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The public role of *Dhimmīs* during ʿAbbāsid times

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Abstract
This article examines how and why non-Muslim *dhimmīs* were employed in a variety of important posts during the ʿAbbāsid period, notably as viziers (*wuzarā'*) and secretaries (*kuttāb*). One of the aims is to show that Jews and Christians were employed in the state administration to the extent that some of them were able to achieve the second highest office after the caliph: the vizier. It is argued that, despite certain legal restrictions outlined by Muslim jurists, *dhimmī* employment in the government had long been an established policy. The first section discusses the juristic debate on whether non-Muslims could be appointed to public office. The second examines examples of non-Muslim viziers and the nature of their political power. The final section offers possible explanations as to why non-Muslims were needed to help the caliphs administer this governmental office. The article concludes with a brief reflection on the significance of this study for the discussion of the nature of state–religion relations in early Islam.
Keywords: ʿAbbāsid, *Dhimmīs*, Fātimid, Non-Muslim viziers, Religion and state, Vizierate

Introduction

Islamic history, as R. Stephen Humphreys describes, is not a history of Muslims alone.[1] From the beginning, non-Muslim elements of society have been at the very centre of government administration. Without attention to their role, it is hard to understand the place of non-Muslims in the early development of the Muslim "state". This article presents an example of how and why non-Muslim *dhimmīs* were employed in a variety of important posts, including the vizierate and secretariat, which were held by many of them, during ʿAbbāsid times. It also provides a glimpse of examples of religious tolerance of this style extending from Baghdad to the Fātimid dynasty in Egypt where members of

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1 R. Stephen Humphreys, *Islamic History: A Framework for Inquiry* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1991), 255.

non-Muslim *dhimmīs* acquired great importance. However, it should be stated at the outset that this study is not about tolerance. As Mark R. Cohen has rightly noted, we cannot assume that the notion of tolerance in the Middle Ages constitutes a virtue, at least as we in the West have understood it since John Locke.[2] The fact that some *dhimmīs* were appointed to high public office did not prevent the occasional persecution of the Christians and Jews and other minority groups by caliphs. As will be discussed in detail later, the caliph al-Mutawakkil (r. 847–862) is reported to have banned non-Muslims from holding state office. Not only did he forbid the employment of non-Muslims in government offices, he also ordered that all churches built since the commencement of Islam should be demolished and imposed several other discriminatory regulations on them.[3]

The question here is this: in spite of the ban on *dhimmī* state service, why did the caliphs persist in appointing *dhimmīs* to public offices to the extent that they rose to positions of great influence and importance in the state? The first section of this article deals with juristic discourses on how non-Muslims could justifiably be appointed to the office of the vizierate. I discuss the views of early Muslim political theorists, such as the eleventh-century jurists al-Māwardī (d. 1058), Abū Yaʿlā (d. 1066), and al-Juwaynī (d. 1085). I then go on to examine examples of non-Muslim viziers and clerks employed in state administration during the ʿAbbāsid period. In particular I discuss the extent of their power and authority in the administration of day-to-day affairs of state. The final section offers some possible explanations as to how the institution of the vizierate came into existence in the early ʿAbbāsid period and why non-Muslims were needed to help the caliphs administer this governmental office.

Juristic discourses on non-Muslim viziers

How could non-Muslims possibly be legally appointed to the office of the vizierate? Early Muslim jurists differ on this issue. However, before attempting to answer this question, let us turn to how Muslim jurists have treated the issue of the vizierate. The earliest extensive treatment of the concept of vizierate from a legal point of view is al-Māwardī's *al-Aḥkām al-sulṭāniyya*, which was probably written for the caliph al-Qādir bi-Llāh (r. 991–1031) or for his

2 Mark R. Cohen, *Under Crescent and Cross: The Jews in the Middle Ages* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2008), xxii–xxiii.

3 Al-Mutawakkil's attitude towards non-Muslims has been the subject of much discussion among scholars. However, it is worthwhile quoting his harsh measures against the *dhimmīs* as recorded by Abū Jaʿfar al-Ṭabarī: "In this year [235/850], al-Mutawakkil gave orders that the Christians and the *dhimmīs* in general be required to wear honey-colored hoods (*taylasān*) and girdles (*zunnār*); to ride on saddles with wooden stirrups and with two balls attached to the rear. . . . He gave orders to destroy their churches which were newly built and to take the tenth part of their house. If the place was large enough, it was to be made into a mosque; if it was not suitable for a mosque, it was to be made an open space. He forbade their employment in government offices and any official business where they would have authority over the Muslim. He forbade their children to attend Muslim schools or that any Muslim should teach them." See Abū Jaʿfar Muḥammad ibn Jarīr al-Ṭabarī, *Tārīkh al-rusul wa al-mulūk* (ed. Muḥammad Abū al-Faḍl Ibrāhīm) (Cairo: Dār al-maʿārif, 1968), 9: 171–2.

successor al-Qā'im bi-Llāh (r. 1031–75).[4] His purpose was to give a legal exposition of the theory of government derived from the basis of theology and to set out the formal basis for government so that the ruler might fulfil the charge laid upon him. H. A. R. Gibb might be right to suggest that al-Māwardī's political theory was "merely the *post eventum* justification of the precedents" and "only rationalization of the history of community",[5] yet his *al-Aḥkām al-sulṭāniyya* came to be accepted by the Muslim jurists of the eleventh century and later as the most authoritative exposition of Sunni political theory.

The structure of the vizierate is as follows: the caliph exercised his authority through the vizier, who in turn delegated his routine duties to various secretaries, each of whom controlled a *dīwān* or office in which a number of subordinate clerks were employed. Al-Māwardī distinguishes between two types of vizierate: the vizierate of delegation (*wizāra al-tafwīḍ*) and of execution (*wizāra al-tanfīdh*). The former implies that full powers were entrusted to the holder; such a vizier-in-charge is practically independent, exercising full power and authority, guided by his own *ra'y* (independent opinion) and *ijtihād* (judgement and decision), as long as he keeps the caliph fully informed of his actions. For this reason al-Māwardī argues that the qualities necessary for a vizier of delegation are the same as those required by the caliph himself, except for the matter of lineage (i.e. he did not have to be of Qurayshī descent).[6] In addition, he has to be competent in the domains of war and finance. The vizier was empowered to undertake almost all the tasks of the caliph, but he was not able to designate an heir apparent, nor could he dismiss officials whom the caliph had appointed, whereas the caliph could dismiss those appointed by the vizier.

