

The Tariq ibn Ziyad Master Narrative

Jeffrey R. Halverson

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Jeffrey R. Halverson is an Associate Research Professor at the Consortium for Strategic Communication at Arizona State University. He is author of *Theology and Creed in Sunni Islam* (2010, Palgrave-MacMillan) and co-author with H.L. Goodall and Steven R. Corman of *Master Narratives of Islamist Extremism* (2011, Palgrave-MacMillan). This report was supported in part by Office of Naval Research grant number N00014-09-1-0872.



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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Master narratives provide important insights into the cultures and societies that analysts and diplomats encounter on a daily basis. Understanding how those narratives are utilized by factions hostile to the interests of the United States can be the difference between successful diplomacy and international catastrophe. Given the current geo-political climate, master narratives employed by Islamist extremists are among the most important. Many of those narratives are recorded and analyzed in the book, *Master Narratives of Islamist Extremism* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2011). This paper addresses an additional master narrative employed by extremists, albeit less frequently than those included in the book.

The Tariq ibn Ziyad master narrative relates the conquest of Iberia (modern Spain and Portugal) by the Berber commander, Tariq ibn Ziyad, in 711. The master narrative posits a champion archetype (Tariq) as a conquering hero who ventures to a new land, strikes down the infidel tyrant (King Roderick), and ushers in a kingdom of righteous and just rule. The master narrative, as it is utilized by extremists, typically exists in a radically simplified form. It ignores many of the inconvenient details of history that problematize the message of the extremists, such as the role of Tariq and Musa's Jewish allies.

The Tariq ibn Ziyad master narrative is viewed an exemplary model for jihadist action against "infidel" or "apostate" dictators and governments, especially in the West. Due to the historical connections of the narrative to North Africa, the master narrative is most commonly found among Islamist extremists in that region, such as al-Qaeda in the Lands of the Islamic Maghreb (AQLIM).

INTRODUCTION

Narratives of conquering heroes, or champions, typically express with great pride a lost era of power and strength. The Greeks have looked back on the time of Alexander the Great (d. 323 BCE) as the pinnacle of their power, when their culture and civilization was brought across the three continents of the ancient world. Similarly, Islamist extremists recall the era of the military commander, Tariq ibn Ziyad, in the early eighth century, who brought Muslim rule into the heart of Europe. And with Tariq's conquest of the Iberian Peninsula came a great Muslim civilization (even a Caliphate) that is recalled with reverence in both the Muslim world and beyond it. However, that said, Islamist extremists selectively and radically re-envision this event and the rich cultural and intellectual civilization that it spawned. Indeed, the ideology that Islamist extremists, such as al-Qaeda in the Land of the Islamic Maghreb, seek to establish is, in many ways, anathema to the Muslim land of *al-Andalus*, or Islamic Spain. Nevertheless, the narrative of Tariq's conquest is regularly invoked, particularly in North Africa, as an exemplary tale of Muslim strength and power when the banner of "jihad" is raised against the unbelievers, especially the Christian West.

THE CONQUEST OF IBERIA

At the start of the eighth century, the Iberian Peninsula, consisting of modern-day Spain and Portugal, was a divided kingdom ruled by the Catholic Visigoths, who were only a generation or two removed from the Arian Church, which rejected the Nicene Creed. But records indicate that pagan practices were still widespread among the populace, especially among the rural peasantry.¹ Iberia or *Hispania* was home to a Jewish minority as well, later known as the Sephardim, who suffered persecution under the Catholic Visigoths. For instance, Visigoth Catholic bishops issued a decree in 694 that the Jews were traitors and should have their wealth confiscated and face perpetual slavery.² Indeed, the Fourth Council of Toledo even describes the Jews, who were allegedly proselytizing their beliefs, as "the Antichrist's ministers."³

The city of Toledo, which emerged during the Roman era, served as the Visigoth royal capital. It was the city of Saint Ildefonso, a Visigoth Catholic monk who later became Toledo's patron saint, and, as a central city in the peninsula, a major religious, cultural, and administrative center among the five Visigothic provinces. A fortified city located along the Tagus River, Toledo was the foremost ecclesiastical seat in Iberia and the location of Christian sites including the royal church of the Holy Apostles and the basilica of St. Leocadia.

