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Umayyad Religious Policies and Transformations in the Political and Social Life of Iranian Christians

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the status of Iranian Christians from the advent of Islam to the end of the Umayyad period. Its primary objective is to analyze the political, social, and religious transformations experienced by Christians in response to developments arising from the Islamic conquests and the policies of the caliphate. The study employs a descriptive-analytical method based on historical sources and recent scholarship. The findings indicate that, following the collapse of the Sasanian Empire, Iranian Christians were not entirely eliminated despite the decline in their political status and the imposition of legal restrictions; rather, they continued their communal life within the framework of the new Islamic order. Moreover, Umayyad policies, Islamic legal regulations, and internal developments within the Iranian Church played a decisive role in shaping their position. The study concludes that the status of Iranian Christians during this period was characterized by a combination of continuity, adaptation, and restriction.

Keywords: *Iranian Christians, Umayyad period, religious minorities, political and social status, Islamic conquests.*

Introduction

The advent of Islam in Iran was one of the most consequential events in the history of the country, leading to the collapse of the Sasanian Empire and extensive political, social, and religious transformations. Iranian Christians likewise entered a new historical phase, characterized both by restrictions and by forms of continuity and adaptation. During the Sasanian period, Christians were consistently subjected to surveillance and, at times, persecution because of their religious difference from Zoroastrianism and their perceived connections with the Byzantine Empire; nevertheless, they succeeded in preserving their identity and institutional structures. With the arrival of the Muslims and the establishment of Islamic rule, their circumstances changed according to the policies of the caliphate, local conditions, and the internal situation of the Church. Particularly during the Umayyad period, as Islamic authority became consolidated, the status of Christians was more clearly defined within the legal category of the *dhimmis*. They retained certain forms of religious freedom but faced political and social restrictions.

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Consequently, Iranian Christians were compelled to adapt to the new order in order to ensure their continued existence.

This study investigates the effects of the advent of Islam and the policies of the caliphate on the political, social, and religious status of Iranian Christians from the beginning of the Islamic conquests to the end of the Umayyad period. The central question is whether Christians were eliminated and weakened or whether they succeeded in continuing their communal life within the new order. The study also examines Umayyad policies, regulations concerning the *dhimmis*, and internal divisions within the Iranian Churches. The Islamic conquests were not merely military events; rather, they created a new order concerning political authority, taxation, property, religious freedom, and relations between Muslims and non-Muslims. Under these circumstances, Iranian Christians were required to accommodate themselves to a system that, on the one hand, allowed them to continue their religious life and, on the other, imposed certain restrictions upon them. The conduct of the Umayyad caliphs was not uniform and varied according to changing political and administrative circumstances. Ultimately, this study demonstrates that Iranian Christians reconstructed their position and continued their communal life amid political pressures, legal restrictions, and religious transformations. The issue, therefore, concerns not only the effects of the conquests but also the ways in which Christians redefined their position within the new Islamic order.

The Introduction of Christianity into Iran and Its Historical Position

Before Islam, Christianity in Iran was not a homogeneous movement but rather a collection of diverse theological tendencies represented by three principal branches: Nestorian, Jacobite, and Melkite Christianity. Each of these traditions reflected the theological controversies of the universal Church while also playing a distinctive role in the cultural and political developments of the region.

a) The Nestorian tradition: This branch, which had been condemned because of the teachings of Nestorius at the Council of Ephesus in 431 CE, migrated into Iran and benefited from the relatively tolerant environment of the Sasanian Empire, eventually becoming the principal Christian institution in Iran. By emphasizing the distinction between the human and divine natures of Christ, the Nestorians extended their influence into Central Asia, India, and China by the ninth century CE and established an integrated network of ecclesiastical institutions (1).

b) The Jacobite or Monophysite tradition: In theological opposition to the Nestorians, this tradition emphasized the unity of Christ's divine and human nature. Following its condemnation at the Council of Chalcedon in 451 CE, its adherents separated from the imperial Church and formed independent communities in Armenia, Egypt, and Syria. The survival of these communities into the modern period attests to their socio-religious resistance in the face of political pressure (2).

c) The Melkite tradition: The term "Melkite," derived from *malko*, meaning "royal" or "imperial," reflected the institutional association of this group with the religious policies of the Byzantine Empire. The Melkites, whose principal bases were among the Greek-speaking communities of Syria and Egypt, maintained institutional ties with the episcopal sees of Antioch and Constantinople and became a force aligned with the Byzantine political establishment. They consequently remained in persistent conflict with the region's non-Chalcedonian traditions (3).

The simultaneous presence of these three traditions in Iran reflected not only theological diversity but also the complexity of political interactions among Iran, Byzantium, and the Christian communities of the Near East during the transitional period from Sasanian to Islamic rule. The earliest association between Christianity and Iran must be sought not in official administrative documents but in the symbolic accounts of the Magi in Christian texts. The

account in the Gospel of Matthew, Chapter 2, concerning the journey of the Magi from the East to Bethlehem represents the earliest cultural reflection of this interaction and became a fundamental element of Christian art and theology during the first centuries CE. The significance of this account lies less in its historical verifiability than in its symbolic importance for the early Church. Representations of the Magi in Christian art wearing Iranian or Median garments established a profound association between Iranian identity and the Christian tradition. Several archaeological theories have been advanced regarding the geographical origin of this narrative. By identifying Kuh-e Khwaja in Sistan with the "Mountain of Victory" mentioned in ancient texts, Ernst Herzfeld argued that the proximity of this site to Lake Hamun—which, in Iranian mythology, was associated with the emergence of the Saoshyant or promised savior—established a semantic connection between Zoroastrian teachings and the messianic expectations of the Magi (4).

During the Islamic period, this narrative was reproduced in popular culture and became intertwined with local legends and popular historiography. A prominent example is Abu Dulaf's account of the fire temple of Shiz, in which the journey of the Magi to Bethlehem and their receipt of sacred soil from Mary served as a means of sanctifying religious sites in post-Islamic Iran (5). These accounts indicate that the narrative of the Magi transcended the boundaries of a religious text and became part of Iranian historical memory through which Iran's position in sacred Christian history was explained. Alongside official accounts, medieval historical texts contain narratives seeking to associate Iranian rulers with foundational events in Christian history. In *Muruj al-Dhahab*, al-Masudi recounts a narrative concerning the period of Cyrus the Great, according to which royal envoys were dispatched to honor the birth of Christ and received gifts such as gold, soil, and sacred bread, leading to the establishment of a fire temple with miraculous characteristics, including water existing amid fire (6). Although this account lacks credibility from the perspective of classical historiography—because the chronological association of Cyrus with the time of Christ contradicts established historical facts—it reflects an "Iranian-Christian popular literature" that circulated from the early Islamic centuries through the tenth century CE and sought to establish symbolic links between the religious traditions of the two civilizations. A similar tendency appears in the ambiguous reports of al-Tabari and in accounts resembling the Gospel of Matthew in the work of Bar Hebraeus (7, 8).

