



# CONVERSION II. OF IRANIANS TO ISLAM

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Iranians were among the very earliest converts to Islam, and their conversion in significant numbers began as soon as the Arab armies reached and overran the Persian plateau. Despite some resistance from elements of the Zoroastrian clergy and other ancient religions, the anti-Islamic policies of later conquerors like the Il-khanids, the impact of the Christian and secular West in modern times, and the attraction of new religious movements like [Babism](#) and the [Bahai faith](#), the vast majority of Iranians became and have remained Muslims. Today perhaps 98 percent of ethnic Iranians, including the population of Persia, are at least nominal Muslims. For such a fundamental, pervasive, and enduring cultural transformation, the phenomenon of Iranian conversions to Islam has received remarkably little scholarly attention (for an early and still worthwhile survey of the subject, see Arnold, pp. 209-20; for significant recent advances, see Bulliet, 1979a; idem, 1979b).

The obstacles to historical understanding of the process of conversion are, in fact, formidable. Although there is an abundance of potentially useful information, it consists of isolated and fragmentary bits of data embedded in many diverse sources: the vast corpus of Arabic and Persian chronicles (for



the most useful and authoritative, see Ṭabarī; Balāḍorī, *Fotūḥ*), local histories (e.g., Naršaḳī; *Tāriḳ-e Sīstān*; Qomī; Ebn Esfandiār), biographical dictionaries, religious texts, and so on. The voluminous works of Sunni and Shi'ite prosopography can also be mined for conversion stories, as can such Sufi texts as Farīd-al-Dīn 'Aṭṭār's *Tadkerat al-awliā'* and Abu'l-Ḥasan Hojvīrī's *Kašf al-maḥjūb*. Geographical texts often provide information on the religious demography of cities and regions (see especially Moqaddasī; *Ḥodūd al-ālam*, tr. Minorsky). All this material has yet to be sifted and analyzed in a systematic fashion.

Beyond the task of collecting the necessary information, there are also significant theoretical issues that must be resolved. The most difficult problem for the modern researcher is determining what constituted a "conversion to Islam" and how it can be identified. It is not clear, for example, to what extent conversion in the early periods was regarded as a formal or ritual act or, in the absence of a church and clergy, how a conversion was ascertained and verified. Some officials, for example, Ašras b. 'Abd-Allāh at Samarqand, seem to have insisted on proof of a full, formal adherence to Islam, including circumcision, attention to ritual, and ability to read the Qur'ān, before accepting a conversion as valid (Ṭabarī, II, p. 1508). Yet numerous individuals must have made nominal conversions to Islam without full acceptance or understanding of the ritual and doctrinal obligations involved. There were clearly many popular, syncretistic sects in early Islamic Persia, and neither heresiographers nor tax collectors were certain whether they should be regarded as Muslim or not. The Ḳorramdīniya, for example, were reported to use mosques and the Qur'ān but did not adhere to all ritual or legal requirements (Baḡdādī, *Farq*, ed. 'Abd-al-Ḥamīd, p. 269; Ebn Ḥawqal, tr. Kramers, p. 364), and one Kurdish group (the Kūrdānāyē) combined aspects of Zoroastrianism, Christianity, and Islam (Michael the Syrian, p. 50; Bar Hebraeus, pp. 131-32). For a proper understanding of the process of the Islamification of Iranians all these tendencies must be taken into account. Finally, the term "Iranian" itself raises difficulties. It is often necessary to guess on the basis of a name or other information whether an individual was a Persian speaker or a member of some other ethnic group living on or around the Persian plateau. It is also not always possible to know whether a given ethnic group (e.g., the Hayātela = Hephthalites) should be regarded as Iranian or not. For the purposes of this article, "Iranian" will be used in the broadest sense of the term. In view of such unresolved problems, any observations about the conversion of Iranians to Islam must be regarded as tentative and in part speculative.



Recent research has established a general chronological framework for the process of conversion of Iranians to Islam. From a study of the probable dates of individual conversions based on genealogies in biographical dictionaries, Richard Bulliet has suggested that there was gradual and limited conversion of Persians down to the end of the Omayyad period (132/750), followed by a rapid increase in the number of conversions after the 'Abbasid revolution, so that by the time when regional dynasties had been established in the east (ca. 338/950) 80 percent or more of Iranians had become Muslims. The data on which Bulliet's study was based limited the validity of this paradigm to generalizations about full, formal conversions in an urban environment. The situation in rural areas and individual regions may have been quite different, but the overall pattern is consistent with what can be deduced from traditional historical sources. Although in some areas, for example, Shiraz at the time of Moqaddasi's visit in about 375/985 (p. 429), there may still have been strong non-Muslim elements, it is reasonable to suppose that the Persian milieu as a whole became predominantly Islamic within the period of time suggested by Bulliet's research.

