How Did the Umayyads Deal with the Religious and Ethnic Communities?

Since its establishment in 661 CE, the Umayyad state ruled an enormous geographic expanse stretching from al-Andalus in the west to the frontiers of India and Central Asia in the east, and from the Caucasus in the north to Africa in the south. This realm included large and diverse populations, such as Arabs, Persians, Amazigh, Turks, Copts, and Syriacs, in addition to various religious communities including Christians, Jews, Zoroastrians, Buddhists, Mandaeans, and Manichaeans.

Although Islam spread gradually, Muslims remained a small minority in the lands they ruled, and estimates cited by researcher Andrew Marsham in his book The Umayyad Empire indicate that more than 90% of the population of the Umayyad state, until its final years, were neither of Arab origin nor followers of Islam.

Given this complex demographic reality, a fundamental question arises: how did the Umayyad state manage a vast empire that encompassed multiple peoples, religions, and cultures? And did the Umayyads adopt exclusionary policies toward other religions and sects?

In this report from the file “The Legacy of Banu Umayya,” we attempt to answer

these questions by tracing the Umayyad state's policies in managing religious and ethnic diversity, and by reviewing examples of its relationship with different religious communities.

The Dhimma System: Managing Religious Plurality in the Umayyad State

The Umayyad state's policy toward non-Muslims extended the approach established by the Prophet ﷺ and the Rightly Guided Caliphs in regulating relations with followers of other religions. This relationship was based on the dhimma system, a covenant of protection and security through which Jews, Christians, and Sabians residing in the abode of Islam were granted protection for their lives and property, as well as freedom to practice their religious rites, in return for paying the jizya tax.

This system gave dhimmis broad religious and social freedom, enabling them to practice their rituals and manage their religious affairs through their own institutions and courts. They also participated in economic activity across various professions, and the Umayyad caliphs granted the heads of religious communities several privileges, such as overseeing tax collection. A number of dhimmis also held senior positions in the state, as we will discuss later.

Within this regulatory framework, the population of the Umayyad state was generally divided into four main categories: Arabs, who formed the ruling elite; the mawali, a class that emerged in the wake of the Islamic conquests; dhimmis from other religions; and slaves.

Christians in the Umayyad State

Various Christian sects were able to live in harmony during the Umayyad era, enjoying freedom in managing their internal affairs, and they participated in most of the state's administrative work, serving as scribes, bureau chiefs, physicians, and secretaries in the Umayyad court.

As for Christians' own stand toward the Umayyad state, Christians of Greater Syria and the Fertile Crescent adopted the civilizational and cultural identity of Arab-Islamic civilization in the Umayyad era, as they were among those who helped shape it and contribute to its institutions. They did not see themselves as strangers within a foreign caliphate, nor as isolated subjects or marginal minorities. Rather, they considered Umayyad rule to have delivered them from Byzantine and Sasanian rule, as researcher Najib George Awad notes.

In his study "Living Together: Social Visions and Changing Interactions of Arabs and Other Religious Communities During the Umayyad Era," Fred M. Donner recounts that Muawiya ibn Abi Sufyan, from the time he became governor of Syria in 639 CE, enjoyed cordial and close relations with Christians. He had strong ties

with the Christian Kalb tribe, and Muawiya even personally financed the rebuilding of a church in the city of Edessa. The leader of the Christians in Damascus was also Muawiya’s own physician.

Some accounts also point to Muawiya ibn Abi Sufyan’s openness to religious discussions with Christians. In his study “The Family of al-Mansur and Saint John of Damascus: Christians and Muslims in the Umayyad Era,” Sidney Griffith, professor at the Catholic University of America, recounts that in 659 CE the Maronites and Syriac Orthodox appealed to Muawiya in a dispute over the nature of Christ’s union, and Muawiya ruled in favor of the Maronites.

He also notes that the Syriac historian John bar Penkaye, writing in the late seventh century CE, said Muawiya had achieved broad peace in the Christian regions he ruled and left everyone free to remain in whatever religion they chose. In the historian’s words: “When Muawiya ruled, peace spread throughout the whole world—a peace the like of which we had never heard of or seen, nor had our fathers or grandfathers.”

Around 661 CE, when Muawiya was pledged allegiance in Jerusalem, he visited a number of Christian sites, including the Church of Gethsemane, Mary’s Tomb, and Golgotha, and it is said that he also visited the Church of the Holy Sepulchre and the Chapel of the Ascension. After his death, Yazid I (680–683) did not change the policy followed toward Christians.

After the deaths of Yazid and then Muawiya II, a struggle over the caliphate broke out. Hassan ibn Malik, leader of the Christian Kalb tribe, encouraged Umayyad leaders to pledge allegiance to Marwan ibn al-Hakam, and the Kalb tribe played an important role in consolidating Umayyad rule during that period.

The role of Christians was not limited to political influence; it also extended to administration and the economy. Sulayman ibn Abd al-Malik (715–717 CE), for instance, appointed for himself a Christian scribe named al-Batriq ibn al-Naqa and put him in charge of construction projects in Ramla.

