

How Did the Turks Become Muslim?

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With a contribution by Prof. Peter B. Golden

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With a contribution by Prof. Peter B. Golden
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Introduction



Altai region in Central Asia (Wikipedia)

This is an English translation of the introduction of my book «HOW DID THE TURKS BECOME MUSLIM?» The original is in Persian. It includes a starting chapter by Prof. Peter B. Golden. Please beware that THIS BOOK HAS NOT BEEN COMPLETELY TRANSLATED INTO ENGLISH: THIS IS JUST ITS INTRODUCTION TRANSLATED INTO ENGLISH. THE FULL TEXT [IN PERSIAN IS AVAILABLE AS A PDF DOC.](#)

This is a concise book on how the Turks historically became Muslim. The question looks short and easy but needs a more detailed answer. It will be necessary to look at the emergence of the Turks in history and their political, social, and cultural developments as well as their dealings with their neighbors. Finally, we will have to briefly check the period of early Islam in the Arabian Peninsula and its acceptance by the Iranians and then the Turks – and how this process developed.

The main geographical origin of the Turks is in Central Asia, in a wide area between China, Mongolia, Russia, and present-day Kazakhstan, called 'Altai'. At the time of the appearance of the Turks on the stage of history (first half of the first millennium CE), a large majority of them lived in the steppes between the three empires of China, Iran, and Byzantium as nomadic tribes. A smaller part of them had settled along the 'Silk Road' routes.

From the advent of Islam in Arabia (620 CE onwards) to the beginning of the Abbasid Caliphate (750 CE), the Arabs first conquered Arabia itself, then the Middle

East, Iran, North Africa, a part of southwest Europe, and established their rule in this empire.

At the time of the rise of Islam in the early 7th century, most Turks believed in shamans, individuals who were believed to have heavenly powers through trance or ecstatic religious experience. Most of the Turks lived in the plains of Eurasia. They were at least five to six thousand kilometers away from the Arabs and Islam. Some Turks and other tribes close to them, such as the Volga Bulgars, though, had migrated to the northern plains of the Black Sea, the Balkans, and Eastern Europe. Some others had penetrated the lands bordering Iran and Byzantium as separate groups and had even settled in these areas. But they still did not have a significant presence in these lands.

This was around 650 CE.

In the following years, Arabs conquered Iran. In the province of Khorasan, they reached the borders of today's Central Asia, the river Jeyhun or Amu Darya, which Arabs called 'Mavara-un Nahr,' or «beyond the river». That includes today's Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, and parts of Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan. The Arab conquest of Sassanid Iran lasted ten to twenty years, but it took almost a hundred years for the Muslims to conquer Central Asia.

This was around 750 CE.

It was in these one hundred years and especially the next two or even three centuries that most of the Turks of Central Asia and its steppes became Muslim. The conversion was gradual and lasted two or three centuries. It went through different ways, following dozens of developments such as attacks of the Arabs and new Iranian converts, even incursions of the newly converted Turkish groups into the neighboring steppes, intermarriage, trade, and the mystic propaganda of Sufi sects. In some cases, thousands of nomadic Turks converted once their chiefs decided to adhere to the new religion. Also, following the downfall of two tribal Turkic states in Central Asia, tens of thousands of Turkic slaves entered the Islamic world. They became soldiers of local kingdoms or even the caliphate in Baghdad. It was self-evident that they became Muslim once they left their nomadic life to join the Islamic society.

The Turks came to acquaint themselves with the Arabs around 650 CE. The latter had conquered most of Iran and reached the oasis city of Marv in Khorasan, once an outpost of Persian empires, neighboring Central Asia. From there Arabs started to punch Central Asian local fiefdoms, with overwhelmingly Iranian populations and local kings. Those kings, too weak to protect themselves against the Arabs, frequently turned to their northern and eastern Turkic neighbors who were known for being excellent and fearless archers and horsemen. They usually welcomed the invitation, though not without a reward.

There were mutual and often hostile and bloody wars between the Turks and the Arabs for sovereignty over Central Asia. At this stage, the fighting Turks, with the

support of the native and Iranian people and kings of Central Asia, frequently tried to repel the Arabs from the region.

This phase lasted for almost a hundred years. Around 750 the Western Turkic Khanate fell due to internal tribal differences and Arab victories over the Chinese from the east. The remaining but weakening anti-Arab Turkic resistance was accompanied by an increasing conversion of the Iranians across Central Asia. It was finally followed by the Turks themselves converting to Islam.

We can consider the mid-8th century, around 750, as the approximate date of the Turks starting to convert massively to Islam. Iranians in Central Asia and especially the Iranian Samanid dynasty (819-1000) were the main force in attracting Turks to Islam. The Samanids were followed by emerging Turkic Sultans and dynasties. The Turks' conversion to Islam took around 300 years, starting from the first Arab attacks in Central Asia as the original habitat of the Turks. Around 950 CE most of the Turks had become Muslim.