In the spring of 711, the Berber commander of a Muslim garrison at Tangier named Tariq ibn Ziyad, serving the Arab governor Musa ibn Nusayr, crossed into southern Spain from Morocco. The traditional crossing point of Tariq's forces is known as Gibraltar, deriving from the term *Jabal Tariq* ("Mountain of Tariq").⁴ Arabic sources differ on the number of Tariq's troops, ranging from 7,000 to 12,000.⁵ News of Tariq's arrival led the controversial King Roderick (Rodrigo in Spanish or *Luthariq* in Arabic) to come southward with his army, where it was swiftly defeated by Tariq's army at the Battle of Guadalete. A Latin chronicle dating from 754 states that King Roderick and several other Visigoth nobles were killed in the battle. Further Muslim victories quickly followed. In October, Córdoba surrendered to a detachment of seven hundred horsemen under Tariq's deputy Mugayth (Mugit) al-Rumi and the city later became the capital of Islamic Spain.⁶ The Muslims called their new imperial province in Iberia, *al-Andalus*, which may derive from the name "Vandalacia" coming from the time of Vandal rule.⁷

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Following the death of King Roderick at Guadalete, his widow Egilona married the son of Musa ibn Nusayr, 'Abd al-Aziz. Tradition relates that Egilona encouraged her new husband to break with the Umayyad Caliph in Damascus and declare his own sovereignty in Iberia, leading to his assassination. Both Latin and Arabic chronicles emphasize the role of Egilona in these events.⁸

The most notable Arabic chronicle of Tariq ibn Ziyad's conquest is the tenth-century treatise, *Tarikh Ibn al-Qutiyya*, which is kept in the Bibliothèque Nationale de France in Paris. The *Tarikh* ("History") relates that Tariq entered Iberia in Ramadan of 711 and claims that he was encouraged by a Christian Visigoth noble or merchant named Julian (*Yuliyān*) seeking revenge against Roderick.⁹ The King had raped or seduced (accounts vary) Julian's young and beautiful daughter. So, traveling to North Africa, where he conducted business in the past: "Yuliyān met with Tariq and incited him to come over to *al-Andalus*, telling him of its splendor and the weakness of its people and their lack of courage; so Tariq wrote to Musa ibn Nusayr and informed him of that, whereupon Musa told him to invade."¹⁰ The narrative further relates that Tariq had a dream during his journey on a boat to the Iberian coast in which he encountered the Prophet Muhammad. Thereafter, Tariq reached land and took *Qartajanna*, thought to be Carteya, in the province of *al-Jazira* [Algeciras] and sent out the survivors to spread the news of his fearsome army and all they had done.¹¹ Shortly thereafter, Tariq faced Roderick in battle. The *Tarikh* relates: "The confrontation between Tariq and *Ludhariq* [Roderick] occurred at the *Wadi Lakuḥ* [Rio Guadalete] in the province of *Shaduna* [Sidona] and God defeated *Ludhariq*."¹² It further adds: "Weighed down with weapons, [Roderick] threw himself in the river and was never found."¹³

A legend recorded in the *Tarikh* relates that Roderick had violated sacred protocol in the Catholic temple (perhaps shrine or cathedral) of Toledo prior to the Muslim conquest. The story goes that a sacred ark (*tabut*) containing the four Gospels sat in the temple, and when a Visigoth king died the name of the king was inscribed on it. This holy precinct was kept closed. Some Muslim traditions state that the altar in the temple once belonged to King Sulayman (Solomon).¹⁴ But when Roderick claimed the throne, he placed the royal crown on his head and entered the sacred temple and opened the ark. The *Tarikh* states:

He opened the temple and the ark, although this was forbidden by Christianity. Inside the ark he found pictures of Arabs with bows on their shoulders and turbans on their heads. On the wooden base was written: “If this temple be opened and these pictures taken out, then *al-Andalus* [i.e. Iberia] will be invaded by the people shown in the pictures and conquered by them!”¹⁵

And thus Roderick lost his kingdom to Tariq ibn Ziyad and the conquering North African Muslim forces. This odd legend clearly reads as an explanation created by Christians to explain how the Catholic kingdom could fall to the “infidel” Muslims, but it was nevertheless recorded in the Muslim sources for posterity.

The advance of Tariq’s army northward from Guadalete to Eciija (Estadja), east of Seville, resulted in a fierce battle. But again Tariq was victorious. From there Tariq advanced further north to the Visigoth capital of Toledo and sent his aforementioned deputy Mugayth to Córdoba. Various traditions, in both the Latin and Arabic chronicles, report that the Jews of the city “opened the gates of Toledo” to Tariq, but some note that the city was abandoned and others that a siege ensued. All agree that Toledo was conquered by Tariq. The Kurdish historian Ibn al-Athir al-Jazari (d. 1233) reports that Tariq found Toledo abandoned and “installed there Jews, together with a certain number of his soldiers.”¹⁶ Meanwhile, the North African historian, Abu’l-Abbas al-Maqqari (d. 1632), relates that Mugayth assembled all the Jews of Córdoba and left them in charge of the city, “trusting them in preference to the Christians, on account of their hatred and animosity towards the latter.”¹⁷ When Tariq’s master, Musa ibn Nusayr, arrived later with a large Arab force and took Seville, he too entrusted the city to its Jewish inhabitants until his return.¹⁸ Musa reportedly met Tariq at Almaraz on the Tagus River near Toledo, where they passed the winter before advancing on Saragossa.¹⁹ After their armies had reached the northern regions of Iberia, the Umayyad Caliph al-Walid summoned Tariq and Musa to Damascus in 714 and Musa left Iberia under the control of his son, Abdul-Aziz, in Seville.²⁰ Neither Tariq ibn Ziyad nor Musa ibn Nusayr ever returned to *al-Andalus*.