Although Caliph Umar ibn Abd al-Aziz (717–720 CE) tried to limit dhimmis from holding certain state offices, he did not do so out of prejudice against them. Rather, he guaranteed them freedom to engage in all economic, commercial, and agricultural activities, from which they made substantial profits.

In fact, during his short reign, Umar ibn Abd al-Aziz took measures that eased the financial burdens on dhimmis, including reducing the jizya and exempting those who converted to Islam from paying it, since some Umayyad governors in the provinces had continued collecting it so state revenues would not decline. Umar ibn Abd al-Aziz abolished this practice because it contradicted Islamic law. His policy toward dhimmis was reflected in his letter to his governor in Basra, Adi ibn

Artat, in which he told him: “Look after the dhimmis kindly, and if one of them grows old and has no wealth, provide for him.”.

Notably, Christian sources remember Umar ibn Abd al-Aziz as having had a positive impact on Christians. The Syriac Chronicle of 819 CE described him as follows: “Umar ibn Abd al-Aziz ruled for two years and seven months, and he was a righteous man and a king more merciful than all those who came before him.” The Jacobite patriarch of the same period also described him as “a merciful man, loving truth and justice, and avoiding evil.”

In her study on Christian art and visual culture in Umayyad Bilad al-Sham, Basma Hamarneh explains that Christian communities flourished during the Umayyad era and that Umayyad rulers regarded them as their brothers. Some accounts also point to continued contact between Christians in the Umayyad state and their counterparts abroad, such as the participation of representatives from Damascus in the Council of Constantinople between 680 and 681 and archaeological evidence from the Umayyad period also show continued care for churches, with extensive church construction and restoration works during the seventh century and early eighth century.

Evidence for this includes the establishment of no fewer than eleven churches in Damascus during the reigns of Muawiya ibn Abi Sufyan (661–680) and Abd al-Malik ibn Marwan (685–705).

The historian al-Maqrizi also mentions that Saint Mark’s Church was built in Alexandria between 676 and 679 CE. When Abd al-Aziz ibn Marwan, governor of Egypt, founded the city of Helwan in Egypt, he allowed the construction of a church known as the “Church of the Farrashin.” Likewise, when water supplies became insufficient to meet the needs of the monastery of Hind al-Sughra in al-Hira, Bishr ibn Marwan ibn al-Hakam, governor of Kufa, ordered a canal to be dug from the Euphrates River to provide the monastery with the necessary water.

Moreover, there were also large Christian communities in various conquered regions, whether in former Roman lands or former Sasanian territories, as well as in Africa and the Mediterranean basin, such as the Nubians and Aksumites in East Africa, the Visigoths, and also the Georgians, Armenians, and Albanians in the Caucasus. The Umayyads’ treatment of these groups did not differ greatly from their treatment of the Christians of Bilad al-Sham.

However tense Umayyad rule may have become with Christians in some periods, it is misleading to assume that this was systematic. In his study “Living Together,” Fred M. Donner distinguishes between two phases in Umayyad-Christian relations. The first extended from the beginning of Umayyad rule until 692 and was marked by a lenient policy that allowed Christians a broad presence

in Umayyad administration.

The second phase began under Abd al-Malik ibn Marwan, when the state moved to emphasize its Islamic and Arab identity in its institutions. But this did not sever its relations with Christians, as Abd al-Malik continued to appoint prominent Christians to important administrative posts, such as Mansur ibn Sarjun as head of his administrative apparatus in Damascus, and Athanasius as the de facto head of administration in Egypt on behalf of his brother Abd al-Aziz.

When the Islamic mint was established under Abd al-Malik, many dhimmi workers were employed there because of their expertise in financial affairs. Financial administration in Damascus remained the preserve of the Sarjun family until the reign of Caliph al-Walid ibn Abd al-Malik. Some dhimmis learned Arabic so they could continue administrative work after the state bureaus were Arabized under Caliph Abd al-Malik ibn Marwan.

Researchers note that Arab Christian tribes remained present in political and cultural life during the Umayyad era, such as Banu Kalb, Tanukh, and Taghlib. The Christian Taghlibi poet al-Akhtal was among the most prominent court poets during the reigns of Yazid, Marwan, and Abd al-Malik, and he was the poet known as the poet of Banu Umayya.

Jews: From Persecution to Stability

In the sixth and seventh centuries CE, Bilad al-Sham was one of the main centers of Judaism, with large Jewish communities living in cities such as Tiberias, the Golan, Jerusalem, and Jericho. Thousands of Jews also lived in Egypt, especially in Alexandria, as mentioned by Andrew Marsham in his book The Umayyad Empire.

But these Jewish communities faced mounting pressure under Byzantine rule, and tensions between Jews and Christians worsened during the Byzantine-Sasanian wars in the early seventh century. Some sources indicate that Jewish groups in Bilad al-Sham sided with Persian forces against Byzantine rule, particularly during the Sasanian conquest of Jerusalem in 614 CE.

After the Byzantine emperor Heraclius retook Jerusalem around 629–630 CE, some historical sources indicate that Jews were subjected to retaliatory measures, such as expulsion from Jerusalem. Some accounts also state that Heraclius issued a decree mandating the forced baptism of all Jews in the empire.

