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How the Seljuks of Iran Adapted the Theory of the Sultan as God's Shadow (*Zill Allāh*) and the Abbasid Concept of the Caliph as God's Vicegerent (*Khalīfat Allāh*), and Its Impact on the Consolidation of Their Position

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ABSTRACT

The Seljuk dynasty, in terms of territorial extent, political cohesion, and power, represents the most significant ruling dynasty of Iran after the advent of Islam, having established a formidable empire during the medieval period. In intellectual and bureaucratic domains, the Seljuks modeled their system of governance on the coherent and powerful states of pre-Islamic Iran, particularly the Sasanian Empire, and implemented *Iranshahrī* concepts and the notion of divine glory (*farr-e Țazātī*) within their governmental structure. The principal architect of this form of governance in that period was Khwāja Niżām al-Mulk, the powerful, prudent, and intellectually distinguished Iranian vizier, who succeeded in establishing a strong, orderly, and authoritative administrative system over a territory that was nearly equivalent to that of the Sasanian Empire at the height of its power. Within this context, the tension between the *Iranshahrī* ideology and the concept of divine glory and the theory of the sultan as God's shadow—both derived from the political thought of ancient Iran, especially the Sasanian tradition—and the spiritual authority of the Abbasid caliphs, whose legitimacy was believed to derive from God and the Prophet and whom the Seljuks formally regarded themselves as bound to obey, provided the impetus for the present study. Accordingly, this research examines the manner in which these two political-theological concepts were reconciled and the extent of their influence on Seljuk political and governmental interactions. The findings indicate that the Seljuks, under the leadership of their powerful vizier Niżām al-Mulk, while implementing *Iranshahrī* thought, the doctrine of divine glory, and the principle of the sultan's absolute sovereignty within the Seljuk governmental structure, outwardly expressed loyalty to the caliph in order to benefit from his spiritual influence among the populace. In practice, however, they themselves made and executed all major political and military decisions and at times even intervened in the appointment and dismissal of the caliph's ministers and officials, effectively imposing their own views upon the caliph. The present study employs a descriptive-analytical method to investigate how the Seljuks of Iran adapted the theory of the sultan as God's shadow and the Abbasid concept of the caliph as God's vicegerent, and to assess the impact of this adaptation on the consolidation of their political position.

