Study of the Factors Shaping the Daʿwah System in the Fatimid and Abbasid Dynasties

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ABSTRACT

The present study seeks to reinterpret and explain four key factors that shaped the Daʿwah system (Ismaʿili and Abbasid missionary systems): ideology, organizational structure, geographical context, and the role of elites. First, doctrinal foundations—particularly the Imamate-centered teachings among the Fatimids and the Abbasids' legitimization through slogans of justice and the transfer of power from the Umayyads—served as the preconditions for the emergence of politico-religious Daʿwah systems. Then, the organizational structure of the Daʿwah system was established through the use of networks of secret missionaries (duʿāt), hierarchical epistemic systems, and collaboration with tribes and local elites. The geographical context also played a crucial role; the Abbasids, by focusing on Khurasan and Kufa, were able to ignite the early flames of Daʿwah, while the Fatimids, through their conquest of North Africa and Egypt, leveraged the strategic potential of geography to expand their mission. The role of elites and social classes—especially judges, scholars, Berber tribes, and Iranians—was highly influential in attracting followers, consolidating legitimacy, and strengthening the Daʿwah system of both dynasties. The present study demonstrates that although both systems shared similar ideological and organizational features, differences in epistemic structure, engagement with elites, and geographical positioning led each to develop its own distinctive path and character. By integrating these four dimensions, this research identifies the Daʿwah system as a multidimensional instrument for political legitimization, social mobilization, and governance stability, emphasizing its functional transformation beyond mere missionary activity.

Keywords: *Fatimids, Abbasids, Daʿwah system, missionaries (duʿāt)*

Introduction

The *Daʿwah* (missionary and proselytizing) system constitutes one of the fundamental components of legitimizing political authority in Islamic societies. Since the earliest days of the Muslim community, *Daʿwah* has functioned not only as a religious duty based on Qur'anic teachings but also as a strategic instrument for cultural influence, the consolidation of political authority, and the response to legitimacy challenges (1). The Qur'anic verses of Āl ʿImrān (3:164) and al-Naḥl (16:125), emphasizing the call to goodness and wisdom, highlight the foundational status of the *Daʿwah* system in structuring the relationship between religion and society. From the dawn of Islam, classical chronicles such as *Tārīkh al-Ṭabarī* (2), which describes the Prophet's missionary organization in Mecca and

Medina, and al-Masʿūdī's *Meadows of Gold* (3), which underscores the role of preaching in the expansion of the Muslim community, have portrayed *Daʿwah* as a dynamic model for the interaction between religion and power. Likewise, Ibn Khaldūn in his *Book of Lessons* (4), through sociological analysis, identified *Daʿwah* as an *ʿasabiyyah* (group solidarity) factor facilitating social cohesion and power transfer, revealing the historical depth of the concept.

Historical evidence shows that the application of the *Daʿwah* system varied across contexts, influenced by variables such as ideology, governmental structure, geography, and demographic composition—from the covert missionary activities of the Umayyads to consolidate the caliphate (2), to the Shiʿi movements opposing it. Among these, the Abbasid and Fatimid caliphates stand out as two prominent and contrasting politico-religious experiences in Islamic history. Each reconstructed its *Daʿwah* system according to its ideological foundation, audience, and sociopolitical circumstances (1, 5). The Abbasids, emerging from the *Daʿwah* movement against the Umayyads, established their legitimacy through a bureaucratic-religious structure, the patronage of Sunni scholars, and influence within mosques and educational institutions, redefining authority through the discourse of "support for Ahl al-Sunnah" (2, 3). Abū Muslim al-Khurāsānī, as a key missionary, organized clandestine networks in Khurasan (6), linking the caliphate with religious institutions to counter intellectual and political rivals. Ibn Khaldūn also interpreted this as an example of power transfer through tribal-religious *ʿasabiyyah* (4).

In contrast, the Fatimids, as representatives of the Ismaʿili Shiʿa, developed a distinct ideological model based on the principles of Imamate, gradual teaching, and the guardianship of the Imams, using an organized missionary network and establishing *Dār al-ʿIlm* institutions (7). Al-Maqrīzī, in *al-Khiṭaṭ wa al-Āthār* and *al-Ittiʿāẓ al-Ḥunafāʾ* (8), described in detail the role of Abū ʿAbd Allāh al-Shīʿī in the Maghrebi *Daʿwah* and the hierarchical organization of missionaries, while Ibn Taghrī Birdī in *al-Nujūm al-Zāhira* emphasized tools such as philosophy, debate, rhetoric, and religious art and architecture in promoting esoteric beliefs (9). This system transformed *Daʿwah* into a mechanism for integrating Berber tribes and expanding across North Africa; Ibn Khaldūn (4) viewed it as both an ideological challenge to the Abbasids and a driver of religious diversity within Islamic civilization.