The Muslim expansion continued into France (Gaul) in the years to come, culminating with the famous Battle of Poitiers (or Tours) in October of 732 where Charles Martel, commander of the Franks, emerged victorious. This put an end to the Umayyad expansion north, but Iberia remained under Muslim rule for centuries to come until the last Muslim (or “Moorish”) kingdom fell in 1492. At its zenith, under the Caliph Abdel-Rahman III (d. 961), *al-Andalus* was a thriving civilization of advanced culture and learning that far exceeded the rest of Europe, noted for its relative tolerance and cooperation between Jews, Christians and Muslims. The capital city of Cordoba is reported to have had a population of one million (making it the largest city in Europe), 1600 mosques, 900 public baths, lighted streets, and numerous libraries, including the royal library of over 400,000 volumes.²¹ Conflict between Muslim factions often marred the history of *al-Andalus* though, along political, ethnic (Arab vs. Berber) and tribal or family lines. By the end of the eleventh century, the provinces of *al-Andalus* were divided into rival *taifa* kingdoms and Muslim fought Muslim, as well as Christian, and at times alliances between Muslim and Christian kingdoms existed to wage war on other Muslim and Christian kingdoms. The fragmentation of *al-Andalus* greatly benefited the Catholic Reconquista, or *al-Istirdad* in the Arabic sources, and one by one the great cities of *al-Andalus* fell to Catholic kings until only the southern most Muslim Emirate (kingdom), Granada, remained. The Emirate of Granada was taken by King Ferdinand and Queen Isabella when its ruler, Boabdil (Muhammad XII), surrendered it in 1492, and together the Catholic monarchs toured the great city and its famous Alhambra palace.

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Prior to the fall of Grenada, Christian monarchs of the former Muslim kingdoms ruled over Christian and Muslims subjects, accepting the place of Muslims in Spanish life and society, but from early 1500 onward a process to eliminate Spain’s Muslims (as well as Jews) from society began.²² This final phase of Islam’s history in Iberia would last 114 years. By the mid-1520s, all remaining Muslims were forced to convert to Christianity or go into exile, and beginning in 1609 even the *Moriscos* (descendents of Muslim converts to Christianity), many of whom were still “crypto-Muslims,” were expelled as well.²³ The expulsion of the early seventeenth century brought the nine hundred year history of *al-Andalus*, and the legacy of Tariq ibn Ziyad, to a close.

THE MASTER NARRATIVE IN EXTREMIST DISCOURSE

The conquest of Iberia by Tariq ibn Ziyad in 711 has become a master narrative of Islamist extremism, albeit in a radically simplified form that ignores many of the inconvenient details of history, such as the role of Tariq and Musa’s Jewish allies. The structural form of the master narrative posits a champion archetype (Tariq) as a conquering hero who

ventures to a strange land and strikes down the armies of a tyrant, the oppressive King Roderick, and ushers in a kingdom of righteous and just rule there. This is taken as an exemplary model for jihadist action against “apostate” dictators and governments. Due to the historical connections of the narrative to North Africa, it has shown to be particularly resonant with Islamist extremists in that region. Arguably the most prominent extremist group operating in North Africa is al-Qaeda in the Lands of the Islamic Maghreb (AQLIM). This group was originally known as the Salafist Group for Preaching and Combat (GSPC) in Algeria before aligning itself with al-Qaeda in 2006.

In a statement by Abu Musab Abdel Wadoud, condemning images posted online of a *niqab*-clad Salafi woman being assaulted in Morocco, the AQLIM leader spoke of the country as a “sacred Islamic nation” in which the champion Tariq ibn Ziyad crossed into Iberia, stating: “[These shameful acts] took place in a Muslim land, a sacred Islamic nation, from which Tariq bin Ziyad, the Western conqueror, once launched his campaign to seize *al-Andalus* and spread Islam throughout Europe.”²⁴ Elsewhere, in a video recorded in 2007 and seized from AQLIM, leaders of an AQLIM combat unit or *katiba* were shown, called the “Tariq ibn Ziyad *katiba*,” whose chiefs were Abu Ammar Yahia Djouadi and Abdelmahid Abu Zeid, who is believed to have murdered two Western hostages.²⁵