Keywords: *Sultan, Caliph, God's Shadow, Seljuks, Legitimacy.*



Introduction

The study and examination of the history of Iranian governments in the Middle Islamic period leads us to the reality that each of these governments was a source of influence and transformation in various arenas and across political, military, scientific, cultural, economic, and social dimensions; nevertheless, it must be acknowledged that the period of Seljuk rule in Iran constitutes one of the most decisive and significant eras in Iranian history after Islam. The Seljuks were a group of Oghuz Turks who, under the leadership of Tughril Beg, entered Khurasan and within a short period gained control over the entirety of Iran, establishing a powerful state (1, 2). At the height of their power, the Seljuks ruled over an extensive territory stretching from Kashgar in the east of present-day Afghanistan to the Mediterranean coasts in the west, and from Central Asia in the north to Yemen in the south of the Iranian Plateau (1). Approximately four hundred years after the collapse of the Sasanian Empire, the Seljuks were able to revive its territorial expanse in Iran through the prudence and administrative expertise of Iranian bureaucrats (3). The history of Iran in the Seljuk period should therefore be regarded as an era of revival or reproduction of the modes of governance of ancient Iranian kings, particularly those of the Sasanian Empire (4). During this period, the Seljuk state, relying on a combination of tribal customs and Iranian bureaucratic traditions, created a new structure of power that enabled it to rule for nearly one and a half centuries over a vast territory extending from the center of the Islamic world to the far western reaches of West Asia (3, 5). At the same time, a crucial issue was how the Seljuks, in the presence of the Abbasid caliphs and the theories of the “sultan as God’s shadow” (*zill Allāh*) and the “Abbasid caliph as God’s vicegerent” (*khalīfat Allāh*), reconciled these two doctrines and succeeded in establishing effective political interactions with the caliphal institution; this process became one of the important aspects of the political and religious history of that era (6, 7). In this context, attention must be paid to the relationship between religion and politics in the Seljuk period, during which Seljuk sultans sought to obtain their religious and political legitimacy through affiliation with the Abbasid Caliphate and through specific interpretations of that legitimacy, while at the same time Seljuk sovereignty in Iran was founded upon the theory of “God’s shadow,” meaning that the sultan was recognized as the “shadow of God” (6, 8). This theory drew simultaneously on Iranshahrī thought and the concept of divine glory (*farr-e īzadī*), as well as on Islam—particularly the concept of the caliphate—and presented kingship as a divinely sanctioned office bestowed by God (9, 10). Within this framework, sovereignty was regarded not only as a political and governmental authority but also as a sacred religious power (11). Likewise, in the Abbasid period, the caliph was recognized as God’s representative on earth and derived the legitimacy of his rule from God (12). Although the Seljuks exercised dominance over the Islamic caliphate in Baghdad, their sultanate was shaped by religious-juridical thought concerning the Islamic caliphate, and they supported the Abbasid caliphate in order to justify and advance their own legitimacy (7). Seljuk sultans presented themselves as the “shadow of God” to consolidate their authority as manifestations of divine will, while at the same time—especially in the early period—they demonstrated formal loyalty to the Abbasid caliphs, a loyalty that was particularly evident through their amirs and court practices (13, 14). Conversely, while the Abbasids in Baghdad retained greater religious authority, the Seljuk sultans, who ruled over vast territories in Iran, initially obeyed the caliphs but later acted independently from them (7). Under these circumstances, by adapting their own theory of “God’s shadow” and linking it to the Abbasid caliphate, the Seljuks were able to strengthen their legitimacy among the populace and the religious scholars, while simultaneously reinforcing their role as Islamic rulers and executors of the sharia (6). Ultimately, through the reconciliation of these two doctrines, the Seljuk sultans benefited

from the religious legitimacy of the Abbasid caliphate while also consolidating their own position within Iran's political and religious structures; politically and religiously, this adaptation was vital for the survival and consolidation of Seljuk rule in Iran (4). The hypothesis that Khwaja Nizam al-Mulk deliberately sought to establish a strong centralized government inspired by the concept of royal divine glory of the Sasanian period and to reconcile it with the status of the Seljuk sultans as God's shadow, thereby demonstrating the superiority of the sultan's power over that of the Abbasid caliph, will be critically examined in this study (4, 8).

Research Background

With regard to the subject of the present research, a number of studies have been conducted by both foreign and Iranian scholars. Among them, Bosworth, in the first part of Volume V of *The Cambridge History of Iran*, translated by Hasan Anousheh and published by Amirkabir, discusses the formation and rise to power of the Seljuk state and its relations with the Abbasid caliphate (1). In the second part of the same volume, Lambton examines the internal structure of the Seljuk Empire, which has also been utilized in this research (3). Claude Klausner, in *The Seljuk Vizierate: A Study of Civil Administration*, translated by Ya'qub Azhand and published by Amirkabir, analyzes the institution of the vizierate during the Seljuk period (5). Mawlawi Muhammad 'Abd al-Razzaq Kanpuri, an Indian scholar, in *The Life of Khwaja Nizam al-Mulk*, translated by Seyyed Mostafa Tabatabaei, addresses the political and cultural life of Nizam al-Mulk and the impact of his ideas on the continuity of Seljuk rule in Iran (15). Abbas Iqbal Ashtiani, in *The Vizierate during the Reign of the Seljuk Sultans*, examines the bureaucracy of this period and emphasizes the role of Khwaja Nizam al-Mulk in its establishment and development (16). Abbas Sarafrazi, in the article "The Impact of the *Siyasatnama* on the Structure of the Seljuk Government," published in *Iranian and Islamic Historical Researches*, and Nira Dahir, in the article "The Caliphate and the Sultanate in *Siyar al-Muluk*," published in the *Journal of Islamic History Studies*, have each addressed aspects of the present research topic (6, 17). While benefiting from these studies and other related research, the present author has sought to examine and elucidate the subject of this research in a particularly comprehensive and in-depth manner.