Given these distinctive experiences, the central question of this study is: which factors—ideological, organizational, geographical, and elitist—shaped and structured the *Daʿwah* systems of the Abbasid and Fatimid caliphates, and to what extent did they differ in their objectives, structures, persuasive strategies, and audience orientation? This question holds historical and analytical significance since both caliphates employed *Daʿwah* as a form of "soft power" (1, 10). As reported by al-Ṭabarī (2) and al-Maqrīzī (8), each used *Daʿwah* as a response to sectarian threats, converting religious propaganda into a political instrument.

The use of soft power in these caliphates exemplifies the transformation of *Daʿwah* from a spiritual act into a political mechanism within religious governance—a process that emerged as a response to internal (religious-ethnic diversity) and external (political rivalry) challenges (11, 12). Al-Masʿūdī (3) and Ibn Taghrī Birdī (9) also highlighted this evolution, noting how *Daʿwah* shifted from spiritual exhortation to an instrument of intellectual hegemony. Despite its historical importance, previous studies have often remained limited to unilateral historical narratives—such as al-Ṭabarī's event-centered approach—or have lacked comparative, theory-driven, and structural perspectives. The absence of comparative studies—especially on the factors influencing the formation of these systems, their institutional structures, methods of religious persuasion, interaction with minorities, and use of cultural-intellectual tools—reveals a significant research gap (13).

For instance, the differing functions of the Fatimid *Dār al-ʿIlm* (8) and Abbasid religious schools (3), or the contrast between Fatimid *duʿāt* and Abbasid preachers (9), raise fundamental questions about proselytization strategies and

their role in shaping Islamic religious politics (7). The present study, therefore, adopts a historical-analytical and document-based methodology—drawing on classical sources such as al-Ṭabarī, al-Masʿūdī, Ibn Khaldūn, al-Maqrīzī, and Ibn Taghrī Birdī, along with modern scholarship—to systematically analyze the ideological, structural, geographic, and elitist dimensions of *Daʿwah* as an instrument of power.

The hypothesis posits that in both caliphates, *Daʿwah* functioned beyond a purely religious-spiritual framework, operating as a strategic mechanism for political objectives, cultural influence, religious legitimacy, and the containment of identity and social crises. This hypothesis, tested through a multilevel analysis, moves from descriptive accounts toward theoretical innovation. The theoretical framework builds on the concept of *soft power* (14), which encourages governments to rely not only on hard (military or economic) power but also on cultural appeal, value-based persuasion, moral legitimacy, and ideological capacity to achieve intellectual hegemony and political stability—an idea prefigured in Ibn Khaldūn's sociological insights (4).

Seyyab Ali Navab (15) analyzed the relationship between historiography and power within the Ismaʿili discourse, demonstrating that the Fatimid *Daʿwah* system—rooted in Ismaʿili thought and Imam-centered ideology—developed a distinct framework compared to traditional historiography. Similarly, Sajjad Dadfar and colleagues (16) investigated Fatimid interactions with the Byzantine Empire in the Levant, showing how the Fatimids employed a combination of *Daʿwah*, diplomacy, and warfare to expand their political legitimacy.

Zeinab Afzali (17) specifically examined the Abbasid-Fatimid confrontation and analyzed the political and military responses of the Abbasids to the Fatimid *Daʿwah*, revealing their defensive or antagonistic stances. ʿAbdullah Naseri Taheri (18) highlighted the organizational, hierarchical, and symbolic mechanisms of the Fatimid Ismaʿili *Daʿwah* and contrasted them with the Abbasids' reliance on popular religious legitimacy and advocacy of justice.

Earlier comparative works, such as those by Sharifi et al. and Armandeh (19), have contrasted the political and religious aims of the two *Daʿwah* systems, noting that while both shared structural principles—secrecy, hierarchical order, and absolute obedience—the Abbasids emphasized political consolidation, whereas the Ismaʿilis prioritized doctrinal propagation alongside political aims. In contrast, the present study focuses on the four formative factors—ideology, organizational structure, geography, and elite networks—analyzing *Daʿwah* as a multidimensional instrument for political legitimization and governance stability.