This reality changed with the Arab conquests in the mid-seventh century CE, as the waves of persecution imposed on Jews under Byzantine rule came to an end. Historical evidence points to the continued activity of Jewish synagogues in Bilad

al-Sham during the seventh and eighth centuries CE. Jewish communities in cities such as Alexandria and elsewhere also retained the religious and social rights stipulated in the surrender treaties concluded with the Muslims.

For example, the governor of Caliph Hisham in Iraq, Khalid ibn Abd Allah al-Qasri (723–738 CE), was tolerant toward Jews. The historian al-Baladhuri records in his book Futuh al-Buldan the text of commander Habib ibn Maslama's treaty with the people of Dabil (Dvin), then one of the most important urban centers in Armenia, in which he granted security to Christians, Magians, and Jews. It reads:

"This is a document from Habib ibn Maslama to the Christians of Dabil, its Magians and its Jews, those present and those absent: I grant you safety for your lives, your property, your churches, your synagogues, and your city wall. You are secure, and we are bound to fulfill the covenant with you so long as you remain faithful and pay the jizya and kharaj. God is sufficient as witness."

Some later Jewish texts from the Umayyad era portray Umayyad rulers as saviors from Byzantine oppression, and some Jewish accounts even indicate that Jews in a number of cities welcomed the Umayyad armies warmly.

In al-Andalus, which the Umayyads conquered in 711 CE, some studies indicate that Jews cooperated with Muslim commanders and supported the conquest campaigns out of resentment toward the rule and rulers of the Spanish Visigoth kings. When the Umayyad family succeeded in establishing the Emirate of Cordoba in 756 CE, Jews enjoyed rights similar to those of dhimmis in the East.

With the consolidation of the Umayyad state in Cordoba and the flourishing of civil and cultural life during the ninth and tenth centuries, Jews began to hold prominent political and administrative positions, becoming advisers and ministers, while Jewish scholarly and cultural life also flourished during this period.

Managing Religious and Ethnic Diversity in Persia and Central Asia

The signing of surrender agreements allowed the inhabitants of newly conquered lands to continue their lives much as before. After the fall of the Sasanian Empire, the Umayyads relied on Persian elites to administer taxes and lands.

In his study The Persian Princes and the Umayyads, Touraj Daryaee notes that archaeological evidence from iran and Sistan reveals Umayyad flexibility in ruling the Iranian plateau. Their policies were not as harsh as modern Persian history books portray them; rather, the Umayyads sought to win over local elites after the fall of the Sasanians and the Rashidun conquests. The researcher concluded that Persian-Umayyad cooperation at the local level was a key factor in preventing uprisings and enhancing stability.

Zoroastrians lived alongside other religious communities in Iraq and Persia and were not subjected to persecution under Umayyad rule. Andrew Marsham noted in his book The Umayyad Empire that Zoroastrians were granted a status similar to that of Jews and Christians under the Umayyads, and some later converted to Islam.

Even groups such as the Mandaeans and Manichaeans maintained their religious and social presence under Umayyad rule. Although evidence is limited regarding their conditions in the Umayyad era, the survival of the Mandaeans under the designation “Sabians” suggests that their experience did not differ greatly from that of Jews, Christians, and other religious minorities at the time.

Likewise, in Central Asian regions such as Khorasan and Balkh, multiple peoples were present, including Turks, Hephthalites, and Bactrians. The city of Balkh was a center of Buddhism. The conquering Arabs concluded agreements with local elites such as the dihqans and the marzban to facilitate the administration of these regions rather than impose control by force, as Andrew Marsham notes in his book The Umayyad Empire.

In her research paper “Non-Muslims in the Army of the Islamic Conquest in Early Islam,” Wadad al-Qadi indicates that non-Muslims from various religions and sects participated in the Umayyad army and naval fleets. They filled multiple roles such as messengers, observers, spies, and advisers, in addition to technical and service functions such as sailors, while some also took part directly in military operations.

As for the Amazigh, or Berbers, in North Africa and the Maghreb, they gradually embraced Islam and participated in the conquests. Military leaders emerged from among them, taking command of armies and contributing to the expansion of the state. But their relationship with Umayyad authority fluctuated between integration and tension, and this tension was embodied in the Great Berber Revolt (739–743 CE).

In conclusion, it is clear that the Umayyad caliphs continued a policy of tolerance toward dhimmis and dealt with all religious and ethnic communities through integrated policies that included the dhimma system, making use of the expertise of these elites, ensuring protection for their rites and institutions, and concluding agreements with local elites.

It can be said that the Umayyad state did not rely on force alone to govern its vast empire; it also sought understanding and coexistence with those who differed from it. This experience made the Umayyads an important model for managing religious and ethnic pluralism. Historian Will Durant noted this in his book The Story of Civilization, where he writes: “The protected non-Muslim

communities—Christians, Zoroastrians, Jews, and Sabians—enjoyed under the Umayyad state a high degree of freedom and tolerance unmatched in Christian lands in these days."

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