In the extremist account, Tariq ibn Ziyad’s conquest created a glorious jihadist kingdom, the loss of which is still felt today. Indeed, the extremists contend that there is an important lesson to be learned from the fall of *al-Andalus*. The lesson is that Muslims must never neglect the banner of jihad. If they do, unbelievers will destroy Islam and ravage Muslim societies. As an AQLIM statement posted online in October of 2009 explains:

*[Spain] is the lost paradise of Muslims. It was owned by Muslims for eight centuries, where they established religion and raised the banner of jihad, and God strengthened them on earth. . . With the fall of Andalucía (which was due to Muslims neglecting jihad and their failure to defend it) the sun of Islam began to set in the Spanish Peninsula and was followed by the countdown of Muslim sultans. Therefore, jihad is and has been a duty for the Muslim nation for approximately six centuries, since the fall of the first city in Andalucía.*²⁶

Thus, through such invocations, we are given not only a warning about the importance of jihad in the master narrative, but also a justification for its current and future implementation. AQLIM makes the argument that jihad has been obligatory since the first Muslim city of *al-*

Andalus fell to the Reconquista campaigns six centuries ago. In doing so, they suggest an ultimate goal of overthrowing “apostate” regimes and creating a jihadist force in North Africa to conquer Spain once again for Islam.

CONCLUSION

In *Master Narratives of Islamist Extremism*, we identified the three “R’s” of Islamist extremism, namely resist, rebuke, and renew, by analyzing over a dozen other master narratives.²⁷ In the examples drawn from the extremist discourse above, we can see the utility of the Tariq ibn Ziyad master narrative for each of these ends. In AQLIM’s condemnation of Morocco’s government in the controversy over the images of the woman being assaulted, we see the invocation of the Tariq ibn Ziyad master narrative for rebuke. In their calls to take up the banner of jihad (i.e. to resist) to fight against “un-Islamic” regimes and nations, as Tariq had done or as the “Tariq ibn Ziyad *katiba*” is doing today, we see the call to resist. In the “lost paradise” that Tariq’s conquest brought about in Iberia, we see the promise of renewal that jihad can bring to the Muslims. Yet, at its core, the master narrative remains that of a champion who achieved victory in battle against a tyrant of the Christian West. That core element obviously carries sufficient resonance for its continued popularity and utility in extremist circles.

NOTES

¹ J. N. Hillgarth, *Christianity and Paganism, 350-750: The Conversion of Western Europe* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1986), 55.

² Alberto Ferreiro, *The Visigoths: Studies in Culture and Society* (Leiden: Brill, 1998), 137.

³ *Ibid*, 141.

⁴ William Montgomery Watt and Pierre Cachia, *A History of Islamic Spain* (Piscataway, NJ: Aldine Transaction, 2008), 8.

⁵ Norman Roth, "The Jews and the Muslim Conquest of Spain," *Jewish Social Studies*, vol. 38, no. 2 (Spring, 1976): 145.

⁶ Watt and Cachia, 9.

⁷ *Ibid*, 12.

⁸ Richard Hitchcock, *Mozarabs in Medieval and Early Modern Spain: Identities and Influences* (New York: Ashgate, 2008), 14.

⁹ David L. James, *Early Islamic Spain: The History of Ibn Al-Qutiya: A Study of the Unique Arabic Manuscript in the Bibliotheque Nationale de France, Paris* (New York: Routledge, 2009), 51-52.

¹⁰ *Ibid*, 52.

¹¹ *Ibid*.

¹² *Ibid*, 51.

¹³ *Ibid*.

¹⁴ *Ibid*, 56.

¹⁵ *Ibid*, 51.

¹⁶ Quoted in Roth, 153.

¹⁷ Quoted in Roth, 153.

¹⁸ Harold Livermore, *The Twilight of the Goths: The Rise and Fall of the Kingdom of Toledo, c. 565-711* (Bristol, UK: Intellect Books, 2006), 100.

¹⁹ *Ibid*, 101.

²⁰ *Ibid*, 101-102.

²¹ John L. Esposito, *The Islamic World: Past and Present* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 30.

²² L. P. Harvey, *Muslims in Spain, 1500 to 1614* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), vii.

²³ *Ibid*, viii.

²⁴ Quoted in the NEFA Foundation, *AQIM Promises Revenge for Attack on Muslim Woman in Morocco* (June 4, 2008), 1.

²⁵ See

https://www.opensource.gov/portal/server.pt/gateway/PTARGS_0_0_200_203_121123_43/content/Display/EUP20100804950029#index=13&searchKey=4322473&rpp=50.

²⁶ *AQLIM Announces Launch of 'Al-Andalus Establishment for Media Production,'* Open Source Center (October 7, 2009); Retrieved from <http://www.opensource.gov>.

²⁷ Jeffrey R. Halverson, H. L. Goodall Jr., and Steven R. Corman, *Master Narratives of Islamist Extremism* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 180.