Siavash Yari (20) explored the regional religious-political dynamics of Fatimid and Abbasid *Daʿwah* across Central Asia and India, showing its role in spreading Shiʿi orientations to distant regions. Mohammad Ali Cholongar (21) compared Fatimid religious policies in the Maghreb and Egypt, showing how regional variations shaped their *Daʿwah* system. Arezou Armandeh (19) examined the organizational mechanisms of Abbasid *Daʿwah* and its role in achieving caliphal power, while Shahin Pahna Dayyan (22) analyzed internal and external factors behind the formation and decline of the Fatimid *Daʿwah*.

Mohammad Amir Sheikh Nouri (23) emphasized the Abbasid-Fatimid competition in the spread of Islam across Central Asia, illustrating how each leveraged local political and religious structures. Heinz Halm (24) in *The Empire of the Mahdi: The Rise of the Fatimids*, argued that the Fatimids' success in establishing a rival caliphate to the Abbasids was due to their cohesive, hierarchical missionary organization grounded in deep doctrinal education and clandestine strategies—an efficient political instrument for state formation across territories under Abbasid influence.

Likewise, Margaret Thalarsinger (25) in *Cults in Our Midst* analyzed missionary recruitment as a psychological and social process, offering an interpretive framework applicable to both Fatimid and Abbasid *Daʿwah* structures.

Together, these studies illuminate the multifaceted nature of *Daʿwah* in Islamic polities, particularly during the Fatimid and Abbasid eras. The present study's four-level analytical framework—ideology, structure, geography, and elites—provides a systematic model for understanding the dynamics of power within Islamic governance. The findings indicate that differences in legitimacy models between the two caliphates directly influenced their institutional mechanisms of *Daʿwah*, transforming their spatial and political dynamics: the Fatimids' territorial expansion across North Africa, Egypt, and Yemen contrasted with the Abbasids' centralized diffusion of authority from Iraq and Khurasan. These divergences also reveal the varying roles of nonreligious elites—such as Berber military commanders and Persian bureaucrats—in consolidating ideological hegemony and political stability.

Examining the Factors Behind the Formation of the Abbasid *Daʿwah* System

The Abbasids, as the descendants of al-ʿAbbās b. ʿAbd al-Muṭṭalib—the Prophet's uncle—represented a branch of the Banū Hāshim and grounded their legitimacy in kinship with the Prophet. Al-Ṭabarī's *History of Prophets and Kings* describes this genealogy as the basis for the Hāshimite claim, while Ibn Khaldūn's *Book of Lessons* interprets it as a form of tribal–religious *ʿasabiyyah* that enabled the transfer of power from the Umayyads (2, 4). According to al-Masʿūdī's *Meadows of Gold*, the Abbasid *Daʿwah* was a deep, organized, and ideological effort to establish a new political order on the foundation of widespread discontent with Umayyad discrimination, where the deliberately vague yet encompassing slogan "al-riḍā min Āl Muḥammad" mobilized Shiʿis, social malcontents, and political groups alike (3, 4). Analytically, this intentional ambiguity not only facilitated covert penetration but also transformed *Daʿwah* from a purely religious movement into a multilayered instrument for assembling temporary coalitions—an early form of soft power in Islamic history that, through ideological ambiguity, created political flexibility to outmaneuver rivals without imposing long-term commitments.

The Abbasid movement took root in broad discontents born of Umayyad social, economic, and religious discrimination. Balʿamī's chronicle portrays these grievances as the backdrop to eastern uprisings, while al-Ṭabarī emphasizes their role in mass mobilization (2, 6). Drawing on a justice-oriented discourse and the revival of Prophetic tradition—highlighted by al-Masʿūdī in accounts of the Khurasani uprising—the Abbasids converted public discontent into ideological support and used it as a popular foundation for their *Daʿwah* (3, 23). From a sociological perspective, *Daʿwah* functioned as a social catalyst: the justice discourse not only channeled grievances but, by linking them to Prophetic precedent, translated religious legitimacy into a tool for temporarily uniting diverse strata (from Shiʿis to Iranians), a pattern that—compared with ʿAlid movements—stressed practical inclusivity and paved the way for political success.

The Abbasid *Daʿwah* initially formed covertly with a precise organizational structure in regions such as Khurasan. Ibn Khaldūn identifies Khurasan's ethnic diversity and social instability as an ideal environment for peripheral movements, where missionaries expanded influence through clandestine networks and confidential communications (4). Al-Ṭabarī underscores the pivotal role of Abū Muslim al-Khurāsānī in consolidating this structure, transforming the *Daʿwah* from secrecy to operational action by organizing the *Siyāh-Jāmagān* and building social bases among the populace (2, 22). Analytically, this hierarchical design not only safeguarded the *Daʿwah* but, by leveraging local elites, provided geographic flexibility; it may be read as an organizational innovation that, by combining *taqiyya* and ethnic mobilization, elevated the model from pure ideology to a hybrid religious–military system resilient under Umayyad repression.