Additional evidence also indicates an early interaction between Christianity and the Iranian territories. According to the account in the Acts of the Apostles, during Pentecost, individuals from Parthia, Media, and Elam—all of which were part of the Parthian realm—were present in Jerusalem and heard Christian preaching in their own languages (9). Pentecost may therefore be regarded as the earliest formal context in which Iranians encountered Christian teachings (10). Despite methodological doubts concerning the historical certainty of the accounts contained in the Acts of the Apostles, historical and archaeological evidence indicates that the missionary centers of Edessa and Arbela were the earliest focal points for the penetration of Christianity during the Parthian period and that the religion was introduced into Iranian territory through these centers.

The Political and Social Structure of Christians at the End of the Sasanian Period

As a multiethnic and multireligious empire, the Sasanian realm provided a complex setting for interaction among religious minorities such as Manichaeans, Jews, and Christians. Among these groups, Christians constituted one of the principal actors within the Iranian social structure because of their demographic concentration and cultural role. Although evidence from the early years of Sasanian rule indicates an organized Christian presence, such as the existence of a church at Dayr Ardashir, as well as a degree of relative tranquility in relations between the court

and the Church, this situation underwent fundamental transformation as geopolitical tensions between Iran and Rome intensified (10, 11).

Sasanian foreign policy, particularly following the capture of the Roman emperor Valerian by Shapur I in 260 CE, constituted a turning point in the changing demography of Iranian Christianity. The transfer of Roman captives and Christian populations from regions such as Antioch to cities including Babylon, Bishapur, and Gondishapur, or Beth Lapat, introduced new Christian currents into the Iranian realm. This demographic relocation divided Iranian Christian society into two principal strata: indigenous Syriac-speaking Christians and newly arrived Greek-speaking Christians (10). This linguistic and cultural duality is clearly reflected in the inscription of the Zoroastrian high priest Kartir, dating to approximately 280 CE, in which he distinguished between the *Nazarenes*, or Syriac-speaking Christians, and the *Christians*, or Greek-speaking Christians (12).

The position of Christians during the Sasanian period was consistently determined by the balance of power between the Zoroastrian priesthood and the broader policies of the monarchs. Whereas certain periods, such as the reign of Hormizd I, were characterized by tolerance (10), Christians faced serious challenges during periods of heightened tension, such as the reign of Bahram II, when they were subjected to pressure alongside the Manichaeans (9). Moreover, theological competition among religions, including debates between the bishop of Kaskar and representatives of other intellectual traditions, formed part of the religious environment of the Sasanian period (13).

The position of Christians during the Sasanian era may be explained through two paradoxes. The first was internal pluralism, resulting from linguistic and geographical differences; the second was security-related vulnerability, arising from the overlap between Christian religious identity and the Byzantine Empire. This tension between Christians' cultural and social role and their perceived political and security threat shaped the fate of Christian communities in their relations with the Sasanian central authority.

The Transition from the Sasanian Order to the Islamic Period

The first encounters and the transformation of social paradigms accompanying the emergence of Islam in the seventh century CE went beyond a mere transfer of political power and resulted in the reconfiguration of religious and social structures throughout the Middle East, profoundly affecting the situation of Iranian Christians. During the final decades of Sasanian rule, Christian communities, despite their presence in different levels of the court, particularly under Khosrow II, were politically vulnerable because of sectarian disputes and internal divisions. Historical sources report possible initial contacts between Iran and Islam during the final Sasanian period. Although the historical authenticity of the early correspondence between the Prophet of Islam and the Sasanian court remains disputed, the existence of narratives such as the dream of Khosrow I reflects a symbolic and gradual awareness of profound transformations on the regional political horizon (14). Irrespective of their historical reliability, these accounts represent a social perception that a major transformation was underway and that the Sasanian order faced imminent collapse before an emerging power.

The contrast between Christian and Islamic sources is evident regarding official Christian responses to the prophetic mission of Muhammad. Whereas the earliest Muslim biographical sources make no direct reference to such interactions, Syriac texts refer to diplomatic activities undertaken by the Church of Ctesiphon. According to these accounts, Ishoʿyahb II, the patriarch of Ctesiphon, upon learning of Muhammad's mission, attempted to establish a formal relationship by sending a letter accompanied by gifts (15). Some narratives also emphasize the

role of bishops such as Gabriel, bishop of Maysan, in transmitting political information between Iran and Medina, suggesting the existence of a channel of communication between Christian elites and the emerging Islamic authority (11).

With the commencement of the Islamic conquests and the fall of the Sasanian dynasty, Christians, particularly those living in Mesopotamia, were among the first communities to encounter Muslim forces. Contrary to common assumptions, this was not a confrontation between two entirely unfamiliar cultures. Because of the longstanding presence of Christianity in the Arabian Peninsula, a degree of mutual familiarity already existed. Early interactions were shaped by the concept of the People of the Book and the traditions of early Islam, which established the foundations of the legal and social models governing Christian communities in Islamic territories. The emergence of Islam represented a dual turning point for Iranian Christians. On the one hand, the fall of the Sasanian Empire entailed the loss of their traditional influence and position within the established structure of power; on the other hand, integration into the Islamic order provided an opportunity to redefine their social status within a new framework of religious rights. Christians thus moved from the status of a minority governed by Zoroastrian monarchs to that of a component within the social fabric of the new Islamic system, where their position varied according to geographical location and sectarian affiliation. During the final Sasanian centuries, the weakening of political and administrative institutions and the exhaustion caused by prolonged wars between Iran and Rome prepared the regional political environment for fundamental transformation. In this context, the fall of the Lakhmid dynasty at al-Hira, one of the most strategically significant Christian centers on the frontier between Iran and the Arabian Peninsula, had profound geopolitical consequences for the subsequent conquests. The Lakhmid realm, which extended from the southern banks of the Euphrates to the Syrian Desert and eastern Arabia, played a role extending beyond that of a local power. By mobilizing Arab tribes allied with Iran, including the predominantly Christian tribes of Taghlib, Rabiʿa, Tayy, and Iyad, it functioned as a buffer zone that restrained nomadic tribes and countered Byzantine influence (7).