The second kind of vizier merely executes the caliph's orders, with no independence or power to change anything his master has decided or commanded. As al-Māwardī puts it: "The vizier [of execution] is a mediator between the caliph and his subjects, carrying out his commands, executing his instructions, enacting what he decides and announcing any governmental appointment or military preparations of the armies".[7] Since his functions are substantially limited, the qualities required of him are less stringent. Al-Māwardī emphasizes the qualities for this vizier: honesty, truthfulness, absence of avarice, lack of enmity or conflict with other people, good memory (to remember well the message of the caliph) and, finally, intelligence and sagacity. Al-Māwardī asserts that "a vizier of execution may be of the people of *dhimma*, although not a vizier of delegation".[8] In other words, al-Māwardī allows public positions to be filled by non-Muslims if that position involves limited authority and no independent judgement. The reason he gives for not allowing the *dhimmīs* to be appointed viziers of delegation is pragmatic: the vizier of delegation enjoys wide political

4 Ann K. S. Lambton, *State and Government in Medieval Islam* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1981), 83.
5 H.A.R. Gibb, "Al-Māwardī's theory of the Khalīfah", *Islamic Culture* 11/3, 1937, 300. Gibb argues that al-Māwardī wrote this book as an attempt to assert the authority of the ʿAbbāsid caliphs against the Buwayhid emirs who were in effective control of their state.
6 Abū al-Ḥasan ʿAlī ibn Muḥammad ibn Ḥabīb al-Māwardī, *al-Aḥkām al-sulṭāniyya* (Cairo: Matbaʿa muṣtafā al-bābī al-ḥalabī, 1966), 23.
7 Ibid., 25.
8 Ibid., 27.

powers over governors, the army and the treasury. Otherwise, nothing could "prevent a *dhimmī* from being a vizier of execution".[9]

One may argue that in permitting *dhimmīs* to become viziers of execution, al-Māwardī is confirming a long-standing practice of caliphs and governors. Historical evidence shows that non-Muslims were employed in large numbers and high government positions under the Umayyads and the ʿAbbāsids, and they are known to have become particularly influential because of their economic power and wealth. However, this does not mean that all Muslim jurists agree with al-Māwardī's view. On the matter of whether a vizier of execution must be a Muslim, Muḥammad ibn Talḥah Abū Sālim (d. 1255) says: "Scholars differ on this issue. Imām Abū al-Ḥasan ʿAli ibn Ḥabīb al-Basrī from Iraq argues that it is permissible for the sultan to appoint *dhimmīs* as viziers. However, Imām al-Ḥaramayn Abū al-Maʿālī al-Juwaynī argued that it was forbidden. He considers the view of the Iraqi imām (al-Baṣrī) who allowed the appointment of *dhimmīs* to the position of vizier as a falsehood that will not be forgiven (ʿ*athra lan tuqāl*)"[10]

In his *Ghiyāth al-umam fī iltiyāth al-ẓulam*, Imām Ḥaramayn al-Juwaynī strongly opposes al-Māwardī's view. The vizier must be truthful (*thiqa*), al-Juwaynī argues, and "the *dhimmī* cannot be trusted in his actions, statements and in all his activities. His transmission is rejected, and so too his testimony about Muslims. How could his information and report for the imām of the Muslims be then accepted?"[11] He puts forward a rational argument that, since the testimony of *dhimmīs* on trivial things is not accepted, *a fortiori* they should not be appointed viziers. Although he adheres to the same Shāfiʿī *madhhab* as al-Māwardī, al-Juwaynī claims that his view is the one that conforms with Shāfiʿī law and is supported by the texts of the Quran and Sunna. He cites two quranic verses to support his view: "O you who believe! Do not take Jews and Christians as friends; they are friends to one another" (Q.5:51) and "Do not take for your bosom-friends people who are not of your kind. They spare no effort to corrupt you" (Q.3:118). He also notes the prophetic *ḥadīth*: "I am free from every Muslim [who lives along side] with a *mushrik* (idolater). Their two fires shall not be within sight of each other".[12]

The Ḥanbalī jurist Abū Yaʿlā, who wrote a book with the same title as that of al-Māwardī (*al-Aḥkām al-sulṭāniyya*), also mentions a practice of the Companions of the Prophet that he believes supports the prohibition of non-Muslim viziers. It is reported that ʿAlī ibn Abī Ṭālib (r. 656–661) was asked whether it is permissible to employ a Jew or Christian in public offices

9 Ibid.

10 Muḥammad ibn Talḥah Abū Sālim, *al-ʿIqd al-farīd lil-malik al-sa'īd* (Cairo: n.p., 1892), 145. I would like to thank Mr Luke Yarbrough, a PhD candidate at Princeton University, for his insightful comment on the translation of the phrase ʿ*athra lan tuqāl*.

11 Abū al-Maʿālī ʿAbd al-Mālik ibn ʿAbdillah al-Juwaynī, *Ghiyāth al-umam fī iltiyāth al-zulam* (ed. Abd al-ʿAẓim al-Dayb) (Cairo: Matbaʿa al-nahḍa, 1981), 156.

12 Ibid., pp. 156–7. The last sentence is the translation of "*lā tatarā'ā nārāhumā*". According to E. W. Lane, this phrase means: "The Muslim may not dwell in the country of the believers in a plurality of gods, and be with them so that each of them shall see the fire of other", see Edward William Lane, *An Arabic-English Lexicon* (London: Williams and Norgate, 1863), 1:1000.

such as *kharāj*. He responded: "Do not ask any help from them!"[13] ʿUmar ibn Khaṭṭāb (r. 634–644) is also reported to have opposed Abū Mūsā al-Ashʿarī (d. 664) when the latter employed a Christian secretary.[14] It is related that ʿUmar sat in the mosque at Medina while Abū Mūsā was in front of him presenting the accounts for Isfahan – written in a fair hand and exactly reckoned, so that all who saw admired them. "Whose writing is this?" asked ʿUmar. He said, "My secretary". When asked to bring his secretary, he replied: "He cannot come into the mosque". ʿUmar said: "Is he unclean then?" He said: "No. He is a Christian". Then, ʿUmar gave Abū Mūsā a slap on the thigh – so hard that he said he thought his thigh was broken – and said, "Have you not read the command of God: 'O you who believe, do not take Jews and Christians as friends; they are friends to one another?'" (Q.5:51). Abū Mūsā then said: "This very hour I will dismiss him and give him leave to return to Iran".[15]

The juristic debate on whether or not non-Muslims could be appointed to public office shows that, at least in the eleventh century, the emergence of powerful non-Muslim bureaucrats had become controversial. Even for al-Māwardī, the presence of powerful non-Muslims was a problem. Thus while he permits *dhimmīs* becoming viziers of execution, he warns that those *dhimmī* viziers seeking a higher rank should be stopped.[16] For reasons that will be discussed in the final section of this article, it was widespread for non-Muslims to hold public office. In fact, throughout the Umayyad and ʿAbbāsid empires, effective administration meant the employment of Christian, Jewish and, in Persia, Zoroastrian bureaucrats. The first Umayyad caliph Muʿāwiyya (r. 661–680) regularly employed non-Muslims in the service of the government. One of his Christian secretaries of finance is thought to have been Manṣūr ibn Sarjūn (Sergius) from a Byzantine Orthodox family.[17] Caliph Marwān (r. 683–685) appointed two Christian secretaries, Athanasius and Isaac. Later, Isaac became head of the governmental offices in Alexandria.[18] In short, until the end of the Umayyad caliphate, "it was seldom that no Christians were to be found in government services".[19]

Next I will discuss the two most important categories of governmental service attributed to *dhimmīs* during the ʿAbbāsid period: viziers and secretaries. Louis Cheikho provides a detailed list of Christians who served as viziers and

13 Abū Yaʿlā Muḥammad ibn al-Ḥusayn al-Farrā', *al-Aḥkām al-sulṭāniyya* (Cairo: Matbaʿa muṣtafā al-bābī al-ḥalabī, 1966), 32.