With the death of Ibrāhīm al-Imām and the transfer of leadership to Abū al-ʿAbbās al-Saffāḥ, the Abbasid *Daʿwah* became overt. Al-Masʿūdī depicts the uprising in Kufa and the victory at the Battle of the Zab as a turning point in the Umayyads' collapse and the establishment of the Abbasid caliphate, where Abbasid forces secured advantage through riverine tactics (3). Balʿamī highlights this transition as the decisive moment of ideological disclosure, marking a passage from secrecy to mass mobilization (6). Strategically, the timing reflected risk management: anchored in prepared bases, the shift to open action converted a sectarian movement into a broad revolution, preserving the ideological core against early deviations and helping to sustain the caliphate.

Geographically and ethnically, the Abbasid *Daʿwah* displayed precise coordination. Al-Ṭabarī identifies Ḥumayma (as the locus of intellectual and organizational formation), Kufa (as the center of revolutionaries and political circles), and Khurasan (as the link to disaffected masses and military power) as key bases leveraged for political ends (2). Ibn Khaldūn attributes the uprising's success to the prominent presence of Iranians—especially in Khurasan—who later became pillars of the caliphal administration, while modern historiography of the Abbasid state underlines similar dynamics (4, 26). From a socio-spatial perspective, this coordination not only eased logistics but also converted ethnic diversity into a strategic asset; it functioned as a spatial strategy that, by distributing bases, reduced concentrated risk and moved Iranian elites from the periphery to the core of power, consolidating an eastern hegemony vis-à-vis western rivals.

With the establishment of the Abbasid caliphate in 749–750 CE and the accession of Abū al-ʿAbbās al-Saffāḥ, the *Daʿwah* entered a phase of political consolidation. The *History of Yaʿqūbī* depicts the choice of Kufa and then Baghdad as an effort to craft an independent identity, while al-Manṣūr's founding of Baghdad and institutions such as the *Bayt al-Ḥikma* fortified the caliphate's scientific and cultural standing (27). Al-Masʿūdī emphasizes the Abbasids' appropriation of Iranian and Greek scholarly traditions and their attraction of figures like al-Khwārizmī, al-Rāzī, and Ibn Sīnā, turning the caliphate into a center of learning and Islamic civilization (3, 22). Institutionally and culturally, these measures transformed *Daʿwah* from mere stabilization into an instrument of intellectual hegemony: the *Bayt al-Ḥikma*, by integrating eastern and western sciences, reconstructed ideological legitimacy through scientific innovation and bridged ethnic cleavages with a civilizational discourse, contributing to the caliphate's longevity.

As reported by al-Ṭabarī, these steps not only consolidated Abbasid legitimacy but also expanded their intellectual and cultural influence; yet, after entrenching power, early justice-oriented promises waned, and supporting constituencies—especially Shiʿis—gradually distanced themselves and became opponents (2). Balʿamī and Ibn Khaldūn read this drift from the founding discourse toward centralization, repression of dissent, and the prioritization of political interest over ideological ideals as a source of fissures within the Islamic community, while modern scholarship on Abbasid–Fatimid contention documents the deepening sectarian polarization (4, 6, 17). From a critical standpoint, this turn illustrates a structural paradox of *Daʿwah*-based regimes: early repression erodes social cohesion and seeds sectarian challenges (e.g., ʿAlid oppositions), offering a cautionary lesson for polities grounded in temporary coalitions.

By exploiting social and religious grievances through covert structures, the Abbasids amassed considerable political power. Al-Masʿūdī credits this success to organized networks, but the gradual departure from justice-based values and the focus on political interest reduced ideological legitimacy. Al-Ṭabarī and Ibn Khaldūn take this as evidence of the need for political flexibility and responsiveness to followers' demands within *Daʿwah* systems; neglect yields profound religious–political cleavages and structural fragility (2-4). Ultimately, analytically viewed, the

Abbasid experience offers a dual model: success in mobilization through inclusive ideology, followed by decline due to imbalance between hard and soft power. The implication is that the sustainability of *Daʿwah* requires the continual reconstruction of legitimacy through social accountability, not institution-building alone.