The strategic role of al-Hira was inseparably connected with its religious character, because the city was not only a commercial center but also a major center for the establishment and dissemination of Christianity within the Sasanian realm. The extensive presence of monasteries, particularly those affiliated with the Nestorian tradition, transformed al-Hira into a secure refuge for Christians. A concrete manifestation of this position occurred in 424 CE, when the Synod of Dadishoʿ was held there. The synod formally declared the separation of the Church of the East from the Western, or Roman, Church, thereby consolidating the structural independence of Christians in the Sasanian territories and establishing an autonomous ecclesiastical authority. In this context, interaction between the rulers of al-Hira and the Sasanian central government consistently centered on frontier management and religious alignments. During the reign of Kavad I, from 488 to 531 CE, this relationship was reflected in financial agreements between al-Harith ibn Amr al-Kindi and the Sasanian court for the containment of Arab tribal influence (7). Similarly, during the reign of Khosrow I, the alliance between the rulers of al-Hira and the Banu Bakr ibn Waʾil against the Ghassanids demonstrates the role of religion in the formation of military coalitions. The extensive influence of Christianity among the Banu Bakr ibn Waʾil likely provided a basis for religious and political alignment between the ruler of al-Hira and these tribes. Thus, before Islam, al-Hira combined a Christian identity with political loyalty to the Sasanian state and became an institution that ensured the stability of the imperial frontier. The collapse of this structure created a strategic vacuum on Iran's borders that ultimately facilitated the advance of Islam. The dissolution of the Christian Lakhmid government at al-Hira during the reign of Khosrow II represented a turning point in the balance of power along the Iranian frontier. Resulting from political and religious tensions between the

Sasanian court and local rulers such as al-Nuʿman, this collapse eliminated Iran's buffer zone and defensive barrier against Arab tribes (16). In the resulting security vacuum, battles such as Dhu Qar and the continuing attacks of tribes such as the Banu Bakr ibn Waʾil undermined Sasanian military prestige and created the conditions necessary for the organized entry of Muslim forces (17, 18).

During this period, the entry of Arab groups such as Rabiʿa into Iranian territory and the subsequent cooperation of newly converted Muslim warriors such as al-Muthanna ibn Haritha with the caliphate accelerated the process of structural transformation (19, 20). Given the Christian affiliation of many of these tribes, it may be inferred that Christians living in the frontier regions were among the first communities to encounter this emerging movement. Under conditions of weakened Sasanian central authority, these encounters compelled Christians to reconsider and redefine their position within the new social order.

The military, political, and social developments accompanying the entry of Muslim forces into Iraq and northern Mesopotamia between 633 and 641 CE indicate a complex process of power transition and the reconfiguration of religious and ethnic identities. This process began with the consolidation of Muslim power in Iraq and al-Hira, where, following the initial resistance of the inhabitants, Christian monks played a decisive role in mediating and persuading prominent citizens, including ʿAbd al-Masih ibn Buqayla, to surrender and pay 190,000 dirhams in *jizya*. The monks themselves were exempted from payment. Following the death of the first caliph, however, revolts in al-Hira were suppressed by armies dispatched under al-Muthanna and Saʿd ibn Abi Waqqas, and the *jizya* was increased to 400,000 dirhams. During the same period, Khalid ibn al-Walid's conquest of ʿAyn al-Tamr resulted in the capture of young men who subsequently entered the elite strata of Islamic society, including the father of Musa ibn Nusayr, the father of Muhammad ibn Sirin, and the grandfather of Muhammad ibn Ishaq.

At the same time, military conflicts became intertwined with religious and ethnic identities. At the Battle of Buwayb in 634 CE, Christian Arab tribes such as Namir and Taghlib chose, on the basis of their ethnic identity, to fight alongside the Muslims against the Sasanian frontier commander. This period witnessed fluctuations of power, including the defeat of Abu ʿUbayd al-Thaqafi at the Battle of the Bridge and the temporary Sasanian reconquest of the Sawad under Bahman Jadhuyah, developments that ultimately ended with the decisive Muslim victory at Buwayb. With the fall of Ctesiphon, the Sasanian capital, Christians found themselves in a state of uncertainty and eventually secured their safety either by paying the *jizya* or by converting to Islam. The defeat of coalitions of Christian tribes, including Iyad, Taghlib, and Namir, which had formed with Byzantine support against the Muslims, opened the way for Muslim control over the eastern Tigris region and Hulwan. Beginning in 639 CE, ʿIyad ibn Ghanm concluded peace agreements with patriarchs and bishops in major cities such as Raqqa, Edessa, Harran, Nisibis, Mardin, and Amida, thereby bringing northern Mesopotamia under Muslim control. These agreements included provisions concerning the payment of *jizya* and restrictions on the construction of new churches and the public performance of religious ceremonies. Concurrently with the expansion of Muslim territories in the north, new political developments occurred along the southwestern frontiers of Iran, beginning with al-ʿAlaʾ ibn al-Hadrami's advance from Bahrain toward the Persian Gulf coast and the Christian-populated regions of Khuzestan (7).

This campaign, which was undertaken without the knowledge of Caliph ʿUmar and in competition with Saʿd ibn Abi Waqqas, resulted in Muslim victory after the caliph dispatched supporting forces and they confronted the army of Hormuzan, governor of Fars and Khuzestan. Following these conflicts, Ramhormoz, Shushtar, Susa, Gondishapur, and Tawwaj, which were predominantly Christian, were conquered. Susa resisted for a prolonged period, and during the siege, priests invoked prophecies concerning the futility of resistance and emphasized the

destiny governing the city (7). Susa eventually surrendered and agreed to pay the *jizya*. Gondishapur, a major scientific center and an important center of Christian settlement, also surrendered after a siege and the receipt of a guarantee of security (7). Although the final Sasanian defeat at the Battle of Nahavand opened the way for the conquest of Hamadan, Azerbaijan, Rayy, Isfahan, Kerman, Sistan, Khurasan, and Transoxiana, recurring local revolts following the departure of Muslim forces meant that many of these cities were conquered repeatedly. This instability, combined with the brevity of the surviving accounts, makes it extremely difficult to determine the precise dates of the conquests and the social and religious circumstances of Christians in these regions. The conquest literature therefore provides little precise information concerning these communities.