The Origin of the Theory of the Sultan as God's Shadow (Zill Allāh) in the Seljuk Period

The concept of the sultan as God's shadow in relation to the Seljuk sultans—and, more broadly, in relation to all Islamic-period sultans up to the Constitutional era—derives from the notion of divine glory (*farr-e izzatī*) in ancient Iran. The Seljuks were among the states that adopted pre-Islamic titles for themselves; Seljuk rulers referred to themselves as *shāhanshāh* and later as *Sultan of Islam* (4, 9). The sultan was conceived as the "shadow of God" on earth, directly appointed by God. All political and military institutions of the realm were administered under the authority of the sultan and were endorsed by the caliphs so that, as deputies, they could exercise power in their respective spheres of influence. The king was obliged to preserve religion, and the protection of religion ensured worldly stability. In the Seljuk polity, the sultan stood at the apex of the political and administrative hierarchy. As God's shadow, he was regarded as exalted and divinely appointed; he possessed kingship and divine glory, and obedience to him was deemed necessary (6, 8).

According to Zoroastrian religious tradition, Ahura Mazda, the supreme deity, bestows upon existence a force known as *khvarnah* (in Middle Persian *farr*, in New Persian *far*), a divine radiance whose illumination elevates the individual above others and through whose light one attains kingship. Through this force the king governs, and as long as he acts righteously the *farr* remains with him; when he turns away from Ahura Mazda, the *farr* is severed,

the realm moves toward ruin, and the conditions for the king's downfall are created. In other words, *farr* is a divine radiance that must belong exclusively to a ruler who is pious, just, and benevolent; accordingly, in the Avesta, tyrants such as Zahhak and the unjust Afrasiyab are not described as possessors of *farr* (10). The bearer of *farr*, if a warrior and champion, surpasses all others in valor and invincibility, and as long as he does not deviate from the path of truth, righteousness, purity, piety, and faith, this sacred force remains with him. Likewise, kings and rulers, so long as they were believers and seekers of truth, justice, wisdom, and compassion, were consistently successful in their affairs (11).

From this perspective, the Sasanians required divine justification for the legitimacy of their rule, and this legitimacy was precisely the divine glory (*farr-e izzatī*), since according to ancient Iranian religious beliefs no king could rule successfully without possessing *farr*. Its presence brought victory, while its absence in the royal order signified divine wrath and often resulted in deposition from the throne. *Farr* thus symbolized the legitimacy of every government. It has been argued that in no land more than Sasanian Iran did adherents so firmly believe in the principle of a heavenly right to kingship. The Sasanian Kings held that their power was granted by God and that they were the chosen rulers on earth. Attention to divine glory was transmitted from the Achaemenid period to the Sasanian era, then to the Islamic period, and later manifested itself in Seljuk political thought, particularly in the ideas of al-Mawardi and al-Ghazali (4, 9). In *Naṣīhat al-Mulūk*, written for Sultan Sanjar, al-Ghazali articulated his conception of kingship—distinct from the caliphate—arguing that the sultan, as God's shadow on earth, receives kingship as a divine gift and favor. He further stated that God has chosen certain groups among humankind and given them precedence over others: first the prophets, and second the kings; therefore, people are obliged to obey kings and to love them (12).

During the Seljuk period, the caliphate and the sultanate were regarded as two distinct institutions: the caliph was responsible for religious affairs and oversight of the community, while the sultan administered worldly governance. In fact, under the Seljuks the prestige of the caliphal institution increased, and the caliph, in turn, willingly conferred legitimacy upon the sultanate (6). Klausner maintains that the balance of power and authority between the sultan and the caliph during the reign of Alp Arslan was successfully preserved largely due to the conciliatory policies of Nizam al-Mulk and also because of the sultan's absence from Baghdad. In this context, a form of control was exercised over the caliph's vizier, and marital alliances were concluded between the sultan and the caliph as well as between the viziers of the two authorities (5).