14 Al-Juwaynī, *Ghiyāth al-umam fi iltiyāth al-ẓulam*, 157.

15 Niẓām al-Mulk, *The Book of Government or Rules for Kings*, tr. Hubert Darke (London: Routledge, 1960), 164.

16 Wadi Zaidan Haddad, "*Ahl al-Dhimma* in an Islamic state: the teaching of Abū al-Ḥasan al-Māwardī's *al-Aḥkām al-sulṭāniyya*", *Islam and Christian–Muslim Relations* 7/2, 1996, 175.

17 Philip Hitti, *History of the Arabs* (London: Macmillan, 1937), 234.

18 See Otto Friedrich August Meinardus, *Christians in Egypt: Orthodox, Catholic, and Protestant Communities, Past and Present* (Cairo: American University Press, 2006), 29; T. W. Arnold, *The Preaching of Islam: A History of the Propagation of the Muslim Faith* (New Delhi: Adam Publishers, 2002), 63–4; A. S. Tritton, *The Caliphs and Their Non-Muslim Subjects* (London: Frank Cass & Co. Ltd., 1970), 19–20.

19 Tritton, *The Caliphs and Their Non-Muslim Subjects*, 19.

secretaries.[20] Here I would like to reconstruct the relationship between the caliphs and their non-Muslim viziers on the one hand, and between the caliphs and/or viziers and their non-Muslim secretaries on the other. I will argue that these non-Muslim officers received all the usual marks of honour, since they could be promoted to the highest office: the vizierate. In spite of legal restrictions as outlined by al-Māwardī, and more strictly by al-Juwaynī and Abū Yaʿlā, some *dhimmīs* were even able to hold what al-Māwardī calls "the vizierate of delegation".

Historical realities in the ʿAbbāsid period

If the ʿAbbāsids claimed that their call for overthrowing the Umayyads was to organize the administration and regulation of the state according to more clearly defined Islamic standards, then why were non-Muslims so prominent within their inner circles of power? Hans Putmann, in his *L'Eglise et L'Islam sous Timothée I (780–823)*, provides the first part of the answer. He argues that, even though there was a desire to establish a purely Islamic state, non-Muslims maintained their positions during the early ʿAbbāsid period because of their education and ability to handle the affairs of the state (e.g. record keeping). During the transition from the Umayyads to the ʿAbbāsids, non-Muslims within the government were able to keep administrative stability within the state.[21] The second part of the answer is to do with the fact that the opinions of independent jurists had no formal hold on the caliph's policy: their desire to implement restrictive measures was not enough to rid the government of all *dhimmīs* from positions of power and authority.[22]

Al-Manṣūr (r. 754–775) was probably the first ʿAbbāsid caliph to attempt to remove *dhimmīs* from his administration. He decided to remove Christians from the office of public treasury, but was later compelled to return them to their positions owing to their expertise. Some Muslims complained to him about the Christian secretaries; he therefore wrote to his provincial governors asking them to expel the *dhimmīs* from government offices and replace them with Muslims. However, one of his close colleagues, Shābib ibn Shaybah, suggested he should take back his order fearing that those officers would find a way to avenge him. Instead, he advised the caliph to replace the *dhimmīs* with the Muslims gradually.[23] Later, rather than dismissing non-Muslims from public office, al-Manṣūr himself appointed a Jew, named Mūsā, as one of the two collectors of revenue.[24]

20 In his *Wuzarāʾ al-Naṣrāniyya wa-kuttābuhā fi al-Islām*, Louis Cheikhu lists seventy-five Christian viziers and 300 secretaries under the Islamic empire up to the year 1517.

21 Hans Putmann, *L'Eglise et L'Islam sous Timothée I (780–823)* (Beirut: Dār al-Mashriq, 1975), 104.

22 The disjunction between *dhimmīs*' political rights in theory and the reality of their political participation in the state administration has been discussed by Antoine Fattal in his *Le statut légal des non-musulmans en pays d'Islam* (Beirut: Imprimerie Catholique, 1958), 232–63. See also Cohen, *Under Crescent and Cross*, 65–8.

23 Al-Abb Suhayl Qāshā, *al-Masīḥiyyūn fī al-dawla al-Islāmiyya* (Beirut: Dār al-Malak, 2002), 322.

24 A. S. Tritton, *The Caliphs and Their Non-Muslim Subjects*, 22.

Al-Mutawakkil was perhaps the most dismissive in ordering his officials in the cities and provinces of the empire not to employ *dhimmīs*. In an edict of 850, he reiterated the ban on *dhimmīs* in state service previously pronounced by the Umayyad caliph ʿUmar ibn ʿAbd al-ʿAzīz (r. 717–720). That edict opened with the preamble: "It has become known to the Commander of the Faithful that men without judgment and discernment are seeking the help of *dhimmīs* in their work, adopting them as confidants in preference to Muslims and giving them authority over Muslim subjects".[25] I believe that al-Mutawakkil's edict was connected with his wider programme to impose more orthodox beliefs on the Shia and the Mutazilites. It is telling that al-Mutawakkil himself is reported to have employed Christians, such as Dulayl ibn Yaʿqūb.[26] He employed a Christian architect (*muhandis masīḥī*) to build his Jaʿfarī palace.[27] Christian sources also confirm that a number of Christian clerks and physicians served in his court.[28]

Another ʿAbbāsid caliph who sought to remove non-Muslims from public office was al-Muqtadir (r. 908–932). He attempted to limit their employment to positions of court physicians and tax collectors. He also ordered the employment of non-Muslims in menial occupations as a mark of their inferiority, simultaneously prohibiting their riding on ordinary saddles.[29] It is reported, however, that al-Muqtadir himself had four Christian secretaries.[30] His own influential vizier Ibn al-Furāt (d. 924) was known for his close relationships with Christian subjects: it is said he had nine Christian secretaries, some of whom had such close access that they were always invited to eat with him.[31] The historian al-Hilāl al-Ṣābī (d. 1056) records an interesting event in his *Tārīkh al-wuzarā'* about the rivalry between two leading viziers under al-Muqtadir's reign: Ibn al-Furāt and ʿAlī ibn ʿĪsā (d. 946). After his second term, Ibn al-Furāt was brought to the court and interrogated by ʿAlī ibn ʿĪsā. The latter said: "Didn't you fear God for appointing a Christian to the office of the Muslim army and causing the defenders of religion to kiss his hand and obey his command?" Ibn al-Furāt responded: "This is something I have not made up or innovated with. Al-Nāṣir li-dīn Allāh [the epithet of the vizier Abū Muḥammad al-Ḥasan al-Bāzūrī] appointed a Christian named Isrā'īl to take charge of the army, and al-Muʿtaḍid bi-Llāh appointed a Christian named Mālik ibn al-Walīd as his secretary". When ʿAlī ibn ʿĪsā confronted him and said that both viziers were wrong in doing so, he responded by saying that even the previous caliphs had had Christian secretaries.[32]

25 See Abū al-ʿAbbās Aḥmad ibn ʿAlī al-Qalqashandī, *Subh al-aʿshā fī sinā'a al-inshā* (Cairo: al-Muassasah al-Miṣriyya al-ʿāmma, n.d.), 13:368.

26 ʿAlī Ḥusnī al-Kharbūtī, *al-Islām wa ahl al-dhimma* (United Arab Emirates: Lajna al-taʿrif bi al-Islam, n.d.), 144.