The Effects of the Conquests on the Political and Social Life of Christians

The military, political, and social transformations caused by the Islamic conquests in regions where Christians constituted the majority of the population played a major role in defining the political and social position of these communities. Many of the earliest confrontations between Iranian and Muslim forces occurred in Christian-populated areas. Muslim armies frequently established their camps near monasteries because such locations possessed considerable strategic value owing to their geographical positions and access to essential resources such as water. Prominent examples include al-Muthanna ibn Haritha's encampment at Dayr Hind (18) and the stationing of Rustam Farrokhzad's forces near Dayr al-Aʿwar during the Battle of al-Qadisiyya (18, 21). This tactical practice continued to be employed in warfare for centuries. Monks and monastery residents may consequently be regarded as witnesses to a series of historical events extending from the preliminary stages of the Sasanian Empire's collapse to the continuing transformations of the Islamic caliphate in Mesopotamia and Iran.

The manner in which these developments were interpreted during the initial stages of the conquests played a crucial role in defining the political and social circumstances of Christians. Three principal approaches may be identified in Christian perceptions of the Muslims. One group of monks searched for signs of these transformations in ancient Christian religious texts, including Genesis 21:12–13 and 21:18, which refer to the divine will that a nation should arise from the descendants of Ishmael (22). On the basis of these passages, some Christians regarded the Muslim Arabs as the descendants of Ishmael and interpreted contemporary developments optimistically. In this context, the head of the Church of the East in the region of Beth Qatraye praised the Muslims and their relations with Christianity in letters addressed to Christian dignitaries, emphasizing that they were not opposed to Christianity and respected Christian faith and clergy (23). Similarly, a Christian bishop residing in northern Mesopotamia and Armenia stated in approximately 661 CE that the Muslims were the descendants of Ishmael and characterized the conquests as a conscious historical movement (24). This interpretation, which continues to attract scholarly attention, portrays the expansion of Islam as a deliberate movement undertaken by the descendants of Hagar. Christian familiarity with these scriptural narratives was probably among the factors that encouraged certain monks and Iranian Christian communities to cooperate with the Muslims. This situation could ultimately lead to either conversion to Islam or accommodation with Muslim authority, examples of which may be observed in the conquests along Iran's western frontiers (23).

A second group of Christians believed that the Muslim conquests represented the formation of a new political government or an emerging empire (25). As a religious minority, they therefore prepared themselves to continue their political and social life within the framework of a nascent system. Documentary evidence supports this conciliatory approach. A manuscript preserved in the British Museum contains a letter from Mar John, a Jacobite

patriarch, to the Christians of Mesopotamia. In this letter, written on May 9, 639 CE, he stated that he, five bishops, and a group of Christians had met a Muslim commander, probably ʿAmr ibn al-ʿAs. He advised Christians to remain hopeful because of the commander's wisdom and knowledge and to give thanks to God (25).

In contrast, another group of Christians believed that they were confronting not merely a new political power but the emergence of a new religion against which resistance was essential for the survival of the Christian community (26). From this perspective, attempts were made to resolve internal disagreements among Christian sects. The composition of Syriac apocalyptic texts predicting that Muslim rule could be overthrown through a Byzantine campaign supported by Christians reflects the aspirations of this group to confront Muslim authority (26). The roots of Christian resistance to the Muslims during the conquests may be located in this interpretation. In addition to these intellectual confrontations, the historical experience of populations living along Iran's western frontiers and the Arabian Peninsula contributed to the formation of these attitudes. Because these communities had long been exposed to repeated invasions during the wars between the Sasanian and Byzantine empires, they did not perceive the arrival of the Arabs as an entirely unfamiliar phenomenon.

During the Sasanian period, Christians were frequently viewed with suspicion by Iranian rulers whenever war with Byzantium occurred. Yet, in the event of a Byzantine invasion, they also confronted challenges arising from sectarian divisions within their own communities. Because the Byzantine Empire provided a degree of support to the Jacobites, the Nestorian community preferred Muslim rule to Byzantine domination (26). Mar John likewise observed that Christians supported the arrival of the Muslims, although during the conquests the Christian inhabitants and other populations of Mesopotamia encountered a group of Arabs who differed from the Arab communities traditionally residing along the region's peripheries. Christians in western Iran consequently re-emerged as a religious minority within the political and social arena. Despite military confrontations that resulted in killings in some regions, Muslim treatment of Christians was generally conciliatory. When confronted with the Muslim offer of choosing between payment of the *jizya* and warfare, Christians usually accepted one of these alternatives. This choice enabled them to continue their political and social life and economic activities. For this reason, Christian communities in western Iran succeeded in preserving their social and religious identities as religious minorities for centuries after the conquests.

The Effects of Islamic Law on the Political and Social Status of Christians at the Beginning of the Conquests

Christians, as one of the first religious communities of Iran to encounter Muslim armies, acquired a defined position within a legal and jurisprudential framework based on Qurʾanic teachings and the Prophetic tradition. Their inclusion among the People of the Book meant that the principles governing relations with them were founded upon tolerance and the observance of reciprocal rights (27). The Qurʾan recognized some of them as genuine believers and emphasized that others should be invited or addressed with gentleness, while prohibiting unproductive disputation with the People of the Book except in cases involving injustice. This approach, based on moderation and reciprocal rights, was likewise established in the Prophetic tradition as the governing principle of relations with the People of the Book, and military confrontation occurred only in the event of resistance or under conditions of warfare (28).