After his victory in the Battle of Dandanqan, Tughril sent a letter to the Abbasid caliph al-Qa'im bi-Amr Allah seeking confirmation and thereby securing the legitimacy of his rule. Ravandi notes that the Commander of the Faithful displayed great ceremony, sent abundant gifts and benefactions, entrusted the governance of the realm to Tughril, and confirmed his sovereignty over the lands of Iraq (14). Following the Buyid period, the caliph sought by any means to restore his former glory and majesty. At that time, the caliph had become so weak that he requested subsistence support from the sultan; Tughril granted this request, and the caliph bestowed upon him the title "Sultan of the East and the West." The sultan then instructed his vizier, Amid al-Mulk Kunduri, to fulfill the caliph's needs and to regulate Baghdad's affairs accordingly (13). Thus, a form of overlap emerged between sultan and caliph. The Seljuk sultans eliminated Abbasid opponents such as the Buyid amirs from the political and religious arena and fought the caliph's enemies, including the Fatimids and Ismailis, thereby gaining the favor of the Baghdad caliphs. Nishapuri describes them as individuals divinely supported and pleasing to the populace (13). Although Seljuk relations with the Abbasid caliphs appeared as loyal subordination, in practice they allowed the sultan to restrict the

caliphs' capacity for independent action—especially military initiatives. As Seljuk sultans gradually attained uncontested authority, they sought, alongside political power, to acquire spiritual authority comparable to that of the Abbasid caliphs. Nizam al-Mulk astutely recognized this aspiration and articulated the theory of “kingship as a divine gift,” that is, the theory of the sultan as God’s shadow (8).

Nizam al-Mulk’s Theory in the *Siyasatnama* on Divine Glory, the Sultan as God’s Shadow, and His Iranshahrī Thought

Divine glory (*farr-e Izadi*), alongside other components of Iranshahrī political thought, was employed in the ideas of Nizam al-Mulk. He advanced his political theory with the aim of separating the institution of kingship from the caliphate and of stabilizing and legitimizing Turkic rule during the Seljuk era. Contrary to al-Mawardi, he sought to ground the legitimacy of the sultan’s power not in caliphal confirmation but in direct divine appointment, drawing upon the concept of divine glory (4). At the same time, he endeavored to reconstruct the ideal king of ancient Iranian political thought within the cultural framework of the Islamic era. He regarded the king as possessing divine glory and a God-given right to rule, by virtue of which he was God’s chosen one and God’s vicegerent on earth (9).

On the basis of this perspective, Nizam al-Mulk writes in the *Siyasatnama* regarding the divine election of the sultan that in every age God selects one individual from among humankind, adorns him with royal virtues, entrusts to him the welfare of the world and the tranquility of God’s servants, restrains corruption and disorder through him, and spreads awe and majesty of him in the hearts and eyes of the people, so that under his justice they live securely and desire the continuity of his rule (8). This passage demonstrates the extent to which Nizam al-Mulk was influenced by the concept of divine glory and the status of the sultan as God’s shadow, and how he founded the Seljuk political and administrative system upon this basis. In subsequent centuries, up to the Constitutional period in Iran, this mode of thought persisted, and expressions such as “God’s shadow” and “Qibla of the World” used for Qajar kings—particularly Naser al-Din Shah—were derived from the same Seljuk conception of divine kingship. Although this discourse diminished after the Constitutional Revolution, it reappeared in the Pahlavi era under titles such as *Shahanshah Aryamehr* and *His Imperial Majesty*, as well as in slogans like “God, King, Fatherland,” all of which, to varying degrees, reflected the enduring legacy of the ancient concept of divine glory (4).