27 Al-Abb Suhayl Qāshā, *al-Masīḥiyyūn fī al-dawla al-Islāmiyya*, 81.

28 Mary ibn Sulaymān, *Akhbār fatārika kursi al-mashriq* (Rome: Excudebat C. de Luigi, 1899), 80.

29 Ibid. See also Camille Hechaime in his introduction to Louis Cheikhu, *Wuzarā' al-Naṣrāniyya wa-kuttābuhā*, 18.

30 ʿAlī Ḥusnī al-Kharbūtī, *al-Islām wa ahl al-dhimma*, 144.

31 See Suhayl Qāshā, *al-Masīḥiyyūn fī al-dawla al-Islāmiyya*, 322.

32 Abū al-Ḥasan al-Hilāl ibn al-Muḥassin ibn Ibrāhīm al-Ṣābī, *Tārīkh al-wuzarā'* (ed. H. F. Amedroz) (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1904), 95.

Here we can see how Ibn al-Furāt justified his decision to employ Christians as secretaries and, more importantly, as commanders in the army. He refers to the involvement of *dhimmīs* in political life in the early period of Islamic history. When he was blamed for placing a Christian in command of the army, he defended himself against the charge of impiety by pleading the example of previous caliphs who had given office to Christians. So, it is true that some caliphs decided to exclude *dhimmīs* from public office, but in reality they were never really able to get rid of them, instead continuing to depend on their skills and competencies to run the government. Evidently the reason why the caliphs, from al-Manṣūr to al-Mutawakkil and al-Muqtadir, again and again made such pronouncements is in part because the attempt to remove non-Muslims from secretariat, public treasury and other state services did not meet with much success. As Antoine Fattal notes, "The implementation of these restrictive measures was practically zero".[33] In addition, I would argue, the opposition to *dhimmī* officials can be understood as a response to the pervasive phenomenon of non-Muslim involvement in the political life of medieval Islam. As a reaction to non-Muslims in influential positions, many Muslims complained to the caliphs that they were being ruled, in their own empire, by non-Muslims.

The first ʿAbbāsid caliph to employ a *dhimmī* vizier was al-Muʿtaṣim (r. 833–842). He was known for favouritism in appointing a large number of Christians to public office. There were two brothers, both Christians, of very high standing in the confidence of the caliph: one, Salmuyah, occupied the position of secretary of state, and no royal documents were valid until he had countersigned them. His brother, Ibrāhīm, was entrusted with the care of the privy seal, and was set over the Bayt al-Māl or public treasury, an office that, from the nature of the funds and their disposition, might have been expected to have been put into the hands of a Muslim. Al-Muʿtaṣim's relationship with Ibrāhīm was so close that the caliph "visited him in his sickness, and was overwhelmed with grief at his death, and on the day of the funeral ordered the body to be brought to the palace and the Christian rites performed there with great solemnity".[34]

Al-Muʿtaṣim too had a Christian vizier, named Faḍl ibn Marwān ibn Māsarjis (d. 865). According to biographer Ibn Khāllikān (d. 1282), al-Muʿtaṣim invested him with the dignity of vizier, entrusting to him at the same time the administration of all his affairs.[35] At first, Faḍl ibn Marwān joined one of al-Muʿtaṣim's secretaries called Yahyā al-Jurmuqānī, and then replaced him. He dealt with al-Muʿtaṣim's business affairs and wrote down, in Muʿtaṣim's name, what ever he himself desired, until al-Muʿtaṣim became caliph. From then on, Faḍl became the effective director of the caliphate: all government departments came under his control, and he stored up all the taxes collected.[36]

33 Fattal, *Le statut légal des non-Musulmans*.

34 T.W. Arnold, *The Preaching of Islam*, 63.

35 Abū al-ʿAbbās Shams al-Dīn Ibn Khāllikān, *Wafayāt al-a'yān wa anbā' abnā' al-zamān*, (ed. Iḥsān ʿAbbās) (Beirut: Dār al-sādir, 1984), 4: 45.

36 On Faḍl ibn Marwān, Ibn Nadīm (d. 995) notes: "al-Faḍl ibn Marwān ibn Māsarjis, the Christian. He served al-Ma'mūn and al-Muʿtaṣim, acting as vizier. After these two, he also served several other caliphs. Although he had little grasp of learning, he showed great intelligence in the service of the caliphs. Among his books were: *Things Observed and Traditions Known by Eye Witness, Seen and Quoted*". See *The Fihrist*

His power was unlimited, and he therefore acted as if he had more power than the caliph himself. At an audience which he held one day for the dispatch of public business, he noticed, among the memorials presented to him, a paper on which were inscribed these lines:

> You act like Pharaoh, O Faḍl ibn Marwān. But take warning! Your predecessors were Faḍl, and Faḍl, and Faḍl;
> Three princes now gone their ways, whom fetters, prison, and violence deprived of life;
> You have become a tyrant among men and you should perish as those three have perished.[37]

According to Dominique Sourdel, Faḍl ibn Marwān was the first example of the many secretaries of Iraqi Christian origin to serve the caliphs during the ninth century.[38] It seems that Faḍl ibn Marwān's power became so extensive that al-Māwardī calls him "a vizier of delegation". Indeed, it was due to his excessive power that the relationship between caliph al-Muʿtaṣim and Faḍl ibn Marwān came to an end. The historian Abū Jaʿfar al-Ṭabarī (d. 923) provides a lengthy discussion of the reason behind al-Muʿtaṣim's anger against Faḍl ibn Marwān to the extent that he finally imprisoned him and seized his wealth. Al-Ṭabarī relates that on several occasions, Faḍl ibn Marwān refused to do what al-Muʿtaṣim had ordered, until the latter was reminded by his close friend Ibrāhīm al-Ḥaftī: "Do you really think that you have now attained success? In reality, you have nothing of the caliphate except the mere name! By God, your commands do not go farther than your own ears! The real caliph is Faḍl ibn Marwān, who issues commands that are immediately put into execution".[39] Al-Muʿtaṣim was shocked, and he asked: "What command of mine has not been carried out?" Al-Ḥaftī responded: "Two months ago you commanded that I should be given such and such, but since that time he has not given me even a single grain of what you commanded".[40] Ibn Abī Dāwūd also testified that Faḍl ibn Marwān often turned down al-Muʿtaṣim's requests for a certain amount of money to spend. Al-Muʿtaṣim was so angry that he finally replaced him as his vizier with Muḥammad ibn Abd al-Mālik.

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of al-Nadim, tr. Bayard Dodge (New York: Columbia University Press, 1970), 278. For a detailed discussion of Faḍl ibn Marwān, see al-Ṭabarī, *Tārīkh al-rusul wa al-mulūk*, 9: 18–22; Dominique Sourdel, *Le Vizirat ʿAbbāside de 749* à *936 (132 à 324 de l'hégire)* (Damascus: Institut français de Damas, 1959–60), 28–35.

37 Tafarraʿta yā Faḍl bin marwān faʿtabir * fa qablaka kāna al-Faḍl wa al-Faḍl wa al-Faḍl
Thalātha amlākin madaw li-sabīlihim * abādathum al-aqyātu wa al-habs wa al-qatl
Wa-innaka qad asbaḥta fi al-nās ẓulman * satūdiya kamā ūdiya al-thalāthatu min qabl

According to Ibn Khāllikān, the three Faḍls mentioned in these lines were: Faḍl ibn Yahyā al-Barmākī, Faḍl ibn al-Rabīʿ, and Faḍl ibn Sahl. See Ibn Khāllikān, *Wafayāt al-aʿyān*, 4: 45.