During the conquests, the political and social status of Christians depended upon the manner in which a region had been conquered and the nature of their interaction with the conquerors (29). Under peace treaties or military surrender agreements, Christians faced three alternatives: accepting Islam, engaging in military resistance, or

retaining their religion while coexisting within Islamic society. Under the third option, Christians were required to pay taxes in the form of *jizya* and *kharaj* in return for the protection of their lives, property, and religion. The *jizya*, justified on the basis of Qurʾan 9:29, was effectively a protective and security-based agreement between the ruler and the subject (30). Politically, the collection of *jizya* indicated the conquerors' willingness to establish peaceful relations and psychological security, thereby facilitating the continuation of Christian social and economic activities. Economically, because of the substantial Christian population in regions such as Iraq, the *jizya* constituted a major source of revenue for the Islamic state. This suggests that the conquerors sought to ensure the social and economic stability of the conquered territories by allowing the inhabitants to retain their religion while collecting taxation from them. The financial structure of the *jizya* was determined according to individuals' economic capacity and included social considerations. It was imposed upon free adult men, while women, children, elderly persons, persons with mental disabilities, and enslaved individuals were exempt (31). Its annual rates were divided into three categories: 48 dirhams for the wealthy, 24 dirhams for the middle class, and 12 dirhams for the poor (32). Some peace agreements concluded during the caliphate of ʿUmar also required the inhabitants of rural areas in the Sawad to provide hospitality to Muslim travelers for up to three days, although this obligation did not apply to urban residents (30). Legally, the death or conversion of a non-Muslim before the end of the fiscal year directly affected the collection of the *jizya* (30). Opinions differed concerning monks. Some jurists held that they were liable for *jizya* only if they left their monasteries, while others considered the collection of the tax from monks entirely impermissible (33). Evidence nevertheless suggests that some individuals joined monastic communities in order to escape this financial burden and that the Islamic government continued to collect *jizya* from them in such cases (33).

An analysis of the economic and legal effects of the *jizya* on religious conversion indicates that, although payment of the tax did not create substantial hardship for affluent Christian families and conversion consequently proceeded more slowly among them than among lower-income groups, the obligation imposed upon adult men could function as an incentive for the conversion of religious minorities. Conversely, the exemption of women and elderly persons may have played a decisive role in preserving traditional structures and continuing Christian rituals within families. Moreover, Christian life under the system of *dhimma* required compliance with a series of conditions divided in jurisprudential sources into mandatory and recommended provisions (33). The mandatory conditions, which were intended to protect the religious and political system, prohibited the alteration of sacred texts, insults against the Prophet of Islam or Islam, sexual misconduct involving Muslim women, support for enemies of the Islamic state, and attempts to return Muslims to their former religions. The recommended conditions, which were commonly incorporated into peace treaties, concentrated more extensively on visible and behavioral differentiation. They included restrictions on the height of buildings, requirements to remain quiet while reading religious texts or sounding bells, prohibitions against the public consumption of alcohol, carrying crosses or pigs through public thoroughfares, and limitations concerning clothing, mourning practices, and forms of riding (30).

In addition to these requirements, other regulations shaped the social circumstances of Christians during the conquests and throughout subsequent centuries (34). Social interactions between Muslims and Christians, including communication intended to invite Christians to Islam, were defined within specific frameworks (33). In the economic sphere, participation in agriculture was permitted, although differences in religious regulations concerning usury created a perceived need for the supervision of financial transactions. The leasing of houses to Christians was often approached with caution or disapproval because of the possibility that Christian ceremonies or the consumption of alcohol might occur on the premises. In family relations, a Muslim man was permitted to marry a Christian woman,

but such a marriage could restrict the Christian wife's freedom to attend church, whereas other Christians generally retained the freedom to visit their religious institutions. In matters of inheritance, the property of the deceased was distributed according to the religion of the heirs (33). On the basis of the Prophetic tradition, harming the People of the Book was prohibited. In cases of injury or homicide, a specified blood payment ranging from 400 to 4,000 dirhams was prescribed. If the victim's family demanded retaliation, it was required to pay the difference in the value of the blood payment (34).

Landownership in agricultural regions and major Christian centers, particularly the Sawad, played a prominent role in determining Christians' economic circumstances. Christian landowners and cultivators were required to pay *kharaj* according to the type and use of the land. Non-Muslim inhabitants whose lands had been incorporated through peace agreements were regarded as people of covenant and retained the right to exploit the land upon payment of the *jizya*. The transfer of ownership from a Christian to a Muslim could alter the legal designation of the land and permit its sale, and it occasionally resulted in the cancellation of the *kharaj*. In transfers to other Muslims, however, the obligation sometimes continued (30). The payment of such taxes was not an entirely new phenomenon for Christians, because they had been subject to comparable taxation systems during the Sasanian period (35).

Historical evidence and early narratives demonstrate the existence of practical and everyday interactions between Muslims and Christians during the first years of the conquests. These interactions extended beyond purely legal frameworks and reflected profound social dimensions. Early reports, for example, describe shared economic activities in which Christian agents collected rents from properties inhabited by both Muslims and Christians, who lived alongside one another in a structure of coexistence. Narratives concerning judicial and social encounters also illustrate a relationship between conversion and advancement in social status. In one account, a Christian man who discovered an object belonging to Imam ʿAli was honored after converting to Islam and subsequently participated in major battles, including Nahrawan, in the army of ʿAli (19). These events indicate that, compared with some restrictions imposed upon Christians during the Sasanian period, the conditions established within the emerging Islamic society were generally less severe and burdensome (36). This pattern became increasingly apparent as Muslim officials gradually relaxed the enforcement of the conditions of *dhimma* during the decades following the conquests.

In the context of structural transformations following the conquests, conversion to Islam could be regarded by Christians as a strategy for acquiring new and more advantageous social positions, because religion constituted the central foundation of individual and social identity during this period (37). The motivations for conversion may be classified into two categories: sincere religious conviction and structural incentives. The first category included those who converted under the influence of interactions with Muslims or on the basis of prophecies contained in their own religious texts. The second comprised Christians who regarded conversion as a means of escaping the financial burden of the *jizya* or preserving their political and social positions. Although some scholars have characterized the amount of *jizya* as relatively insignificant and have rejected it as the primary cause of conversion (38), the role of outward conversion as a means of preserving social status and participating in Islamic society cannot be overlooked. Many converts attempted to preserve their former identities by privately maintaining Christian rituals within the family, although this transition frequently resulted in separation from Christian familial and social networks.

This process confronted Christian converts with a form of identity crisis, because they entered a society that did not yet possess fully established patterns and clearly defined criteria for the implementation of religious injunctions.