How the Seljuks and Nizam al-Mulk Reconciled the Theory of the Sultan as God’s Shadow with the Status of the Caliphs, and the Question of Priority and Posteriority

In the *Siyasatnama*, there is no reference to the caliphate as an institution from which a ruler or king derives legitimacy; rather, any mention of the caliphs can be explained in light of their function as rulers, not out of necessity and not by virtue of their caliphal office (6, 8). The manner in which Nizam al-Mulk dealt with the caliphal establishment—or, more precisely, the way he effectively reduced the caliphs to mere rulers under conditions of ambiguity between the institutions of caliphate and sultanate—is highly meaningful, because in both practice and theory he appears to have held that the era of caliphate had passed and that its restoration, especially in Iran, was not possible (4). This argument rests on the idea that Nizam al-Mulk sought to eliminate the danger of political fragmentation by strengthening the authority of the sultan, understood as the principal power in the country. At that time the caliphate had also weakened, and Nizam al-Mulk believed that if the caliphate were to disappear, the sultan should at least succeed it (17).

At the same time, although during the Seljuk period the caliphate had long been largely a symbolic position lacking military power, caliphal confirmation remained crucial for the Seljuk sultans, because the majority of their subjects regarded the caliph as the successor of the Prophet (6, 7). Nizam al-Mulk, in his book, promotes the idea of the sultan's being chosen by God; nevertheless, it should not be overlooked that the legitimacy the Seljuks acquired in the time of Tughril was embedded in the Abbasid caliphate's confirmation (13, 14). Given that the caliphate continued to preserve its standing among Sunnis, it is natural that—even though Nizam al-Mulk repeatedly presents divine election as the foundation of royal legitimacy—he does not ignore the caliphate. Yet his intention is not to sacralize the caliphate; rather, he works to preserve it because it can still yield practical benefits, and Abbasid confirmation was regarded as important for Iran's Sunni population (6, 8). In this regard, Nizam al-Mulk, in one of his discussions, warns about "ill-believers" who are enemies of kingship and Islam, who have gained proximity within the polity, and who secretly strengthen certain networks and attempt to induce the "Lord of the World" to remove the House of the Abbasids—suggesting that lifting the lid from that "pot" would expose considerable scandal (8).

In any case, through Nizam al-Mulk's unequivocal support for the Abbasid caliphate, relations between the grand vizier and the caliph were highly cordial. To the extent emphasized in the text, the caliph granted Nizam al-Mulk an honorific title that was ordinarily reserved for kings and had not previously been bestowed upon a vizier, nor was it thereafter granted to anyone else (4, 16).

The Impact of the Theory of the Sultan as God's Shadow and the Caliph's Spiritual Status on Seljuk–Abbasid Political Relations

As noted earlier, the Seljuks made all major political and military decisions independently, and within the Seljuk political order the caliph functioned largely as a spiritual and ceremonial figure; in fact, without the sultan's support, the caliphal institution might not have survived. Nonetheless, Seljuk sultans accorded the caliph considerable respect, and the caliphs—aware that, given threats from the Fatimid caliphs of Egypt and from the Ismailis, they could not endure without Seljuk backing—also showed great favor toward the sultans, honoring Seljuk rulers and their viziers with gifts and titles (2, 7). Over the long course of Great Seljuk rule, however, serious conflicts sometimes emerged between the sultans and the caliphs, and political relations could deteriorate; these disputes were typically resolved through mediation by leading figures on both sides—especially the grand vizier Nizam al-Mulk and the caliph's viziers—and at times by means of politically strategic marriages or the exchange of gifts, after which relations returned to normal (5, 16).

For example, a dispute arose in Baghdad between Tughril Beg, the first Seljuk sultan, and the Abbasid caliph al-Qa'im bi-Amr Allah; it was resolved through the mediation of viziers and notables and culminated in the arrangement of marriage between the caliph's daughter and the sultan, although Tughril died in Ray before the caliph's daughter reached him (12). Another instance was the deterioration of relations between Sultan Mas'ud Seljuk and the Abbasid caliph al-Mustarshid, which led to armed conflict in which the sultan besieged Baghdad and captured the caliph, though the confrontation ultimately ended in reconciliation (2, 7).

