own right guidance, after having exerted himself to the limit, so that he submitted to the imam, repairing humbly to him and obediently surrendering the fortress."[17]

Again, the reason for the sparing of such a rebel leader was due to the fact that with the defeat of Bobastro, a bastion of apostasy and sedition,[18] the Islamic faith had been defended, and thus it was unnecessary to spill more blood after the rebel's submission to the emir.

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It was after 'Abd al-Rahman III's final victory over the Hafsuns in 929 that the emir was to complete the next grand step in his rule. In 929, due to internal and external[19] factors, the emir decided to take on the title of Caliph of the Umayyad Caliphate.[20] The predominant cause for this decision was the external threat from the recently proclaimed Fatimid Caliphate in North Africa.[21] It was believed that only one Islamic party could hold the title of caliphate at one time, and thus 'Abd al-Rahman III's hesitancy to proclaim it. At the time, the Abbasid Caliphate in Baghdad was the 'official' caliphate; however, its power had been waning for some time.[22] After the Fatimids conquered North Africa, they proclaimed themselves as an Islamic Caliphate.[23] 'Abd al-Rahman III believed that this act was threatening, both politically and religiously, to the emirate in Spain, and so on the 16<sup>th</sup> of January 929, 'Abd al-Rahman III proclaimed himself Commander of the Faithful, God's representative on earth.[24]

Another step undertaken to counter the Fatimid influence in al-Andalus was the minting of gold coins: in the period between 890 and 928, there was near to no currency in al-Andalus, and the Fatimid caliphate started to mint their own gold and silver currency. The minting of gold dinar coins was an exclusive right of Caliphs, and thus when the Fatimid dinars began to permeate the peninsula, 'Abd al-Rahman III performed the necessary steps to counter the North African Caliphate.[25] In addition to minting gold coins, each one was inscribed with a portrait of the Caliph, while the other side, in order to fully establish his position, bore the phrase "The servant of God 'Abd al-Rahman, Commander of the Faithful, who brings victory to God's religion." [26] This phrase reflects in particular the justification that 'Abd al-Rahman III used to revive the Umayyad Caliphate, as it hints to the Caliph's military triumphs.[27] This justification of his assertion of the title of Caliph can be seen in one of his letters to his governors, after the fall of Bobastro in 928.

The correspondence describes the city of Bobastro as a "foundation of polytheism, a house of unbelief and falsehood, a centre of Christian power".[28] With such a description, the emir conveys that his victory over this city was a holy war against polytheists and unbelievers.[29] Further on, in relation to the siege against the city, the emir explains that "the state of affairs was prolonged, and [God's] blessing overtook it"[30], "obliterating it as a house of polytheism"[31]. To conclude the letter, perhaps one of 'Abd al-Rahman III's most important messages was conveyed to his subjects:

"Order the reading of this, our letter to you, to those Muslims under your authority in the mosque of your place, so that they might praise God – may His countenance be exalted! – for the wonder he has made for them and given to them, and so that they might bring forth thanks to Him – May He be glorified! – for that which He warded off from them." [32]

This quote outlines two significant features: firstly, that the emir ordered the reading of this letter outlining his victory over the polytheistic rebels of Bobastro, which was also described as base of sedition and the strength and refuge of Christianity,[33] to all the mosques under his domain, thus spreading the news of his glorious triumph. The second, slightly more cryptic feature refers to how the prayers were to be directed at God to thank Him for what He warded off from the subjects. This was used for later justification, as in another letter, after his decision to become Caliph had been made, where the Caliph stated that all his victories were granted thanks to the grace of God.[34] These successes against polytheism were used as proof that because of his devout service to God, with his holy war, God had chosen 'Abd al-Rahman III to be Commander of the Faithful and Caliph.[35] 'Abd al-Rahman III did not choose to assert the title of Caliph, but according to one of his circulars, God had granted him the ability to conquer his enemies for his unwavering stance to protect the religion, and it would thus have proven ignorant to disregard this next step.