Under these circumstances, support from officials of the Islamic government could play a crucial role in integrating converts into Muslim society and consolidating their political and social positions. Conversion simultaneously transformed both the individual's ascribed and acquired status. Whereas Muslims regarded the convert's new position as elevated and commendable, Christian society often responded to conversion with condemnation and social exclusion. Christian converts, like other newcomers, were incorporated into the emerging social system as *mawali*, or clients affiliated with Arab tribes. Many concluded agreements of clientage with Arab individuals or tribes in order to obtain political protection and social security. Given the geographical proximity of western Iran, particularly the Sawad, to Arab tribal territories, the presence of Christian *mawali* was probably more substantial in these regions than in eastern Iran. Figures such as Abu Luʾluʾ, the servant of al-Mughira, and Abu Farwa, the servant of ʿUthman, may be considered within the broader context of this social process. It is also possible that Christian converts selected Arab tribes with earlier Christian backgrounds as their partners in clientage agreements in order to facilitate social integration.

Determining the political and social status of Christians during and after the conquests depended heavily on defining their social role and position within the new political system. Because individual social identity in the emerging Islamic society was assessed according to adherence to religious teachings, values, and norms, the conditions governing Christian religious life became a decisive factor in determining their social position. Nevertheless, despite certain grievances, the continuation of social and economic activities within Islamic society constituted a practical and advantageous strategy for Christians. Consequently, although Christian social structures underwent substantial changes following the political transformation caused by the collapse of the Sasanian Empire and the establishment of Islamic rule, they neither became destabilized nor collapsed. Instead, Christian communities succeeded in preserving their existence within new institutional forms.

The Strategies of the Umayyad Caliphs toward Religious Minorities

The transfer of the caliphal capital from Kufa to Syria during the reign of Muʿawiya ibn Abi Sufyan, from 661 to 680 CE, marked a fundamental new phase in relations between Islamic authority and Christian communities. Syria was the principal center of Christianity within Islamic territory, and Muʿawiya possessed prior familiarity with the region's religious and social structures. The need for skilled officials to administer extensive territories and sensitive Byzantine frontiers consequently enabled Christians to acquire a distinctive position within the Umayyad bureaucracy. Because the administrative system of the caliphate was still in the process of formation, the technical and administrative expertise of Christians, particularly groups such as the Jacobites, became indispensable (11). Although the formal employment of non-Muslims in matters concerning Muslims was subject to limitations, political realities and administrative necessities frequently led to the disregard of this principle during the Umayyad period and in later states, including the Abbasid caliphate and Iranian dynasties (29).

Umayyad policies designed to secure Christian loyalty included measures such as the reconstruction of Christian houses in Edessa following an earthquake. Christian poets also composed panegyrics in praise of Muʿawiya (11). Prominent families such as that of Sarjun, whose members had served as fiscal officials under Byzantine rule, played a crucial role in the governmental apparatus. Sarjun, one of Muʿawiya's leading secretaries, exercised considerable political influence over major decisions (7). The presence of Christians in fields such as medicine and financial administration likewise demonstrates their influence within the power structure. The Christian physician Ibn Uthal, after participating in sensitive political events, was appointed to collect the taxes of Homs (14, 39). The

military and administrative missions assigned to Christians such as Stephanos in Khurasan, as well as the use of Christian groups in the protection of Medina, similarly indicate their presence at different levels of the Umayyad political and military system. This relatively open religious environment, although occasionally criticized by rigorist Christians such as John the Monk, continued under Yazid ibn Muʿawiya and his successors. The presence of the Christian Taghlibi poet al-Akhtal at Yazid's court illustrates the extent of these cultural and social interactions (40). Although ʿAbd al-Malik ibn Marwan initiated the replacement of non-Muslim officials by Arabizing the administrative registers, which had previously been maintained in Greek in Syria and Middle Persian in Iraq, he continued to benefit from Christian scientific and educational expertise (6). This demonstrates both the transitional character of the period and the gradual continuity between ancient administrative structures and the new Islamic system.

The caliphate of al-Walid ibn ʿAbd al-Malik, from 705 to 715 CE, occasionally witnessed a stricter Umayyad religious policy toward Christians. Reports indicate that certain churches were destroyed or converted into mosques during this period, provoking a response from the Byzantine Empire (6). Evidence nevertheless confirms the continued religious life of Christian communities and the survival of churches in recently conquered regions such as Bukhara. The caliphate of ʿUmar ibn ʿAbd al-ʿAziz, from 717 to 720 CE, was accompanied by more stringent restrictions upon the *dhimmis*, including prohibitions against publicly carrying crosses, using saddles or silver ornaments, transporting women in litters, and wearing certain luxurious garments (32). Despite these restrictions, he is also reported to have ordered that churches be protected from destruction. During this period, John of Damascus, one of the most prominent Christian intellectuals, served in a fiscal position at the court of Yazid ibn ʿAbd al-Malik before withdrawing to a monastery and composing important works in defense of Christianity. Under Hisham ibn ʿAbd al-Malik, from 724 to 743 CE, the tolerant policy of certain officials, particularly Khalid ibn ʿAbd Allah al-Qasri, governor of Iraq, significantly affected Christian circumstances. Because Khalid's mother was Christian, he constructed a church in Kufa and permitted Christians to ring bells and establish a monastery in Basra. This tolerant policy, however, provoked dissatisfaction among some Muslims and contributed to his removal from office (7).

Despite fluctuations caused by changes in the policies of individual Umayyad caliphs, Christians remained active throughout the period in bureaucracy, medicine, literature, and even politics. Their continuing presence, although sometimes accompanied by political and religious restrictions, reflected both the structural dependence of the Islamic government upon their knowledge and skills and the relative flexibility of Umayyad religious policies when confronted with the social and administrative realities of an extensive empire.

Internal Transformations and the Institutional Position of the Iranian Church during the Umayyad Period

The expansion of the Islamic conquests and the collapse of the Sasanian political structure produced fundamental transformations in the lived world of Iranian Christians and their institutional organization. During this transitional period, ecclesiastical leaders, including bishops, priests, and monks, played a central role in managing interactions between Christian communities and Muslim authorities. Monasteries, more than any other institutions, functioned as strategic points of connection. They not only provided secure religious refuges for Christians in towns and villages but also facilitated the encampment and logistical support of Muslim armies because of their geographical locations. The administrative and social importance of monasteries was such that, even during the centuries following the conquests, caliphs and government officials used them as temporary residences. The central

role of these institutions in Islamic territories, particularly in the Sawad and Iraq, is clearly reflected in classical works such as Abu Yusuf's *Al-Kharaj* (32).

