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# A Fractured Family and Its Heirs: Seljuq Power and the “Sunni Revival” in the Middle East, 1000-1200 CE

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A Fractured Family and Its Heirs:  
Seljuq Power and the “Sunni Revival” in the Middle East, 1000-1200 CE

Elijah Sloat  
July 21, 2017

## ABSTRACT

The Seljuq Turks were a group of nomadic warriors who converted to Sunni Islam by the end of the tenth century. Over the course of the next half century the Seljuqs conquered the majority of what we now call the Middle East. One Seljuq dynasty in particular, known to historians as the Great Seljuqs, positioned themselves as the dominant political power in the region as well as champions of Sunni Islam. Scholars refer to this period of Seljuq control as the “Sunni Revival” and debate heavily whether Seljuq political and religious practices were the cause of this “Revival,” as well as whether there was ever a “Sunni Revival” at all. The question of the extent of direct Seljuq involvement matters because this period was a pivotal moment in the religious and political history of the region. My research seeks to understand the factors that caused the structural changes evident in Islamic societies between 1000-1200 CE, including the question of "revival," the role of the Great Seljuqs, and the political and religious strategies they and others employed. Indeed, as I show, the Great Seljuqs were so influential in their religious devotion and political system that they created standards of rule that would influence Islam and Islamic rule for centuries.

## INTRODUCTION

The stampeding hooves of thousands of horses marked the Seljuq Empires inception, as the Great Seljuqs rode into the heart and history of Islam.<sup>1</sup> The Seljuqs started as a family group of the larger Turkish Oghuz tribe which lived on the border of Khwarazm and Transoxania.<sup>2</sup> By the late tenth century the Seljuqs started their conquests, taking over Khurasan and Transoxania and then conquering the Ghaznavids and Buyids.<sup>3</sup> In 1055 the Seljuqs conquered Baghdad and started their story of “Sunni revival” by ousting the Shi’a Buyids at the behest of the Abbasid Caliph. The Great Seljuqs continued expanding, venturing into Syria and Anatolia, winning the crucial battle of Manzikert in 1071 over the Byzantine Empire and opening the doors for Turkish

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<sup>1</sup> The Great Seljuqs are the main branch or the Seljuq family. The use of Great is to differentiate the ruling sultans of Iraq, The Great Seljuqs, and those of Anatolia and the Sultanate of Rum.

<sup>2</sup> Khwarazm and Transoxania are an area east of the Caspian Sea around modern day Afghanistan and Tadjikistan.

<sup>3</sup> The Ghaznavids were defeated by the Seljuqs in 1040, but still retained some territory in eastern Afghanistan until 1186. The Buyids also called the Buwayhids controlled Iraq from 945-1055 and were the first to accept that “their own right to rule was based on Caliphial Recognition.” Ira Lapidus, *History of Islamic societies Second edition* (Cambridge: Cambridge, University Press, 2002), 114.

control of the area which would continue to this day. In the reign (1071-1092) of the third Great Sultan Malik-shah, the Seljuq Empire reached its height, stretching from the Mediterranean to India, however this would not last as Malik-shah's death in 1092 along with his vizier Nizam al-Mulk threw the empire into civil war.<sup>4</sup> The Seljuq Empire was dealt another blow as the First Crusades came into the Levant in the closing years of the eleventh century, and put too much strain on the already faltering Seljuqs. The majority of the empire fell to individual interests and factionalism, and it would take until the Ottoman Empire before the whole region would be under the same government.

The Great Seljuqs having conquered much of the Middle East, created an unstable political structure that, within decades of the empire's inception, allowed politically motivated Atabegs, Amirs, and even soldiers to create small hereditary kingdoms and principalities which undermined the Great Seljuq Empire.<sup>5</sup> Nonetheless, they would come to be revered as an example of Islamic rule, and credited with a reform and revival of Islamic piety sometimes known as the "Sunni revival." Given the unstable political structure of their rule, how did the Great Seljuqs secure such a positive historical legacy?

As this paper demonstrates, the Seljuqs were innovative and devoted in their use of caliphal authority as a source of dynastic legitimacy in the eyes of the Muslim elites and common peoples, while also bolstering their religious patronage and support in the form of public works and supporting legal schools and 'ulama'.<sup>6</sup> At the same time, jurists, religious scholars, and rising elites within Seljuq society were also operating, suggesting that many

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<sup>4</sup> Carole Hillenbrand, *The Crusades: Islamic Perspectives* (New York: Routledge, 2000), 16.

<sup>5</sup> Amir: the title of a military commander, governor, or prince. Atabeg: the tutor of a Seljuq prince, his military advisor; later independent governors. Lapidus, 874 Glossary.

