

# HEAVY TAXATION AND HUMILIATION CONTRIBUTING TO CONVERSIONS IN IRAN

Dr. Kersey Antia, Jan 16, 2020

Daniel C. Dennat, Jr., relates that the Christian church in Egypt had “a powerful machinery for resisting conversion and for keeping the worshippers in line”, but in Khurasan the Christian, Jewish and Magian Communities were not so capable of resisting Islamization because of their geographical position and local circumstances”. (*Conversion and the Poll Tax in Early Islam*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, 1950, p. 119). Dennat notes that in Iran “there was not the organized opposition to Islam which the Arabs encountered elsewhere” (p. 119). Since the Arabs exempted converts to Islam from paying Jaziya tax, the burden of paying taxes became intolerable for those who did not convert, creating a financial crisis which is well documented at least for Khurasan by Dennat. For instance when in the year A.H. 110 a local prince complained to the governor of Khurasan al-Ashres that, Kharaj (taxation) was “going broke”, Asras responded: “Verily in the Kharaj is the strength of the Muslims. I have learned that the people of as-Sughd (Sogdia) and their likes have not become Muslims sincerely. They have accepted Islam only to escape Jizya”.

Similarly, the Dahaqin of Bukhara complained to Ashres: “From whom are you going to get the Khara when everyone has become an Arab?” Ashres then ordered his tax officials: “Collect the Kharaj from those from whom you used to collect it and restore the Jizya on those who have become Muslims,” which led 7,000 Sogdians to secede.

When a Mawla tax collector protested against it, he was imprisoned. His friends revolted,” but were soon disposed of. Then the Arab supervisors of the Kharaj insisted on collecting it in full and they mistreated the Persians. The clothing was torn from the Dahaqin, their girdles (Kusti) were hung about their necks in derision and they took the Jizya from the converts who were weak.

Dennet quotes W. Barthold and H.A.R. Gibbs as maintaining at the local Iranian princes much more than the Arab invaders were interested in meeting the tribute quota as it served their political interest, the preservation of their authority, which was being undermined by the spread of Islam. \*Ashras on his part was not acting out of piety; instead, his principal aim was to secure the allegiance of the Sogdians and he employed Islam as a means. Ghurak (the local prince) opposed him since the success of Ashra's campaign would have frustrated Ghurak's hope of recovering his independence. This explanation is entirely

probable (pp. 123-4). However Dennett does not agree with Van Vloten's notion of an Iranian population staggering under a burden of taxation and ready to revolt at the first opportunity" (p. 228) though this notion is more often supported by many historians as indicated in my paper on the Abbasid Revolution. It is interesting to learn how the Arabs ended up adopting the Sasanian system of taxation.

Dennett regards "Khushro divided the land into units, each unit Jarib, consisting or The Arab Tax System virtually the same as the Persian" (p. 14). Up to the reign of Khushro I (531-79 AD), as Dennett explains, the tax on land was proportional to the harvest, which proved problematic in case the harvest rotted before the tax collector could arrive to measure it. In order to remedy this, Khushro divided the land into units, each unit, Jarib consisting of 2,400 square meters and levied a tax of one Dirham per year on crop land and more on vineyards, date palms or olive trees. Khusro also discontinued the previous practice of collecting a fixed amount of taxes assessed by collectors themselves as best as they could and compelled all able bodied males between the ages of 20 and 50 to pay poll tax graded according to their income; the majority of population ending up paying the smallest amount.

However, the Ruling House, nobility, priests, administrative chiefs, soldiers, secretaries and those serving the king were exempted from paying taxes. This resulted in a sharp distinction between the ruling class and the ruled. While in theory the latter were to pay the poll tax in lieu of being unable to conduct royal, administrative or priestly duties. Dennett quoting Noldeke, holds that "the payment of the tax amount to a badge of degradation and a mark of social inferiority" (p. 15), which, however, I for one find it hard to accept for all that I know of the Persian and Zoroastrian tradition and that prompts me to evaluate it further on my own, especially as no subjects could avoid taxation.

"Like many of the other Muslim wars of conquest", explains Dennett, "the first attack on the Sassanid empire began as a raid which resulted in an unexpected initial success" (p.15). Other raids followed; as detailed by me in my paper, Arab Conquest of Iraq (forthcoming). Relying on Caetani's observations and finding them correct, Dennett informs us "what was contemplated was not the overthrow of an empire but the seizure of booty" (p.19). However, when Al-Hirah was captured by the Arabs, its royal governor was offered three choices by the Arabs: conversion, payment of Jizya or the declaration of war, and he accepted to pay Jizya.