In terms of religious leadership, Catholicos Ishoʿyahb II of Gdala, who served from 628 to 646 CE, was responsible for guiding the Church of the East during the transitional period. He had previously acted as a representative of the Sasanian court in diplomatic relations with Byzantium during the reign of Queen Boran (11). He established his seat in Beth Garmai, corresponding approximately to modern Kirkuk. Although some Eastern Christian narratives refer to possible meetings between him and the Prophet Muhammad or Caliph ʿUmar, scholars seriously question the historical credibility of these claims because the region was conquered by Muslim forces only during ʿUmar's caliphate (11, 15). Under his leadership, however, episcopal centers such as Hulwan, Herat, and Samarkand were elevated in status, contributing significantly to the expansion and continuity of Christian missionary activity in Turkestan (11). Alongside political transformations, the Church continued to confront theological challenges and internal divisions. In 643 CE, the influence of emerging theological ideas derived from the Councils of Ephesus and Chalcedon and promoted by Bishop Sahdona affected the structure of the Church. This religious tendency became especially evident during the leadership of Mar Emmeh over the Iranian Church and following the synod held at the Monastery of Mar Shimun in 647 CE. Mar Emmeh, formerly bishop of Nineveh, occupied an intersection between politics and religion during the conquest of Mosul by accepting civil responsibilities such as provisioning Muslim forces (11). Although the precise date of his death remains uncertain, leadership of the Church subsequently passed to Ishoʿyahb III of Adiabene, who served from 649 to 659 CE (11).

The tenure of Ishoʿyahb III was accompanied by structural instability in the coastal regions of the Persian Gulf. The absence of ecclesiastical authorities from Church councils compelled him to dispatch the bishops of Hormizd-Ardashir and Shushtar to reorganize ecclesiastical affairs (11). Although churches within former Roman territories also confronted challenges arising from the conquests, the general approach of Muslim rulers, while seeking to manage tensions, allowed the Roman and Eastern Churches a degree of practical independence and institutional continuity.

Structural Transformations and the Leadership of the Church of the East during the Umayyad Period

The Umayyad caliphate was a period of institutional challenges and efforts to consolidate organizational unity within the Church of the East. With the accession of Giwargis I to the catholicosal throne, where he served from 660 to 680 CE, administrative centralization became the Church's principal priority. At a synod held on the island of Dayrin in 676 CE, he placed the dispersed churches of the Persian Gulf coast, including those of Dayrin, Tirhan, Mazun, Hajar, and al-Khatt, under the direct supervision of the metropolitan see of Rew-Ardashir in order to repair earlier organizational divisions (11). During the same period, scholarly activities flourished in regions such as Merv, where Bishop Elijah composed exegetical works on the Bible. After his death, however, the metropolitan see of Merv remained vacant for a period (11). In the political sphere, the Church was profoundly affected by changes in Umayyad administration. The intervention of al-Hajjaj ibn Yusuf in Iraq and his prohibition of the election of a catholicos created a leadership crisis that continued until the end of his governorship. Following a policy change under Yazid ibn ʿUqayl, Sliba-zkha was elevated to the catholicosate and served from 714 to 724 CE (11).

Following his death, factional competition between the bishops of Kaskar and al-Hira for the catholicosal office generated internal conflict that continued until the caliphate of Hisham ibn ʿAbd al-Malik and ultimately resulted in the election of Pethion. Relations between Umayyad officials and Christian institutions fluctuated during this period.

Khalid ibn ʿAbd Allah al-Qasri, governor of Kufa, supported Pethion's efforts to expand schools and monasteries (15), but this tolerance did not endure. Aba II, the final catholicos of the Umayyad period, was compelled by the harsh policies of Yusuf ibn ʿUmar to withdraw to the monastery of Wasit, where he died shortly before the transition to Abbasid rule (11). Despite political instability, the intellectual activities of the Church of the East did not cease. Educational and theological centers, associated with figures such as Isaac of Nineveh, Theodore, Babai of Savi, Jacob of Edessa, and Bishop Giwargis, continued to compose exegetical treatises and expand centers of learning. This activity demonstrates the dynamism of the Church's cultural institutions under the political constraints of Umayyad rule.

The External Sphere of Influence and Missionary Dynamism of the Iranian Church during the Umayyad Period

During the Umayyad caliphate, while the Church sought internally to adapt to the new political system, a substantial portion of the dynamism of the Church of the East was directed toward extending its religious influence beyond the eastern frontiers. This missionary process had originated in the final Sasanian period, but under Umayyad rule the political integration of the Islamic territories transformed it from a dispersed movement into a more systematically organized enterprise. Security and stability along commercial routes, particularly the Silk Road, created favorable conditions for Nestorian missionaries to penetrate Transoxiana, Turkestan, China, and India with greater ease (41). India constituted one of the principal centers of the missionary activity of the Iranian Church. Although Christian traditions emphasize the antiquity of Christian teachings in the subcontinent, the principal role in consolidating and expanding Christianity there is generally attributed to Nestorian missionaries, who intensified their activities following the institutional independence of the Iranian Church (41). Archaeological evidence, including inscriptions dating from approximately the fourth century CE in southern India and bearing crosses and Middle Persian texts, confirms the longstanding influence of the Church in regions such as Kerala, Travancore, and Alangad (42). Historical records, including the *Christian Topography* from the first half of the sixth century CE, likewise refer to the presence of Syriac bishops and Christian communities along the coasts of India and Sri Lanka (43).

Political developments in Iran and tensions between the Byzantine and Sasanian empires also stimulated collective Christian migrations eastward. These population movements increased the number of Iranian Christians in India and strengthened the supervision of the Church of Babylon over the Malabar region (41). The original nucleus of the Malabar Christian community had been formed through the migration of Christian families during the disturbances of the reign of Shapur II. Over time, these migrants acquired a strong social and economic position, transforming the community into a strategic base for Nestorian missionaries. Consequently, during the seventh century CE, specialized missionaries were dispatched from the Iranian Church to expand missionary activities systematically in these regions, demonstrating the continuing organizational power of the Church of the East during the transition from the Sasanian to the Islamic order.