Examining the Factors Behind the Formation of the Fatimid *Daʿwah* System

The Fatimid *Daʿwah* system, a complex and hierarchical structure, was founded on the Ismaʿili religious ideology emphasizing divine Imamate and the ʿAlid lineage of the Imams. This ideology, as articulated by Qāḍī al-Nuʿmān in *Iftitāḥ al-Daʿwah*, described the Imamate as divinely ordained and as an inheritance of prophetic authority, ensuring religious legitimacy while simultaneously transforming *Daʿwah* into an ideological challenge to the Abbasid caliphate. Opposition to the Imam was thus equated with denial of religious truth, fostering unconditional loyalty (28, 29). Unlike the Abbasid propaganda, which rested on historical legitimacy, the Fatimid system emphasized secrecy, gradual recruitment, and deep doctrinal education. Al-Maqrīzī in *al-Khiṭaṭ wa al-Āthār* underscores this distinction, emphasizing the role of the *Dāʿī al-Duʿāt* (chief missionary) as supervisor of the missionary hierarchy, where each *dāʿī* was not merely a preacher but also bore political, informational, and educational responsibilities (8).

From a sociological standpoint, this hierarchical structure—grounded in the esoteric concepts of *bāṭin* (inner meaning), allegorical interpretation (*taʾwīl*), and *taqiyya* (religious dissimulation)—fortified the caliphate's political legitimacy. Ibn Khaldūn regarded these mechanisms as factors fostering sectarian cohesion under external pressure (4). Consequently, the Imam emerged as an infallible leader and exclusive interpreter of religion, with state institutions operating under his directive to expand the *Daʿwah* and consolidate sovereignty. Analytically, this reveals that the Fatimid system transcended mere religious preaching, evolving into an apparatus of ideological hegemony.

Geographically, the Fatimid *Daʿwah* extended from the Maghreb to Egypt, Syria, Yemen, India, and Transoxiana, grounded in a cohesive and clandestine network. Ibn al-Athīr in *al-Kāmil fī al-Tārīkh* describes this expansion as a strategic response to Abbasid weakness on the peripheries, while travel accounts—such as that of Nāṣir Khusraw cited by al-Maqrīzī—highlight the role of missionaries in disseminating esoteric doctrine in distant regions (8). From a geopolitical perspective, this dispersion generated strategic opportunities but also challenges related to ethnic diversity. *Taqiyya*, as a flexible instrument, allowed for interaction with varied communities and became a soft-power model centered on ideological persuasion rather than coercion—contrasting with the Abbasids' geographic concentration in Iraq and Khurasan and demonstrating the Fatimids' superiority in cultural influence (1, 13).

Socially and historically, the Fatimid *Daʿwah* found its firmest foothold in North Africa, particularly among Berber tribes dissatisfied with Abbasid rule. Al-Maqrīzī in *al-Ittiʿāẓ al-Ḥunafāʾ* attributed this to economic grievances, religious discrimination, and devotion to the Prophet's family, highlighting the role of Abū ʿAbd Allāh al-Shīʿī in organizing the Kutāma tribes and moving the *Daʿwah* from secrecy to public action (8). Ibn Taghrī Birdī in *al-Nujūm al-Zāhira* analyzed this recruitment as the catalyst for the conquest of the Maghreb (9). From an analytical standpoint, this underscores the pivotal role of local elites—especially the Berber tribes—in consolidating the system. By fusing Shiʿi ideology with social demands, the Fatimid *Daʿwah* became a vehicle for mobilizing marginalized classes, contrasting with the Abbasid reliance on eastern discontent, and thereby established a western–Maghrebi-centered model that ensured the caliphate's relative stability for nearly two centuries (18, 30).

The conquest of Egypt in 969 CE by Jawhar al-Ṣiqillī marked a turning point in consolidating the *Daʿwah* system. Ibn al-Athīr described this as a geographic expansion, while al-Maqrīzī emphasized the founding of Cairo and al-

Azhar as institutions for doctrinal education and political legitimation (8). Analytically, al-Azhar represented not only a missionary center but also a symbol of *Daʿwah's* transformation from clandestine activity to official institution. The present analysis interprets this as the functional evolution of *Daʿwah*—from an ideological resistance tool against the Abbasids to a pillar of territorial expansion and the construction of an independent Shiʿi identity. This shift, coupled with the role of elites such as Ismaʿili judges and scholars, distinguished the Fatimids from the Abbasids, who relied on Sunni ʿulamāʾ, and demonstrated how cultural persuasion sustained political stability (5, 15).