38 Sourdel, *Le Vizirat ʿAbbāside de 749* à *936*, 247.

39 Al-Ṭabarī, *Tārīkh al-rusul wa al-mulūk*, 9: 19.

40 Ibid.

Under the Fātimid dynasty in Egypt, there was more than the usual degree of favour for non-Muslims. There are no known parallel examples of employment of non-Muslim viziers among contemporary Muslim regimes. When the Ismaili Fātimids came to power in Egypt, many Jews and Christians were employed in the administration, although not to the rank of the viziers. This development is understandable because non-Muslims were regarded as less of a threat to their heterodox teaching than were the orthodox Muslims with whom they had to deal. *Dhimmīs* were evidently regarded by most of the populace as being in league with Shiis. The Fatimid caliph al-Muʿizz (r. 953–975) had a Christian wife. Among his brothers-in-law were the Melchite (Greek Catholic) patriarchs of Alexandria and Jerusalem.[41] It was said that at his court nothing could be done without the help of some or other Jew. During the Fātimid era, non-Muslims were able to attain the highest office of the vizierate. It is reported that the Fātimid caliph Al-ʿAzīz bi-Llāh (r. 975–996) had two non-Muslim viziers: one a Christian named ʿĪsā ibn Nestorius, the other a Jew named Manasseh.[42] In all there were seven Christian and three Jewish viziers in the Fātimid period.[43]

Two viziers in particular of the Fātimid dynasty deserve more attention because of the nature of the power vested in them. The first is Yaʿqūb ibn Kīllis (d. 991) of Iraqi Jewish origin, who was the first vizier appointed by al-ʿAzīz; and the second is Bahram al-Armānī (d. 1140) of Armenian Christian origin, the vizier of al-Ḥāfiẓ (r. 1130–49). Ibn Kīllis is said to have been "the architect of Fātimid administration".[44] He first served as head of the bureau under caliph al-Muʿizz. Soon after his master passed away in 978, he was appointed by al-ʿAzīz, the son of al-Muʿizz, and honoured with the title "the most illustrious vizier (*al-wazīr al-ajall*).[45] Ibn Kīllis' power as a vizier was unlimited because of his personal ties as trusted adviser and friend of al-ʿAzīz.[46] However, scholars differ on the nature of his conversion to Islam. Walter J. Fischel, as cited by Yaacov Lev, emphasizes the Jewish origin of

41 Susan Jane Staffa, *Conquest and Fusion: The Social Evolution of Cairo A.D. 642–1950* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1977), 70.

42 Jurji Zaydan, *Umayyads and ʿAbbāsids*, tr. D.S. Margoliouth (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1907), 167.

43 See Leila S. al-Imad, *The Fātimid Vizierate, 969–1172* (Berlin: Klaus Schwarz Verlag, 1990), p. 71. Such a period of high favour led to jealousy and hatred on the part of Muslims, many of whom could not bear to see unbelievers in authority. Sarcasm is plain in a quotation from a contemporary poet: "Become Christian, for Christianity is the true religion! Our time proves it so. Worry not about anything else: Yaʿqūb, the vizier, is the Father: al-ʿAzīz, the Son, and Faḍl, the Holy Ghost". See Ibn al-Athīr, *al-Kāmil fī al-tārīkh*, (ed. C.J. Tornberg) (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1876), vol. ix, 117. Jalāl al-Dīn al-Suyūṭī cites a similar lampoon: "The Jews of our times have reached the goal of their desire and come to rule. Theirs is the dignity, theirs the money! Councillors of the state and princes are made from them. O people of Egypt! I give you advice: become a Jew, for Heaven has become Jewish!" See al-Suyūṭī, *Ḥusn al-muḥāḍara fī tārīkh Miṣr wa al-Qāhira* (Cairo: Matbaʿa idārat al-watan, 1968), 2: 201.

44 Ibid., 80.

45 Mark R. Cohen and Sasson Somekh, "In the court of Yaʿqūb ibn Kīllis: a fragment from the Cairo Geniza", *The Jewish Quarterly Review* 80/4, 1990, 248.

46 Al-Imad, *The Fātimid Vizierate*, 89–91.

Ibn Kīllis.[47] Lev finds this view problematic because "it is impossible to overlook his total absorption not only in the Fātimid causes as a political movement but also with Ismailism as a creed".[48] However, there were non-Muslim viziers such as Faḍl ibn Marwān who were deeply devoted to the ʿAbbāsid cause. I would argue that the cause of controversy lies in the unsettled description of Ibn Kīllis' religious identity in the early sources. Ibn Khāllikān, for instance, appears confused about Ibn Kīllis' conversion to Islam. He notes that Ibn Kīllis "died in his [original] faith (*māta ʿalā dīnihī*) and his adherence to Islam was only outward show", yet he also says, "He professed Islam, and it was true that he converted to it".[49] Whether or not he was truly a Muslim is a matter for debate, but it is clear that he frequently joined the Jewish community and helped many Jews attain positions in the Fātimid bureaucracy.[50]

Most scholars of the Fātimids agree that Ibn Kīllis' power as a vizier was such that, as in the case of Faḍl ibn Marwān during al-Muʿtaṣim's reign, many people thought that it was he who was in fact the ruler, not al-ʿAzīz. He often obstructed the judicial authority of ʿAlī ibn al-Nuʿmān, the chief *qāḍī* of the Fātimid caliphate. Not only had the chief *qāḍī*'s sentences been subjected to his approval, but he also appointed a *qāḍī* of his own, independent of al-Nuʿmān. Ibn Kīllis is also reported to have controlled great military manpower of his own.[51] When Ibn Kīllis died in the year 991, al-ʿAzīz grieved for him very deeply and closed the *dīwān* for several days in his honour. He subsequently appointed as vizier a Christian called ʿĪsā ibn Nestorius.[52]

Another Fātimid vizier meriting attention is Bahram al-Armānī. He was "the only Christian vizier who ever received such titles as *sayf al-Islām* (sword of Islam), *tāj al-dawla* (crown of the state), and *tāj al-khilāfa* (crown of caliphate)".[53] For a non-Muslim and an alien of sorts to be given such titles was indicative of the caliph's desperate state of affairs. According to some sources, Bahram was not freely appointed by al-Ḥāfiẓ, but rather nominated by the army. He was a military man who, in becoming vizier, combined two jobs, giving him great power.[54] We should keep in mind that Bahram came to power thirty-five years before the end of the Fātimid era, and therefore he had to face different

47 Yaacov Lev, "The Fātimid vizier Yaʿqūb ibn Kīllis and the beginning of the Fātimid administration in Egypt", *Der Islam* 58, 1981, 238; cf. Walter J. Fischel, *Jews in the Economic and Social Life of Medieval Islam* (London, 1937).