During the reign of Alp Arslan, his relations with the caliph were better than in Tughril's time, because he showed notable political acumen in cultivating cordial ties and took steps early on that secured the caliph's goodwill; in response, the caliphal court treated Alp Arslan's envoys with full respect and, after ceremonial proceedings and the

giving of gifts, dispatched an emissary to obtain the oath of allegiance for Alp Arslan, who in turn accepted the caliphal robe of honor and affirmed allegiance (2, 13).

In this process, as previously indicated, the role of Nizam al-Mulk in sustaining these cordial interactions was decisive and exceptional. The earlier vizierate had not succeeded in maintaining an optimal relationship between Sultan Tughril and the caliph, whereas the change of vizier under Alp Arslan significantly improved this pattern. The caliph's esteem for Nizam al-Mulk and the conferral of an extraordinary honorific upon him—presented in the text as unprecedented for viziers and ordinarily reserved for sultans—also illustrates the distinctive standing of the grand vizier in Seljuk–caliphal relations; moreover, this trajectory continued more strongly during Malik Shah's reign, and as long as Nizam al-Mulk lived, relations between sultan and caliph remained largely positive, with any minor tensions typically resolved through his mediation and that of the caliph's vizier (4, 5, 16).

Conclusion

When Tughril the Seljuk ascended the throne in Nishapur in Sha'ban 429 AH (corresponding to 1038 CE) and assumed the title of sultan, the Seljuks, under the rule of Tughril Beg, effectively took over the leadership of the Islamic world by establishing political dominance over the Abbasid caliphate in Baghdad. They were profoundly influenced by Iranian culture and played a significant role in forging a connection between Turkic and Iranian cultural traditions. From the very beginning, the Seljuks supported the Abbasid caliphate in order to justify their own legitimacy and employed this support to their advantage. Influenced by the ancient Iranian doctrine of divine glory (*farr-e Izadi*), they presented themselves as the “shadow of God,” thereby reinforcing their authority as representatives of divine will. The concept of the “shadow of God” became closely associated with the notion of kingship in Islamic-period Iranian history and came to express the legitimacy and power of rulers in this era. In this context, *Iranshahrī* thought was formulated alongside the idea of divine glory and interpreted as an expression of Iran's historical continuity. Accordingly, the Seljuk sultans sought to advance their political objectives and enhance their authority by drawing simultaneously on the ancient Iranian concept of divine royal glory and on the Islamic legitimacy conferred upon them by the Abbasid caliph. For this reason, Seljuk sultans—especially in the early phase of their rule—remained loyal to the Abbasid caliphate, a loyalty that was clearly manifested through their amirs and court practices. Conversely, although the Abbasids in Baghdad possessed greater religious and spiritual authority, Seljuk rule in Iran gradually came to operate independently of them. On this basis, the initial research question—how the discourse of divine shadowhood was able to secure Seljuk legitimacy alongside the caliph's confirmation of their rule—can be answered by confirming the hypothesis that, by reconciling their own theory of divine shadowhood with the Abbasid caliphate, the Seljuks succeeded in strengthening their legitimacy among the populace and the religious scholars while simultaneously consolidating their role as Islamic rulers and executors of the sharia. Ultimately, by harmonizing these two doctrines, the Seljuk sultans were able both to benefit from the religious legitimacy of the Abbasid caliphate and to stabilize their own position within Iran's political and religious structures. Politically and religiously, this reconciliation was vital for the survival and consolidation of Seljuk rule in Iran, a process that was theorized, facilitated, and implemented under the central guidance of their great vizier, Khwaja Nizam al-Mulk.

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Authors' Contributions

All authors equally contributed to this study.

Declaration of Interest

The authors of this article declared no conflict of interest.

Ethical Considerations

All ethical principles were adhered in conducting and writing this article.

Transparency of Data

In accordance with the principles of transparency and open research, we declare that all data and materials used in this study are available upon request.

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