Beyond its religious essence, the Fatimid *Daʿwah* functioned as a principal instrument of political legitimacy, territorial expansion, and resistance against the Abbasids. Ibn Khaldūn viewed this rivalry as a sectarian challenge in Islamic history, where the Fatimids, by proposing an alternative model of politico-religious leadership, contributed significantly to Islamic pluralism (4). Yet internal crises—such as droughts, famines, and economic pressures, noted by al-Maqrīzī—combined with Sunni–Shiʿi rivalries, eroded cohesion (8). Analytically, these challenges expose the limitations of Fatimid ideological rigidity: an overemphasis on Imam-centered doctrine, without social adaptability, led to decline in the 12th century with the Ayyubid conquest under Ṣalāḥ al-Dīn. This outcome, contrasted with the Abbasids' relative endurance through bureaucratic flexibility, offers a historical lesson for *Daʿwah*-based governance—emphasizing the need to balance ideology with political adaptability (11, 16).

Ultimately, the Fatimid *Daʿwah* system—anchored in exclusive Shiʿi ideology, hierarchical missionary organization, broad geographic reach, and the participation of religious–military elites—created a formidable caliphate that rivaled the Abbasids. Ibn Taghrī Birdī attributed its fall to internal causes, yet analytical interpretation suggests that the Fatimids' initial success stemmed from the synthesis of doctrinal faith with geographic strategy, while their downfall resulted from the failure to adjust to social transformations (9, 24). This view positions the *Daʿwah* system not merely as a historical phenomenon but as an enduring analytical model for understanding the dynamics of power and legitimacy in both classical and contemporary Islamic societies (1, 25).

Comparative Analysis: Ideology, Organizational Structure, Geography, Role of Elites

The ideology of the Fatimid caliphate was shaped around Ismaʿili doctrines, which regarded the Imamate as a divine and exclusive endowment to the progeny of ʿAlī b. Abī Ṭālib and his descendants. In this view, the Imam was not only the religious leader but also the legitimate political sovereign of the Islamic community, endowed with infallibility and divinely ordained authority. This ideology emphasized the principle of divine sovereignty and portrayed the Abbasid caliphate as an usurping government devoid of religious legitimacy. Accordingly, the Fatimid *Daʿwah* became an instrument for restoring the right of the Prophet's Household and consolidating the political and religious status of the Imam (17, 18). By contrast, the Abbasid caliphate grounded its legitimacy in historical succession, affiliation with the Banū Hāshim, and the defense of Ahl al-Sunnah, viewing the caliphate as a political institution legitimated through *bayʿa* and public consent. Within the framework of Sunni jurisprudence, the Abbasids presented the caliphate as a product of the community's consensus rather than divine appointment. Thus, Abbasid ideology was more political and integrative, with less theological exclusivity, focusing on establishing order and continuity with the early Islamic political tradition rather than proving the Imamate of an infallible leader (17, 20). This fundamental divergence rendered the Fatimid *Daʿwah* a revolutionary and structure-disrupting movement vis-à-vis the Abbasid order (22).

Structurally, the Fatimid system centered on the Imam and a hierarchical *Daʿwah*. The *duʿāt* (missionaries) were the system's key agents who, beyond propagating Ismaʿili beliefs, also performed political, educational, and

informational roles. This organized, tiered network enabled the Imam to exercise effective control over distant regions and varied communities through appointed representatives. The Fatimid *Daʿwah* structure rested on *taqiyya*, the coded transmission of concepts, and covert organizational practices (17, 18). By contrast, the Abbasid caliphate operated through centralized bureaucracy, a professional army, and multiple ministries. The Abbasid apparatus assigned little formal place to a *Daʿwah* institution; its legitimacy was largely secured via Sunni juridical, judicial, and educational institutions. Hence, although administratively advanced, the Abbasid structure lacked the Fatimid system's ideological cohesion (22).

Geographically, the two caliphates prioritized different regions. The Fatimids launched their *Daʿwah* from North Africa—especially Qayrawān—and, after conquering Egypt, transformed Cairo into the caliphal center. Their missionary reach extended to Syria, Mediterranean littorals, Yemen, and at times parts of India. Operating across ethnically and confessionally diverse regions compelled the Fatimids to adopt flexible, engagement-oriented policies, such that relations with Berbers, Turks, and even Christians reflected a tolerance-inflected and functionally political approach to *Daʿwah* (17). The Abbasids, by contrast, were primarily concentrated in Iraq, western Iran, and the broader Middle East. Baghdad served as the principal capital, and their social base consisted largely of Sunni strata, Persian bureaucrats, and Arab tribes in Iraq and Syria. Differences in geographic environment, demographic diversity, and social bases shaped distinct political and religious interactions in the two caliphates (22).