48 Lev, "The Fātimid vizier Yaʿqūb ibn Kīllis and the beginning of the Fatimid administration in Egypt".

49 Ibn Khāllikān, *Wafayāt al-aʿyān wa anbāʾ abnāʾ al-zamān*, 7: 34.

50 Mark R. Cohen and Sasson Somekh argue that, according to a Geniza document, members of the Jewish community were upset with him for allowing ridicule to be made of a Jewish prayer book during one of his *majlis* (the vizier's weekly court). Their dismay shows that usually he was, or was expected to be, an advocate for the Jewish community. See Cohen and Somekh, "In the court of Yaʿqūb ibn Kīllis: a fragment from the Cairo Geniza", 283–314.

51 Lev, "The Fātimid vizier Yaʿqūb ibn Kīllis and the beginning of the Fātimid administration in Egypt", 247–8.

52 See al-Suyūṭī, *Ḥusn al-muḥāḍara fī tārīkh Miṣr wa al-Qāhira*, 2: 129.

53 Samir Khalil Samir, SJ, "The role of Christians in the Fātimid government services of Egypt to the reign of al-Ḥāfiẓ", *Medieval Encounters* 2/3, 1996, 177.

54 Al-Imad, *The Fātimid Vizierate*, 109–19.

kinds of discontent. He had full control over the realm and subdued every revolt against the state. In the eyes of caliph al-Ḥāfiẓ, however, the vizierate of Bahram had many positive aspects. A Christian Armenian could not hope to supplant the Fāṭimid caliphate, or to undermine the Ismaili character of the state. Of course, this reliance on Christian Armenians had its price; it contributed further towards the waning of the religious aura of the Fāṭimid regime.

If we use the categorization of the vizierate proposed by al-Māwardī, both Ibn Kīllis and Bahram al-Armānī can be classified as viziers of delegation (*wuzarā' al-tafwīḍ*). It is, therefore, difficult to accept P. J. Vatikiotis' assertion that "the function of minister in the early Fāṭimid caliphate was insignificant for doctrinal reasons primarily". He mentions Yaʿqūb ibn Kīllis as only an "executive assistant of caliph al-ʿAzīz".[55] This is certainly contrary to the historical evidence of the Fāṭimid practices. Rather than being an "executive assistant of al-ʿAzīz", Ibn Kīllis enjoyed unlimited powers, for he had the initiative in all affairs of government. In many instances, his word overruled that of the caliph himself. Perhaps, it was viziers like Ibn Kīllis who prompted the Ismaili theologian Ḥamīd al-Dīn al-Kirmānī (d. 1021) to limit the political power of viziers within the Fāṭimid bureaucratic system. Al-Kirmānī says: "There are no delegated powers or offices in the state, only executive functions subordinated to the imām's absolute theocratic authority".[56] As a devoted theologian, he did not, for obvious reasons, want to see the power of the imām being delegated, and eventually result in a weakened position for the imām. This would be similar to the goal of al-Māwardī who tried to restore the public duties of the imām, and such important duties should not be delegated to his non-Muslim viziers. Al-Māwardī attempted, by the device of two forms of vizierate, to keep within the framework of Islamic government officials and other holders of power who, in exercise of this, neglected the caliph.[57]

Some possible explanations

The question remains: why were non-Muslims needed to hold such important offices as vizier and secretary? No single answer will suffice. The circumstances under which non-Muslims were appointed as viziers varied from one case to another. However, we can look for common features surrounding the employment of non-Muslim viziers during ʿAbbāsid times that can help us understand why they were needed in the first place to fulfil the posts of the vizierate. It seems to me that the ʿAbbāsids recognized the need to maintain those *dhimmīs* already in the administration. For practical reasons, it would be difficult

55 Panayiotis J. Vatikiotis, *The Fāṭimid Theory of State* (Lahore: Institute of Islamic Culture, 1981), 97.

56 Quoted in Al-Imad, *The Fāṭimid Vizierate*, 48. Here we can see that there is a disjunction between the theoretical vizierate outlined by Ismaili scholars and the Fāṭimid experience. In theory, there can be no delegation of imāmī powers in the Fāṭimid state, but in reality, the Fāṭimid experience was in many respects very different from al-Kirmānī's theory of the theocratic state. Both Ibn Kīllis and Bahram were exercising unlimited powers that fitted the category of vizierate of delegation, rather than vizierate of execution. This was also the case with Faḍl ibn Marwān during the ʿAbbāsid era, as discussed earlier.

57 See Lambton, *State and Government in Medieval Islam*, 95–6.

for the caliphs to allow Arab Muslims to run a vast empire with a complex system of administration. Because the existing administrative systems were kept in place along with their existing languages, there was a practical need for those who were fluent and capable of keeping records in those languages. In the former Byzantine provinces, for example, there was a need for personnel who could work in Greek, in the former Sassanid provinces there was a need for those fluent in Persian. In other words, because the Arabs ruled as a minority community over established societies with their own administrative systems, they had to establish methods to maintain order through the existing bureaucracy. Non-Muslims were thus in demand as professional state administrators who often rose to influential and important position.[58]

To make sense of this explanation, we shall consider closely how the institution of vizierate emerged in the early ʿAbbāsid period. Scholars agree that there was no actual vizierate during the Umayyad period. This institution was not known until the triumph of the ʿAbbāsids. Early Western scholarship seems to emphasize the Persian origin of this vizierate. As early as the second half of the nineteenth century, one encounters scholars such as Alfred von Kremer who argue that "this [*wizāra*] office appears to be of Persian origin, and came into existence for the first time under the ʿAbbāsids".[59] Franz Babinger takes it for granted that both the word and the institution were borrowed from the Sassanian empire.[60] Philip K. Hitti also speaks of "... the vizier (*wazīr*), whose office was of Persian origin".[61] Michael G. Morony proposes an interesting suggestion that this earlier scholarship on the vizierate might have been influenced by "the extravagant claims of writers such as the Niẓām al-Mulk (d. 1092) who derived the Islamic office of *wazīr* from a Sasanian origin".[62]

S. D. Goitein refutes the assumption that the vizierate was borrowed, saying that "the Persian origin of the vizierate is far from an established fact".[63] For

58 David D. Grafton, *The Christians of Lebanon: Political Rights in Islamic Law* (New York: Tauris Academic Studies, 2003), 35–6.

59 Alfred von Kremer, *The Orient under the Caliphs*, translated by S. Khuda Bukhsh from *Culturgeschichte des Orients unter den Chalifen*, first published in 1877 (India: University of Calcutta, 1920), 220.

60 Franz Babinger, "Wazir", in M.Th. Houtsma et al. (eds), *The Encyclopaedia of Islam* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1934), 6: 1135.

61 Hitti, *History of the Arabs*, 318. The list of authors holding the same opinion could be easily extended. In this regard I should like to mention one book especially devoted to the question; Harold Bowen, *The Life and Times of ʿAli ibn ʿĪsā: "The Good Vizier"* (1928). In his book Bowen states: "The designation vizier, of Persian origin, had been introduced by the ʿAbbāsids, who had modeled their Court procedure as closely as possible on that of the Sassanians" (p. 14).

62 Michael G. Morony, *Iraq after the Muslim Conquest* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1984), 71; cf. Nizam al-Mulk, *The Book of Government or Rules for Kings*, 178–80. For a detailed discussion of the historical development of the vizierate during ʿAbbāsid times, see Tawfīq Sultān al-Yuzubkī, *al-Wizāra: Nash'atuhā wa-taṭawwuruhā fī al-dawla al-ʿAbbāsiyya (132–447)* (Baghdad: Mosul University Press, 1975).