'Abd al-Rahman III was able to bring the emirate from the verge of collapse to a flourishing kingdom, and restored the Umayyad claim to the Caliphate. Through a methodical and systematic approach of pacifying the rebel leaders that were spreading sedition, unbelief and apostasy, all those features that not only threatened his ideology but his kingdom too, 'Abd al-Rahman III restored much of the previous emirate, and provided a springboard for his assertion of caliph. 'Abd al-Rahman III was tactful in the way in which he approached the task, and was able to justify his motives accordingly by Islamic law and scripture. Thus, 'Abd al-Rahman was a successful ruler, who upheld the faith of Islam at a time when all seemed hopeless and was able to restore the Umayyad emirate to its previous stature as the Umayyad Caliphate, and himself to God's representative on earth.

[1] Olivia Remie Constable, *Medieval Iberia Readings from Christian, Muslim and Jewish Sources* (University of

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Pennsylvania Press, 1997), 62.

- [2] Janina M. Safran, *The Second Umayyad Caliphate* (Harvard University Press, 200), 21.
- [3] Janina Safran, "The Command of the Faithful in al-Andalus: A study in the articulation of Caliphal legitimacy," *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, Vol. 30 (May 1998): 186
- [4] Anwar G. Chejne, *Muslim Spain Its History and Culture* (University of Minnesota Press, 1974), 33.
- [5] Maribel Fierro, *'Abd al-Rahman III The First Cordoban Caliph* (Oxford 2006) 44
- [6] Hugh Kennedy, *Muslim Spain and Portugal* (Addison Wesley Longman Limited, 1996), 88-89; Fierro, *'Abd al-Rahman III The First Cordoban Caliph*, 44-45.
- [7] Kennedy, *Muslim Spain and Portugal*, 90; Fierro, *'Abd al-Rahman III The First Cordoban Caliph*, 46.
- [8] Fierro, *'Abd al-Rahman III The First Cordoban Caliph*, 55.
- [9] Kennedy, *Muslim Spain and Portugal*, 88.
- [10] Fierro, *'Abd al-Rahman III The First Cordoban Caliph*, 45-46.
- [11] Ibn 'Abd Rabbihi, 'The Unique Necklace', in *Medieval Iberia Readings from Christian, Muslim and Jewish Source* trans. Paul M. Cobb ed. Olivia Remie. (University of Pennsylvania Press, 1997), 65-67.
- [12] Ibid., 65.
- [13] Ibid., 65.
- [14] Ibid., 65.
- [15] Rabbihi, 'The Unique Necklace', 66.
- [16] Ibid., 65.
- [17] Ibid., 67.
- [18] Safran, *The Second Umayyad Caliphate*, 22-23.
- [19] Fierro, *'Abd al-Rahman III The First Cordoban Caliph*, 54.
- [20] Ibid., 53.
- [21] Jan Read, *The Moors in Spain and Portugal*, (Faber and Faber, 1974),  
73; Fierro, *'Abd al-Rahman III The First Cordoban Caliph*, 55.
- [22] Fierro, *'Abd al-Rahman III The First Cordoban Caliph*, 53-55; Kennedy, *Muslim Spain and Portugal*, 90.
- [23] Kennedy, *Muslim Spain and Portugal*, 90; Safran, "The Command of the Faithful in al-Andalus, 184.
- [24] Fierro, *'Abd al-Rahman III The First Cordoban Caliph*, 53; Safran, *The Second Umayyad Caliphate*, 19.

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[25] Fierro, *'Abd al-Rahman III The First Cordoban Caliph* 58-59.

[26] *Ibid.*, 59.

[27] Safran, *The Second Umayyad Caliphate*, 21.

[28] Ibn Hayyan, 'Muqtabis', in *Medieval Iberia Readings from Christian, Muslim and Jewish Source* trans. Paul M. Cobb ed. Olivia Remie. (University of Pennsylvania Press, 1997), 68.

[29] Safran, *The Second Umayyad Caliphate* 22

[30] Hayyan, 'Muqtabis', 68.

[31] *Ibid.*, 70.

[32] *Ibid.*, 71.

[33] Safran, *The Second Umayyad Caliphate*, 23.

[34] Safran, "The Command of the Faithful in al-Andalus, 187-188.

[35] Safran, *The Second Umayyad Caliphate*, 23.

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