This period of Islamization of the Turks coincided with:

1. The arrival of the Abbasid caliphate instead of the Umayyads. They moved the Arab empire's capital from Damascus, Syria, closer to the ancient Iranian empire's capital, to Baghdad in today's Iraq.
2. The establishment of local, powerful, and practically independent regional Iranian powers – the Tahirids, Saffarids, Samanids, Ghaznavids, and Karakhanids.
3. The increasing role of the newly Muslim Turks in the form of war slaves, later powerful local warlords, and finally the establishment of the Turkic-Iranian empires of the Ghaznavids, the Seljuks, and the Turkic Khwarazmshahs. Formally, they were still subordinate to the Abbasid caliphs but had increasing independence in practice. And finally
4. Migrations and settlement of Turks in Khorasan and the rest of Iran and later Anatolia, eastern Caucasus, Northern Iraq, and Syria, ruling in these lands and mixing up with local populations throughout this region.

These historical developments were extremely important for the formation of today's Iran, Turkey, and the entire Middle East. It is necessary to be aware of these developments to answer our topical question «How did the Turks become Muslim?» I am honored that Professor Peter B. Golden, an emeritus professor at Rutgers University in the United States of America, and one of the most prominent Turkologists in the world today, accepted that a large part of his famous treatise on the origin and emergence of Turks in history be translated into Persian and used as the starting chapter of the current writing.

Finally, a few 'scene-setting' notes:

The term 'Turks' applies to all individuals and peoples who spoke or still speak any form of the Turkic language family, regardless of geographical or historical boundaries. 'Turkic' is an adjective of the terms 'Turk' and 'Turks'. This is an accepted practice among contemporary sources. Likewise, 'Iranian' does not only apply to individuals and languages of present-day Iran but all individuals and

peoples, past and present, who spoke or still speak any form of the Iranian language family.

In this little research, the dates are Gregorian, unless the Hijri calendar (H) is specifically mentioned. Also, the author, unlike many Western sources, does not differentiate between the terms 'Inner Asia' and 'Central Asia,' but uses both in the same sense. The definition of these geographical terms may vary in different cultures and traditions. From a historical point of view, both expressions encompass the lands of various nomadic peoples among the civilizations of ancient China, Iran, and Byzantium. But some contemporary authors have chosen to distinguish between the eastern part of these lands, i.e., the borderlands of China, Russia, and Korea, such as Kashghar, Tula, Mongolia, and Tibet, as 'Inner Asia,' on the one hand, and Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, and present-day Turkmenistan, on the other, as 'Central Asia'. They have also proposed the toponym 'Central Eurasia' which they consider as more precise and correct. In the historiography of Iran, Turkey, and the Islamic world in general, there was no such separation of those terms. All those lands were called 'Central Asia' (Persian: *Asiya-ye Markazi*, Arabic: *Asiya al-Vusta*, Turkish: *Orta Asya*). Still, some oriental contemporary scholars have followed their Western colleagues in distinguishing those two geographical sub-groups.

I am not aware of a separate book that specifically focuses on the acceptance of Islam by the Turks. Still, some historians and researchers in this field have addressed this issue on the sidelines of their works.

A few words about my sources: First, referring to the works of early Muslim historians and geographers such as Ibn Athir, Jahiz, Tabari, Ibn Hawqal, and Maqdisi are of fundamental importance in understanding our subject. When quoting these works, the name of the author and the relevant page will be mentioned.

Notwithstanding, the importance of the works of contemporary Western researchers cannot be stressed enough. They are key to examining the works of the early Muslim scholars, comparing them, summarizing, and analyzing the issue from a scientific and contemporary angle. It is not surprising that some 100 years ago Vassili Barthold provided the most important and detailed information about the Turks of historical times in both of his famous works «Turkistan to the Mongol Period» and «Twelve Lessons about the Turks of Central Asia». Barthold's first work has also been translated into Persian. Golden's famous and newer book «An Introduction to the History of the Turkic Peoples» is also of fundamental importance. In several places, he describes an abstract of the spread of Islam among the Turks. There is also a modern Turkish translation of Golden's book under the title «History of the Turks». The writing of Jean-Paul Roux is also among the works that devote a few pages to the subject of the acceptance of Islam by the Turks, although (at least in its Turkish translation) the sourcing is not always exact.

The author of this book has used all the important academic works mentioned at the end of this book. At the same time, he has not expanded the description of the subject to details that would tire the non-academic reader. In the case of sources

that have been used more than once or twice, I will give the name of the author, the year of publication, and the relevant page number within the text of this book. To check the complete information of these sources, please refer to 'Sources' at the end of this book. Information about the sources that have been used only once or twice is given in full in the text itself.

Finally, I am aware that in Turkey one of Claude Cahen's books was translated, published, and wrongly entitled «How did the Turks become Muslim?» This was probably due to the popularity of the topic in Turkey while having no specific focus on its title.

Prague, fall 2019, and Munich, fall 2023,

Abbas Djavadi