63 S. D. Goitein, "The origin of the vizierate and its true character", *Islamic Culture* 16, 3–4 (1942), and reappears in his *Studies in Islamic History and Institutions* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1968), 169.

Goitein, the ʿAbbāsid vizierate developed gradually and its origin could be traced back to the Arabian tribal custom according to which a tribal chief would entrust the education of his son to a slave or freedman of the family. The primary development in ʿAbbāsid times, Goitein argues, was the early caliphs' practice of putting their sons and heirs under the supervision of an experienced man of affairs, who was always a personal dependant. Here we can see that the caliph, while retaining the system of family-rule brought from Arabia, initiated at the same time the rise of the vizierate by transferring an important feature of the household of the Arabic chieftain to the administration of the ʿAbbāsid caliphate. When, as a second development, the tutor to the heir apparent became vizier to the new caliph, the element of personal service remained fundamental to the character of the emerging institution, and this explains why its powers were never properly defined. It was only at the time of Harūn al-Rashīd (r. 786–809) that "the vizierate reached its apogee".[64] Based on this evolutionary approach, he concludes: "the vizierate was not borrowed by the Muslims as a fixed and well-defined institution from the Sassanians or anyone", rather it developed gradually under the special historical circumstances at the end of the Umayyad and early ʿAbbāsid rules.[65]

In his extensive work on the ʿAbbāsid vizierate, Dominique Sourdel is sympathetic to Goitein's suggestion that the ʿAbbāsid vizierate must have developed gradually, and argues that it did not exist as a single, well-defined institution of government practically from the beginning of the ʿAbbāsid caliphate. However, he emphasizes the specifically administrative function of the vizierate, and therefore he is more willing than Goitein to see a connection with the Persian past.[66] For Sourdel, the practice of attaching tutors to the caliphs' heir, although it may be of Arabian origin, was a secondary development intended to provide them in advance with the viziers they would need on becoming caliph. By looking closely at the professional secretarial background from which the viziers were mainly recruited, he concludes that the vizierate developed primarily as a response to the administrative needs of an increasingly sophisticated government. The fact that the ʿAbbāsid viziers, at least from the time of al-Manṣūr, belonged to the famous family of the Barmakids is seen by Sourdel as "the undeniable Iranianization of the ʿAbbāsid courts and administration".[67]

It may be safe to say that, for the time being, the problem of the origin of the vizierate has not been solved. Even the early Muslim sources seem to advocate two different portraits of the early ʿAbbāsid vizierate. On the one hand, we have al-Ṭabarī's *Tārīkh al-rusul wa al-mulūk*, which provides the early development of the vizierate in somewhat evolutionary terms and shows continuity with the previous history of the term *wazīr* in the Islamic political context. On the other hand, we have al-Jahshiyārī's *al-Wuzarā' wa al-kuttāb*, which shows that the ʿAbbāsids adopted what was effectively a ready-made institution. Its early history is simply a succession of different viziers, with no institutional

64 Goitein, "The origin of the vizierate and its true character", 182.

65 Ibid., 191.

66 Sourdel, *Le Vizirat ʿAbbāside de 749* à *936 (132 à 324 de l'hégire)*, 41–61.

67 For a discussion of the early development of the vizierate, see R. A. Kimber, "The early ʿAbbāsid vizierate", *Journal of Semitic Studies* 38/1, Spring 1992, 65–85.

development. There is no sense of the ʿAbbāsids experimenting with an Islamic cultural resource. For Jahshiyārī (d. 942), the vizierate existed as a single, well-defined institution of government practically from the beginning of the ʿAbbāsid caliphate. R. A. Kimber is certainly correct when he asserts that while "Goitein's more evolutionary approach, with its emphasis on the vizierate to the heir apparent, is closer to al-Ṭabarī's version of events", Sourdel's uniform approach is "no doubt influenced by al-Jahshiyārī".[68] It is worth noting that the picture of the vizierate that emerges from both al-Ṭabarī and al-Jahshiyārī is essentially administrative in nature, and this tends to weaken Goitein's argument for Arabian tribal origins.

Even if we accept that the vizierate developed gradually during the ʿAbbāsid period, as Goitein claims, we cannot deny the impact of the Sassanian tradition that largely shaped the function and practice of the vizierate. I would argue that the vizierate, whether it grew out of the office of the secretaries whose profession in later Umayyad courts had drawn much inspiration from the Sassanian practice and style, or was a reinvention of the early ʿAbbāsids, owed a great deal to Sassanian practice. The Persian presence is evident from the fact that the vizierate's beginning and period during which it flourished coincide with the rise of the Persian *mawālī*, their occupation of the vizierate for several successive generations, and the adoption of many Persian administrative measures. The Sassanian administrative system, which was regarded by the Arabs as the highest example of wise statecraft, served as the model.[69] It is therefore understandable that Muslim jurists feel the need to provide Islamic guidelines so that this vizierate could still be framed within Islamic principles of government. This is also the reason why most, if not all, viziers and secretaries, were non-Arabs, either non-Muslims or converts who had been familiar with this imported tradition. Generally speaking, ʿAbbāsid viziers were recruited from the scribal class, or *kuttāb*, who were educated either in the Persian tradition or the Byzantine one, depending on which phase of the caliphate one examines.[70]

Now, why non-Muslims precisely? Because of their ability and experience non-Muslims were often kept as administrators, clerks, tax collectors, even as viziers and governors. Well-trained bureaucrats of Persian and Byzantine origin were in ever greater demand to administer an institution that was somehow alien to the Arab culture. Experts in finance and bureaucratic routine, they brought to

68 Kimber, "The early ʿAbbāsid vizierate", 84.

69 It is related that the caliph al-Manṣūr formally ordered his entourage to wear the Persian tall, black, conical hat (*qulansuwa*) and banned the use of the turban, which was worn previously. Meanwhile, the costumes of the Sassanid kings were imitated and garments decorated with golden inscriptions were introduced. Government officials were also encouraged to wear black, which was a symbol of the ʿAbbāsids (the Umayyad colour had been white). For a detailed discussion of how Persian culture found its way into the early ʿAbbāsid court and society, see Mahmood Shakib, *The Influence of Persian Culture during the Early ʿAbbāsid Times*, unpublished Ph.D dissertation (University of Washington, 1982).

70 Hugh Kennedy is right when he says: "Umayyads had had secretaries, and under the early ʿAbbāsids this office developed into the office of vizier". See Hugh Kennedy, *When Baghdad Ruled the Muslim World: The Rise and Fall of Islam's Greatest Dynasty* (Cambridge, MA: Da Capo Press, 2005), 36.

their work the wisdom passed on by generations of experience. Christian subjects in particular had experience in the Byzantine administration, and their knowledge of several languages – Roman, Syriac, Persian and Armenian, in addition to Arabic – made it easier for them to benefit from the experience of other civilizations. In most cases the experiences and educational abilities of Christians made acceptance of their services a great benefit. Fātimid recruitment of viziers was no different. They found some *dhimmīs* to be highly qualified for the post of vizierate. As A. S. Tritton puts it, "The Fātimids attached great importance to the post of chief secretary, and chose their secretaries, both Muslims and *dhimmīs*, for their skill in writing".[71]

In his *State and Society in Fātimid Egypt*, Yaacov Lev argues that the persistence of Christian administrative personnel was the outcome of several factors. First, the agrarian administration was very complex and not easily mastered; Christians played an important role at the local level as well as at the central offices in the capital. Second, administrative knowledge was passed on by the officials to their families when fathers employed their sons, thus maintaining the family hold over the post. Finally, the large number of Christians in the administration also reflected the only partial Islamization of Egypt: this was the case prior to the Fātimids and did not change under their rule.[72] It can be argued that, like the ʿAbbāsids, the Fātimids were simply pragmatic. On the one hand, they were Ismaili Shiis facing a Sunni majority, and on the other, because of the social, economic, and demographic importance of Christians and Jews, the caliphs had to take care of them and employ them in government services.