The process of converting Iranians to Islam commenced in Arabia itself, where numerous people of Persian origin were resident, probably as a consequence of Sasanian involvement in Yemen. Ṭabarī (I, pp. 1778-81) gave the names of several individuals said to be of Persian ancestry among the freedmen (*mawālī*) of the Prophet Moḥammad. According to tradition, the first and most important of them was Salmān Fārsī, who became the prototype of Persian converts and the symbol of the role that Persia and Persians would play in the future of Islam. A second set of converts came from the ranks of soldiers defeated during the early phases of the wars of expansion: 4,000 after the battle of Qādesiyya; substantial numbers of heavy cavalry (*asāwera*) from Susa, Tostar, and Ahvāz; several *dehqāns* after the battle of Jalūlā'; ordinary infantrymen in other parts of Persia (Ṭabarī, I, pp. 2485, 2563; Balāḍorī, *Fotūḥ*, pp. 265, 373-74). Some of these converts accepted Islam half-heartedly "as a refuge," others in order to gain entry into the Muslim armies, to keep existing property, or to become eligible for permission to settle on conquered lands. In several areas individuals from the local Persian elite also converted to Islam fairly quickly, primarily in order to preserve their existing privileges or to gain entry into the new Muslim ruling elite. These early converts probably formed an influential core around which other converts would coalesce, as is known to have happened in conversion to other religions. There do not appear to have been any systematic efforts at widespread proselytization among the



Persian population before the conquest of Transoxania (ca. 88-94/706-12). There Qotayba b. Moslem clearly pursued a policy of encouraging conversion by destroying local religious monuments, building mosques, having the Qurʾān read in Persian, forcing the local population to share their homes with Arabs, and offering a payment of 2 dirhams to anyone attending [Friday prayers](#) (Naršaḳī, pp. 65-67; tr. Frye, pp. 47-49). Qotayba's intention was probably to use Islam as a means of pacifying and governing the region and as a tool of political control, undermining the local aristocracy, only a few of whom in Transoxania seem to have converted until after the 'Abbasid revolution. This policy was not instantly successful, as many of the inhabitants, like the Saxons in the time of Charlemagne, tended to apostatize as soon as the Muslim armies withdrew (Naršaḳī, p. 66; tr. Frye, p. 48). The pious Omayyad caliph 'Omar b. 'Abd-al-'Azīz (r. 99-101/717-20) may have launched an ambitious effort at proselytization throughout Persia; in his time there were perhaps 20,000 recent converts, but after he promised relief from the poll tax many more accepted Islam (Ṭabarī, II, p. 1354; Balāḍorī, *Fotūḥ*, p. 426). Later Omayyad officials, notably Ašras b. 'Abd-Allāh in 110/728, also encouraged the conversion of the Transoxanians but insisted on more rigorous adherence to Islamic practices (Ṭabarī, II, pp. 1507-08).

The 'Abbasid *da'wa* (lit, "call") in Khorasan was a particularly successful effort at winning converts to Islam, as well as political recruits. Numerous sources note that Abū Moslem persuaded many *dehqāns*, peasants, and slaves to join his cause. According to the anonymous *Aḳbār al-'Abbās* (p. 280), new military recruits were interrogated as to whether or not they were Muslims, and there are many other hints in the texts that 'Abbasid propaganda involved religious instruction: summoning people to follow the Qurʾān and the traditions of the Prophet (and disavowing the missionary Ḳedāš, who won converts by teaching that the Qurʾān did not require prayer, fasting, or the pilgrimage); sending preachers (*motakallemīn*) into cities; engaging in religious disputation; providing free meals to attract crowds to hear 'Abbasid preachers; and the like (for examples, see *Aḳbār al-'Abbās*, pp. 203-07, 210; Ṭabarī, II, pp. 1358, 1501, 1588; Ebn al-Aṭīr, V, p. 196; Maqdesī, *Bad'*, VI, p. 61). It may thus be assumed that converting Persians to Islam was an important element of Abū Moslem's agenda. The fact that, as governor of Khorasan following the success of the 'Abbasid revolution, he constructed several new mosques in the region also suggests that the numbers of Muslims there had increased substantially as a result of the *da'wa*. Somewhat later the Isma'īli *da'wa* may have served a similar purpose in more remote and rural areas; Nāṣer(-e) Ḳosrow's



conversion of the people of Badaḡšān is an example (for discussion and further references, see Daftary, pp. 216-18; cf. Stern). A somewhat different but equally effective type of missionary work and proselytization was conducted by Shi'ite refugees who settled in parts of western Persia. At Qom a militant colony of Arabs led by the brothers Aḡwaṣ and 'Abd-Allāh b. Sa'd b. Malek Aš'arī transformed the area into a bastion of Shi'ism (Qomī, pp. 244ff.; Faqīhī; Madelung, 1988, p. 79). From 250/864 onward in Deylam and the Caspian provinces several 'Alids, including Ḥasan b. Zayd, Moḡammad b. Zayd, and Ḥasan b. 'Alī Oṭrūš, successfully combined propagation of Zaydī Shi'ite Islam with popular sociopolitical movements (Mas'ūdī, *Morūj* IX, p. 5; for further discussion and sources, see Madelung, 1965; idem, 1987). In the countryside the many syncretistic movements, for example, those led by Behāfarīd, Sonbād, and Bābak Korramī probably represented a transitional phase in the local progression from existing popular cults (based on Zoroastrianism, Manicheism, Buddhism, and other religions) to Islam.