Elites in the Fatimid system included viziers, *duʿāt*, military commanders, and Ismaʿili scholars who actively governed; in periods when caliphs were weak or underage, certain viziers or commanders effectively wielded power, a situation that fueled internal rivalries and weakened the structure in the later period (17, 18). In the Abbasid caliphate, elites comprised scholars, jurists, judges, soldiers, and administrators, with Sunni scholars and jurists playing a particularly salient role in legitimizing the caliphate. Operating within a formal bureaucracy and Sunni legal order, Abbasid elites imparted greater cohesion and stability to the caliphal apparatus (20, 22).

It follows that the Fatimid *Daʿwah* system combined exclusive Shiʿi ideology, a hierarchical religious–missionary structure, broad geographic dispersion, and active participation by religious and military elites, whereas the Abbasids preserved dominion over vast territories through historical legitimacy, a powerful bureaucratic structure, and the support of Sunni scholars. These differences, together with internal and external factors, generated politico-religious rivalry between the two caliphates that ultimately weakened the Fatimids and reinforced the Abbasids. This comparison reveals the diversity and complexity of Islamic caliphal systems and the central role of ideology, structure, geography, and elites in the rise and collapse of governments (17, 22).

Comparing the Fatimid and Abbasid systems shows that religious ideology and the articulation of political legitimacy were decisive in shaping their governmental structures. Based on Ismaʿili doctrine, the Fatimid caliphate construed the Imamate as a divinely appointed and exclusive office for the family of ʿAlī b. Abī Ṭālib, elevating it beyond a merely political caliphate through divine appointment and infallibility. This directly tethered Fatimid legitimacy to the realms of revelation and theology, turning the *Daʿwah* into an instrument for entrenching this legitimacy and countering Abbasid rule. Conversely, the Abbasids defined legitimacy through Hāshimite lineage, popular *bayʿa*, and social acceptance within Sunni jurisprudence, treating the caliphate as a political–social institution deriving legitimacy from the community's consensus. This ideological divergence explains the profound differences in their approaches to religious politics, public engagement, and the interpretation of divine governance.

Structurally, the Fatimid state, grounded in a precise missionary hierarchy, covert organization, and specialized cadres such as the *duʿāt*, developed its distinctive administrative and propagational apparatus. By focusing on the

instruction of Ismaʿili doctrines, deploying clandestine methods such as *taqiyya*, and maintaining dedicated communication systems, this structure enabled the Imam to control vast territories. The Abbasids, in contrast, relied on centralized bureaucracy, a standing army, and expansive juridical and judicial institutions supported by Sunni scholars. They consolidated legitimacy and authority through formal institutions and the participation of Sunni social and intellectual classes. This contrast in power architecture reflects two modes of political management: one centered on ideology and missionary networks, the other on administrative order, legal institutionalism, and bureaucratic consolidation.

Socially and geographically, the Fatimids began in North Africa and, after founding Cairo, extended influence to Egypt, Syria, Yemen, and parts of India. This dispersion—often encompassing religiously and ethnically diverse communities—necessitated policies of forbearance and engagement with minorities. The Abbasids, by concentrating on Iraq and the Middle East and relying on Arab and Persian elites and Sunni social strata, forged greater structural cohesion at the imperial center. In both caliphates, elites were pivotal in strengthening or weakening the system. In the Fatimid order, although viziers and *duʿāt* played active roles in governance, periods of caliphal weakness saw elite rivalries produce fragmentation and the decline of central authority. The Abbasids, leaning on Sunni scholars, nurtured an intellectual cohesion and institutional durability that afforded the caliphate relatively greater longevity. Ultimately, this comparison shows that the interplay among ideology, administrative structure, geographic reach, and elite social bases decisively shapes the endurance or demise of an Islamic government, and that imbalance among these components—despite religious legitimacy or military power—can precipitate collapse.