We also find that some Muslim rulers were reluctant to employ Arab Muslims because of tribal attachments which made them prone to tribal rivalries. ʿUbaydullah ibn Ziyād (d. 686), the Umayyad governor of Iraq, said: "If I employed an Arab as tax collector and embezzled the land-tax and I punished him I risked antagonizing his tribe. If I fined him, deducting the fine from the pension of his clan, I did him harm. If I dropped the matter I would be wasting God's money… . I found therefore the *dihqāns* (Persian gentry) were more knowledgeable about tax-collection, more honest with their trust and and easier for me to call to account".[73] The ʿAbbāsid caliph al-Muʿtaḍid (r. 892–902) also expressed strong confidence in Christians and preferred them to others. During his reign, the governor of Anbar, ʿUmar ibn Yūsuf, was a Christian, and the caliph approved of the appointment on the ground that Christians were found to be competent.[74] It is related that his vizier, ʿUbaydullah ibn Sulaymān, was reluctant to appoint Christians to public office. Al-Muʿtaḍid advised him as follows: "If you found a Christian suitable for any office, you should appoint him.

71 Tritton, *The Caliphs and Their Non-Muslim Subjects*, 25. In fact, there were fewer Ismaili viziers than the other religious groups combined: twenty-nine non-Ismailis to twenty-three Ismailis. Among the non-Ismailis were seven Christians, three Jews, eleven Sunnis, six Shiis, one "Unitarian" (*tawḥīdī*, perhaps Druze?), one Muslim without a *madhhab* and eight unknown. See Al-Imad, *The Fātimid Vizierate*, 71.

72 Yaacov Lev, *State and Society in Fātimid Egypt* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1991), 190.

73 Cited in Tarif Khalidi, *Arabic Historical Thought in the Classical Period* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 89–90.

74 Arnold, *The Preaching of Islam*, 64.

A Christian is more truthful than the Jews because the Jews want the return of kingdom to them; he is also better than a Muslim as the latter is of the same religion as yours he desires to take over your position; he is also better than Zoroastrians because the kingdom is in their hand."[75]

Concluding remarks

This study has sought to establish three main points. First, the concept of the vizierate developed by both Sunni and Ismaili scholars had not been fully implemented by the caliphs in the way they appointed their viziers. While the jurists either prohibited the employment of non-Muslim viziers or limited their power merely to executing the caliphs' commands, the caliphs delegated to their non-Muslim viziers the affairs of state administration (*wizāra tafwīḍ*) in their entirety. Instead of being bound by Islamic law, the caliphs made their decisions regarding the state administrative procedures based on contextual practicality, that is, what worked in a given area. Second, there is a disjunction between the legal conceptualization of the institution of the vizierate developed by the ʿulama and its implementation during ʿAbbāsid times. We have discussed the case of the ʿAbbāsid vizier Faḍl ibn Marwān and the Fātimid viziers Ibn Kīllis and Bahram al-Armānī to show the delicate interplay between theory and practice. Third, the employment of non-Arab viziers (either non-Muslim or converts) supports the idea that this institution of the vizierate was not known to Islam in its early history. It was not until the triumph of the ʿAbbāsids that the vizierate gradually became an integral part of the state administration through the impact of Persian culture. It was precisely because this institution was somewhat alien to the Arab culture the caliphs were compelled to consider non-Muslims who had the experience and skills to fulfil this important post.

This study also has significant implications for the discussion of the nature of state–religion relations in early Islam. The fact that some caliphs delegated their administrative powers to non-Muslim viziers confirms earlier findings about the separation of state and religion in early Islamic society. It is inconceivable that *dhimmī* viziers would govern and administer the day-to-day affairs of state in accordance with the *sharīʿa*. Scholars such as Ira M. Lapidus, Patricia Crone and others have argued that there had been a sharp conflict between the ʿulama and the ʿAbbāsid caliphs, and that the ʿulama would have nothing to do with the state, which eventually led to the separation of religion and state.[76] The argument emphasizing the disharmonious relation between the ʿulama and the caliph comes under attack by Muḥammad Qasim Zaman who argues for "the deep involvement of the early ʿAbbāsids in the religious life

75 Mary ibn Sulaymān, *Akhbār fatārika kursi al-mashriq*, 84; see also Louis Cheikhu, *Wuzarāʾ al-Naṣrāniyya wa kuttābuhā fi al-Islām*, 27.

76 See Ira M. Lapidus, "The separation of state and religion in the development of Early Islamic society", *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 6, 1975, 363–85; Patricia Crone, *Slaves on Horses: The Evolution of the Medieval Polity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980).

of the times".[77] Yet we have seen that, by delegating their administrative power to their non-Muslim viziers, the caliphs failed to integrate such an institution into some kind of "Islamic" framework as defined by Muslim jurists. This was also the case with the Fāṭimids, who were the product of the Ismaili *daʿwa*. The Fāṭimids practised a form of separation of state and religion whereby government institutions, although parallel in organization to the *daʿwa*, functioned independently of it. At the same time the evidence presented in this study shows that the caliphs had lost their political power earlier than Ira M. Lapidus has suggested, that is, from the middle of the tenth century. This study demonstrates that during al-Muʿtaṣim's reign in the first half of the ninth century effective control of the Arab–Muslim empire had passed into the hand of Christian vizier Faḍl ibn Marwān.

This study also shows the extent to which non-Muslim *dhimmīs* were embedded in the early Muslim state.[78] What makes this sense of *dhimmī* embeddedness in Muslim society possible is that early Muslim/non-Muslim relations were not as hostile as is sometimes supposed. In most cases, the Arab rulers did not interfere with the internal civil and religious administration of *dhimmīs*. This also explains why the peoples of the conquered provinces did not confine themselves simply to accepting the new regime, but in some cases actively assisted in its establishment. As Bernard Lewis notes, "The change from Byzantine to Arab rule seems to have been gradually welcomed by the subject peoples, who found the new yoke far lighter than the old, both in taxation and in other matters".[79] It is now more fashionable to argue that the Islam of earlier times seems to be more tolerant than that of later times, because in earlier periods Muslims were ready to learn and adopt anything valuable from the experiences of other communities.

77 Muḥammad Qasim Zaman, *Religion and Politics under the Early ʿAbbāsids: The Emergence of the Proto-Sunni Elite* (Leiden: Brill, 1997), 11.

78 I would like to thank Professor Mark Cohen for driving me to this important point. It would be interesting to discuss the significance of *dhimmī* viziers and secretaries for the non-Muslim communities themselves, but this would make another article.

79 Bernard Lewis, *The Arabs in History* (London: Hutchinson's University Library, 1950), 58.

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