Confrontation with Islamic Rule and Christian Responses to Opposition Movements

The entry of Islamic forces into Iran confronted Christians with a new paradigm of governance. Their responses may be analyzed at two levels: adaptation for survival and sporadic resistance. In contrast with the instability experienced during the Sasanian period, Christian life under the new authority, although accompanied by profound structural changes, was characterized by relatively greater stability. The strategic priority of most Christian

communities was therefore to ensure institutional survival and to accept the new order to a considerable degree (44). Groups that adopted a confrontational approach were generally removed from the region's political life either through physical elimination or migration to Christian territories. Relations between Islamic rulers and Christians under the category of the People of the Book ranged from tolerance to occasional severity. Nevertheless, the geographical dispersion of Christian populations and their long tradition of minority existence and social isolation prevented the formation of a unified and coherent movement against the government. Structural differences between the circumstances of Christians in Iran and those in the predominantly Christian centers of Syria similarly prevented the emergence of a homogeneous response across the Islamic territories.

Historical analysis nevertheless indicates that, during critical periods marked by changes in religious policy and temporary restrictions against minorities or recent converts, some Christian communities indirectly aligned themselves with opposition movements. The earliest indications of such disobedience are found in reports concerning the cooperation of certain Christians with opponents of the government during the caliphate of ʿAli, particularly groups such as the Banu Najiya and Khirrit ibn Rashid. These reports suggest the existence of a politically active current among Iranian Christians. During the second half of the seventh century CE, no significant pattern of alignment is apparent because most uprisings were predominantly Zoroastrian in character and were geographically distant from major Christian communities. By the late seventh century CE, however, political interactions with opposition movements intensified. During the uprising of Salih ibn Musarrih al-Tamimi in strategically important Christian-populated regions such as Dara, Nisibis, and Sinjar, the connection between political unrest and Christian communities became increasingly visible (45). This pattern became even more apparent during the rebellion of Shabib ibn Yazid. His extensive conflicts with the forces of al-Hajjaj, extending from Kufa to Azerbaijan, and his tolerant approach toward Christians, particularly in Azerbaijan, encouraged these communities to seek refuge with and strategically align themselves with the opposition movement (46). This pattern indicates that Christian alignment with opposition groups was not necessarily founded upon religious ideology but was more commonly based on political interests and responses to changes in governmental treatment of minorities.

Within the political context of the Umayyad period, relations between Christians and opposition groups, particularly the Kharijites, ranged from tolerant interaction to ideological hostility. On the one hand, certain early Kharijite movements distinguished between Muslim political opponents and Christian *dhimmis*. This distinction was apparent at Nahrawan, where the life of a Christian companion was protected on the basis of the principles of *dhimma*, and in reports concerning the protection of Christian property rights. A prominent example of this association was the encampment of Shabib ibn Yazid and his followers in a monastery on the road to Ctesiphon during their siege by Khalid ibn ʿAttab (47). Shabib's tolerant approach, particularly in Azerbaijan, not only encouraged Christians to seek refuge with him but also highlighted his role in protecting these communities amid political turmoil. Conversely, certain elements within opposition movements adopted a hostile attitude toward the visible presence of Christians in public space. Ibn Muljam, the assassin of ʿAli, reacted violently to the funeral procession of a Christian notable in the market of Kufa. His declaration that he wished to destroy those participating in the presence of priests and Christian ceremonies reveals the intensity of hostility among some radical movements toward the visible participation of Christians in Islamic society (18, 33).

Historically, the Iranian Church had been viewed by Sasanian political authority as a potentially oppositional religious and political force because of its transregional connections with Rome and Armenia. Following the collapse of the Sasanian Empire and the fall of Ctesiphon, however, the Church entered a new environment. Under Islamic

rule, its strategy became focused on preserving its institutional structure and maintaining peaceful relations with the government. Although the circumstances of Christians in Iran differed from those of Christians in Syria—who possessed a more firmly established position because of their proximity to Byzantium and the longstanding Christian character of the region—the general framework of relations based on Islamic teachings and the Prophetic tradition provided a relatively stable environment for the continuation of Christian religious life. Within the Umayyad power structure, the position of Christians was dual. Whereas the majority of Christians generally occupied a middle social and economic position, Christian elites obtained strategically important offices within the administration because of their specialized expertise in medicine, secretarial work, and fiscal affairs. The active participation of Christian elites in scientific and administrative fields not only consolidated their position in the formulation of Umayyad domestic and foreign policy but also enabled them to contribute effectively to the continuation of cultural and administrative traditions during the transitional period.

Conclusion

An examination of the status of Iranian Christians from the beginning of the Islamic conquests to the end of the Umayyad period demonstrates that this religious community experienced one of the most sensitive periods in its history. Christians, who had already maintained an active presence within the political, social, and religious structures of Sasanian Iran, entered a new phase of power relations with the arrival of the Muslims. On the one hand, they experienced a decline in their former political position; on the other, the new Islamic order provided a framework within which their religious and social existence could continue. During the Sasanian period, despite religious restrictions and pressures, Christians formed part of the social fabric of Iran, while considerable diversity and competition existed among the different branches of Christianity. The Muslim conquests transformed these circumstances, and Christian-populated regions were directly affected by political, military, and administrative changes. The position of Christians consequently changed from that of a minority periodically subjected to pressure under the Sasanian state to that of a *dhimmi* minority within the structure of the Islamic caliphate. Although this status involved legal and social restrictions, it provided greater stability for the continuation of Christian religious existence than had been available during certain earlier periods. Islamic laws and, subsequently, the policies of the Umayyad caliphs played a major role in defining the status of Christians. During this period, the payment of *jizya*, restrictions on access to certain offices, and the supervision of religious activities were among the most important factors affecting their political and social lives. Nevertheless, differences in the policies of local governors and Umayyad rulers meant that Christian circumstances were not uniform across all regions. In some areas, Christians were able to engage in interaction and accommodation and even to participate, on a limited basis, in administrative and cultural activities. The Iranian Church also underwent important internal and external transformations during this period. Internally, its clerical and institutional organization was modified in order to adapt to new circumstances. Externally, its relations with Christian centers outside Iran and with the governing political authority played a decisive role in its survival. Religious and political opposition movements likewise sometimes created greater difficulties for Christians and at other times offered them expanded opportunities for political action. Overall, the history of Iranian Christians from the advent of Islam to the end of the Umayyad period was a history of transition, adaptation, and the redefinition of their position within a new political order. They were neither entirely eliminated from the social sphere nor able to preserve their former position. Instead, they continued their communal life within a new

framework while maintaining their religious identity. This process contributed to the formation of a distinctive pattern of religious coexistence in Islamic Iran, the effects of which remained visible in subsequent periods.

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All authors equally contributed to this study.

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Transparency of Data

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