But the Persians realized that al-Hira was the military key to Iraq and so the Persians severely crushed the Arabs in the Battle of the Bridge in A.H.13 with other Arab possessions nearby but did not follow up the victory and ultimately lost out to the Arabs in May 37 in the battle of al-Qadisiyah. The Arabs then occupied the Persian capital, al-

Madain (Ctesiphon) in July 637 and crushed the remnants of the Sasanian army at Jalula. (Here I am reminded of a comment by Patricia Crone, noted elsewhere by me that had the Persians chosen their capital on the highlands of interior Iran, the cold weather would have barred the Arabs from prevailing over them and given the Persians more time to prepare).

The Caliph Umar indeed “learned that the climate of Ctesiphone was bad” and built a new city of al-Kufah. However, “over vast areas there was now no government at all. It was impossible to demand tribute from the conquered, for the good reason that the conquered were not present to pay it. They had either died or fled. The peasants still remained on the land, to be sure, but in the absence of the legal owners of the land, the peasants cannot be expected to sign treaties or collect their own revenue. The Arabs had to do the job themselves” (p. 19).

However the Arabs did not contemplate becoming peasants but preferred to be landlords living off the labour of the farmers. So at least three farmers were assigned to each Arab. However, if such a sedentary system of landlords prevailed in the area, there will be few Arabs available for garrisoning the cities conquered, defending the frontiers and maintaining a large army. Therefore, Umar decided against allowing the Arabs to become sedentary landlords and instituted a system of levying poll and Jizya tax on peasants and natives for sustaining the Muslim fighters (p. 20).

Even though the Persians who converted to Islam were exempted from the Jizya tax, Dennett contends that the subjected peoples of Iraq did not receive the same treatment that the Arabs were privy to. “On the Contrary”, he asserts, “The Theme of Wellhauser, Goldziher, von Vloten, and all the other historians of the Arab empire is that in spite of the principles of the Koran, there was not the quality within the Muslim community. The Arabs of the conquest formed a ruling aristocracy, with special rights and privileges, which they emphatically did not propose to share with the Mawali. From this circumstance resulted more of the civil disorder during the Umayyad period” (p.38).

1. There dwelt in the chief cities many *mawali*, who had come from the villages of the Sawad. Al-Hajjaj compelled them to return to their villages and rural districts, and he placed the poll tax *on their necks* in the same manner it used to be taken from them when they were infidels.
2. During the revolt of Ibn Ash'ath, the *mawali* in Basra had been a source of danger. They were numerous and powerful. Al-Hajjaj wished to disperse them so that they would no longer form a community. He said therefore, “You are barbarians and strangers. You belong in your towns and villages.” He dispersed

them, destroyed their unity, sent them wherever he pleased; and he branded the name of the place where each man was sent upon his hand.

3. 'Umar ibn 'Abd-al-Azia removed the jizya from those in Egypt who had become Muslims. The first man who took the jizya from converts was al-Hajjaj b. Yusuf.

In the Islamic community, the idea of citizenship as a political concept meant not membership in the Muslim state, but membership in a tribe; therefore, when a non-Arab became Muslim, he acquired political significance—if at all—by becoming the client or *mawla* of a patron or a tribe. As such, both legally and in fact, the convert was placed in an inferior status (p.38).

Citizenship among the Arabs did not then mean membership in a Muslim state but in an Arab tribe and a non-Arab had to become the client (Mawla) of a tribe or its member. “As such,” notes Dennett, “both legally and in fact, the convert was placed in an inferior status.” (p.38). Thus, the nobles of Isfahen who were exempt from paying tax during the Sasanian times preferred converting to Islam rather than submitting to “the shame of paying a poll tax which continued under the Arabs to be a sign of degradation.” (p.33). Dennett also reports Ali telling the Dihqan of Ain at-Tamr who converted to Islam: “As for the Jizja on your head, we shall remove it, but your land belongs to the Muslims.” The Caliphs Umar and Ali let the converts continue to possess their land but ordered them to pay the Kharaj always as in the past. What Dennett notes further is very revealing: “The evidence suggests that many of those who were exempt from the poll tax in Persian days became Muslim rather than pay it to the Arabs, but that most of those, who had paid poll tax before continued to pay it and did not become Muslims” (p. 33).

It is so evident, however, the ultimately “rapacious taxation”, persecution, humiliation, oppression and the like forced the latter to convert or to die for their cause. Dennett attributed the reason for the rapid Islamization of Iran, when compared to Egypt, to the fact that the Arab tribes had migrated to Khurasan in significantly large numbers and “were scattered over the length and breadth of the land”. This proximity of conqueror to conquered”, pointed out by Dennett “encouraged conversion, which from the frequency with which the venues of Mawali appear in the texts and the large numbers of these converts who are mentioned as accompanying” their Arab patrons can easily be verified (p. 118).

However, the phenomenon of coerced, involuntary conversions created its own problems and led to the Abbasid Revolution, as already brought out by me, as well as to Shi'ism, Sufism, Hagarism, etc.