It is difficult to be precise about the motives or forces that facilitated the conversion of the Iranian population to Islam. The notion that coercion was a significant factor in producing conversions to Islam has been generally discredited (Arnold, p. 5). Virtually all the purported texts of treaties with conquered Persian cities contain guarantees of protection for the existing religious communities and for the free exercise of their customary religions (e.g., Ṭabarī, I, pp. 2641, 2655-62). There may, however, have been sporadic use of force, not so much to compel conversions as to weaken the hold of Zoroastrianism over the population. For example, both Muslim and non-Muslim authors alluded to the execution of Zoroastrian priests, the destruction of fire temples, and the burning of Zoroastrian texts in K̄vārazm (Balādorī, *Fotūh*, p. 421; Bīrūnī, *Āṭār*, p. 35); orders for similar actions were sent to Sīstān but apparently were not implemented (*Tārīk-e Sīstān*, pp. 92-94). As the Zoroastrian establishment had already been weakened by popular discontent as manifested in Mazdakite upheavals and the spread of Christianity and Buddhism in the late Sasanian period, even limited Muslim attacks on the clergy and temples may have helped to create a religious vacuum, which Islam gradually filled. It is also likely that many of the men, women, and children taken captive during the wars of conquest converted under a certain amount of duress or at least an implied threat of force; the best example is the story of the Persian commander Hormozān's conversion to avoid execution (Ṭabarī, I, p. 2560). In any case, social and economic considerations were much more important than coercion in producing significant numbers of conversions. It is



clear from the sources that in some areas elements of the Persian aristocracy—*dehqāns*, *marzbāns*, and the like—accepted Islam in order to preserve their social status and to avoid the stigma of paying certain taxes from which they had traditionally been exempted as a privileged class. Although the whole town of Qazvīn supposedly converted rather than pay the poll tax (Balāḍorī, *Fotūḥ*, p. 321), the idea that commoners converted simply to evade taxation is controversial. In theory conversion may have removed some tax burdens, but it also imposed others, like *zakāt* (alms tax); furthermore, some converts continued to be held responsible for the old taxes, or new taxes were introduced in their place (see Dennett, *passim*). However, there may have occasionally been economic incentives to convert, for example, Qotayba's offer of cash payments to those who showed up for the ritual prayers. Subtle social pressures were probably more effective than financial inducements in bringing about conversions. The strong sentiments expressed by Neẓām al-Molk (tr., pp. 166-69) against employing non-Muslims in public service or even visiting them when ill or attending their funerals had no doubt already been current for some time; certainly the prejudice against marriage with non-Muslims and other legal restrictions (like dietary regulations preventing acceptance of certain foods from non-Muslims and impediments to the inheritance by non-Muslims of property belonging to Muslims) represented a long-standing tradition (cf. Balāḍorī, *Fotūḥ*, p. 80). As the spread of Islam placed greater and greater barriers to full participation by non-Muslims in the political, economic, and social arenas of life, the pressures for conversion would naturally increase. As suggested above, deliberate proselytization was also important. Such efforts might typically be combined with a political agenda, as in the 'Abbasid and Isma'īli *da'was*. However, it could also be the result of simple fraternization between Muslims and non-Muslims. That was likely the case in Khorasan, where large numbers of Arab settlers, converts, and Persians lived in close proximity. It was also a factor in the success of the Shi'ite missionaries operating in western Persia. Finally, the importance of individual spiritual experiences leading to conversion should not be underestimated. Sufi literature is particularly full of anecdotal material illustrating conversions through contact with other mystics, perceptions of miracles, dreams, or sudden ecstatic awareness of the divine: The stories of Ḥabīb 'Ajāmī's repentance of his usury and conversion to Islam under the influence of Ḥasan Baṣrī; of Foẓayl b. 'Eyāz's giving up a life of brigandage on the highways near Marv after hearing a verse from the Qur'ān; and of Ebrāhīm b. Adham's turning to Sufism after hearing an animal that he was hunting speak to him are well-known examples. Although such stories may



often be apocryphal, the points they illustrate are certainly not uncommon in the phenomenology of religious conversion.

The conversion of Iranians to Islam was thus an extremely complex historical process. It varied considerably from region to region and in the motivations and forces behind it. What is not in doubt is its phenomenal success. By the time that most of the surviving historical sources were written not only was the Persian milieu thoroughly Islamic, but also the change had come to be regarded as the result of a natural and inevitable process, often said to have been foretold in prophetic Hadith: “Even had Islam been fixed among the Pleiades, the men of Fārs would have attained it” (Yāqūt, p. 325).

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