Conclusion

The *Daʿwah* and missionary system in Islamic societies functioned beyond a devotional duty rooted in Qurʾānic teachings—it operated as a strategic mechanism for political legitimation and as a response to identity crises. In this respect, the Abbasid and Fatimid caliphates, as two prominent yet opposing experiences in the political–religious history of Islam, reconstructed the *Daʿwah* system based on distinct ideological foundations. The Abbasids, through a religious bureaucracy, the support of Sunni scholars, and influence within institutions such as mosques and schools, redefined legitimacy via affiliation with Ahl al-Sunnah, whereas the Fatimids, through hierarchical networks of missionaries, *Dār al-ʿIlm* academies, and the use of tools such as philosophy, disputation, and religious art, presented an Imam-centered and esoteric model. Analytically, these two systems illustrated the transformation of religious propagation into soft power, where their discursive and political rivalry not only addressed the religious–social challenges of their time—such as ethnic and sectarian diversity—but also enriched the civilizational dynamics of Islam through ideological and cultural persuasion. The present research interprets this transformation within a multilayered framework—ideology, structure, geography, and elites—filling the gap left by earlier one-dimensional studies and emphasizing a historically analytical approach grounded in both classical and contemporary documentary sources.

In the Abbasid caliphate, the *Daʿwah* system was built upon the Hāshimite kinship link to the Prophet and the mobilization of social and economic discontent under the Umayyads. It emerged as an ideological movement centered in Khurasan and Kufa, where the justice-oriented discourse and the revival of the Prophetic tradition attracted popular support. The secret organizational structure led by Abū Muslim al-Khurāsānī and the use of geographic bases such as Ḥumayma enabled the overthrow of the Umayyads. After the establishment of the

caliphate in 749–750 CE, investment in Baghdad and the *Bayt al-Ḥikma* reinforced cultural legitimacy. However, the gradual departure from initial justice-oriented ideals and the repression of opponents, including Shiʿis, deepened sectarian rifts. Analytically, this deviation reflected the inherent paradox of coalition-based *Daʿwah* movements—initial success leading to political pragmatism and eventual structural fragility in the face of sectarian challenges such as ʿAlid uprisings. The analysis here underscores the need for balance between ideology and political flexibility, a model that ensured the Abbasids' relative endurance for centuries—though at the cost of diminishing ideological legitimacy.

Conversely, the Fatimid *Daʿwah* was rooted in Ismaʿili ideology and divine Imamate. Its expansion in North Africa drew on Berber discontent and the leadership of Abū ʿAbd Allāh al-Shīʿī, where the doctrines of *taqiyya* and allegorical interpretation built strong bases in the Maghreb and Egypt, facilitating the conquest of Egypt in 969 CE. The establishment of al-Azhar as a doctrinal center transformed the *Daʿwah* from a secret to an official institution, extending its reach from the Maghreb to Syria. Yet, economic crises and sectarian conflicts undermined internal cohesion, leading to decline in 1171 CE with the arrival of Ṣalāḥ al-Dīn. Analytically, the intense focus on Imam-centered ideology, while securing doctrinal hegemony, limited adaptability and transformed the mobilization of marginalized groups—such as the Berber tribes—into elite rivalries. This study interprets such evolution as the functional decoupling of *Daʿwah*: success in cultural influence and soft power was not matched by the capacity to manage social crises. Compared with the Abbasid bureaucratic order, the Fatimids' ideological supremacy in religious diversity is thus evident, but their long-term sustainability remained vulnerable.

The comparative synthesis of these two systems reveals fundamental differences in ideology (justice-centered Abbasid versus Imam-centered Fatimid), structure (covert networks versus esoteric hierarchy), geography (eastern concentration versus western expansion), and elite roles (Sunni scholars versus Ismaʿili missionaries). These distinctions represent the underlying forces of variation in Islamic caliphal systems that fueled political–religious competition and ultimately consolidated Abbasid hegemony in response to Fatimid challenges. From a theoretical perspective, both systems transformed *Daʿwah* into a multidimensional instrument of legitimation and identity management; however, the Abbasids' success in adaptability and juridical coherence versus the Fatimids' ideological rigidity highlights the importance of balancing religious conviction with social responsiveness. This comparison not only clarifies the dynamics of religious politics within Islamic civilization but also offers insights for contemporary governance: sustainability demands the integration of hard power (military–economic) with soft power (cultural persuasion), and neglecting either leads to systemic collapse.

By filling the comparative gap through a historically analytical and document-based approach, this research proposes that future studies focus on quantitative modeling of factors such as the role of elites within *Daʿwah* networks to deepen the understanding of religion–power interrelations in contemporary Islam. This approach elevates *Daʿwah* from a historical institution to a theoretical framework for examining the dynamics of religiously grounded democratic governance.

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Authors' Contributions

All authors equally contributed to this study.

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The authors of this article declared no conflict of interest.

Ethical Considerations

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Transparency of Data

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