<sup>6</sup> 'ulama;' the collective term for the scholars or learned men of Islam Lapidus, 882 Glossary.

groups, not just the Seljuq sultans, were invested in determining the political and religious destiny of Islam and the Middle East. Early Seljuq sultans, who brought the empire to its greatest heights, began to be seen as the picture of Islamic piety— the perfect embodiments of how a ruler should act. On the other hand, later sultans, who ruled in the twilight years of the empire, had begun to become more culturally Arabic and in several cases were seen as less pious. Overall, Seljuq zealotry combined with ailing political strength in the later years of the empire, created a unique religious and political environment that fostered diverse Islamic growth, in legal literature and public works, and became a staple strategy for Seljuq Successor states.

## **SOURCES AND CONTEXT**

The paper is a broader study of the Seljuq period and thus is more heavily grounded in secondary literature. Islamic overviews like, Lapidus, *A History of Islamic societies* provide broader Islamic context while Seljuq focused articles in *The Seljuqs: Politics, Society, and Culture* edited by Christian Lange, and Songul Mecit provide more detailed writings on the Seljuqs themselves. The main primary source that is used throughout the paper is *The Book of Government or Rules for Kings* written by Nizam al-Mulk and translated by Hubert Darke. This text was written in the late eleventh century by the Vizier, Nizam al-Mulk, as a teaching tool to explain all aspects of government and ruling.<sup>7</sup> What makes this text valuable for this research is the background of the writer, and the time that it was written. Nizam al-Mulk was in power for several decades under two different Sultans. He also occupied a high position in the government at the height of Seljuq political power. Both of these factors give him a stronger grasp on what is important when ruling the Seljuq Empire. Furthermore, *The Book of Government or Rules for*

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<sup>7</sup> This genre of book is commonly called mirror of the princes to denote its use as a teaching tool.

*Kings* is the only book of its kind to focus on different aspects of rule from paying soldiers to how to be a just ruler. Of course it must also be stated that Nizam al-Mulk was not Turkish or Seljuq and his literary style was from an Arabic-Persian background. This means that his narrative is from an idealized Arab Persian lens. This can be seen in several stories where Persian and Arabic rulers are used as characters to convey moral and political truths.

Unfortunately, there are no Seljuq literary sources written by Seljuq Turks.<sup>8</sup> Historians of this time must rely on the works of jurists, poets, and religious scholars most of whom were Persian or Arab writing in those cultural traditions.<sup>9</sup> Many were also employed by the Seljuq Empire, and while this does not invalidate these sources it does make some questions more difficult to answer and some sources more requiring of in depth study. There are also many Arabic and Persian sources not translated, thus limiting the scope that some scholars are able to engage with. My research specifically, can only make use of sources translated into English which limits both the number and availability of my sources. Relying on translation can also be challenging since translations can have errors or possess some of the author's personality. Close reading can backfire if the meaning of a single word carries more or less connotation than it should. This can be especially difficult when trying to understand the level of affect that the Seljuqs may have had on religious development, or on the numerous different groups living under their rule.

It is important to keep in mind that up to this point many of the people living in Muslim controlled regions were themselves not Muslim, and not Arab in ethnicity. In Iraq, centuries of Persian culture, Sassanid political structure, and Zoroastrian heritage was in the process of

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<sup>8</sup> Carole Hillenbrand, *Aspects of the Court of the Great Seljuqs*. In *The Seljuqs: Politics, Society, and Culture*. Edited by Lange, Christian and Songul Mecit (Edinburgh, Edinburgh University Press, 2011), 23-24.

<sup>9</sup> Hillenbrand, 23-24.

syncretizing with Arabic culture and Islam.<sup>10</sup> There were also many pockets of Nestorian and Coptic Christians as well as Jewish, and Zoroastrian communities throughout the Middle East, and many of those who would convert to Islam had ties to some of these, or even other religious or cultural groups.<sup>11</sup> Islamic history is deep and complex in its possibilities, and it is difficult enough to tackle on its own, but it also is isolating to imaging it in such confining context—especially in a time period when so many groups are taking part. This period has Seljuq nomads, Arab and Persian scholars, legal minds, poets, Jewish and eastern Christian sects, Byzantines, and European crusaders each with their own voice and narrative, all of which can help create a larger view of the world not defined by East-West/ Muslim-Christian binary relations.

The Seljuqs themselves, must also be understood in the political context with which they positioned themselves, namely as “servants” of the Abbasid Caliphate.<sup>12</sup> The caliphate was a position of extreme religious and political significance, and while the Abbasid Caliphate still held military sway over the region, from the eight to tenth century, they were the spiritual head of Islam as well as head of state.<sup>13</sup> As Abbasid power started to wane, the caliph was forced to give up military control over the region and “appoint” a powerful figure to take control of the government.<sup>14</sup> At this stage the “appointed” group was in complete control, while the caliph still maintained religious significance. That is not to say that the caliphate was unchallenged in the religious realm either. By the time the Seljuqs arrived the caliphate had already lost a

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<sup>10</sup> Lapidus, 36.

<sup>11</sup> Lapidus, 36.

<sup>12</sup> The Seljuqs officially recognized that their right to rule came from caliphal authority, although the Seljuqs had the military power to override the caliphate and suppress its authority.

<sup>13</sup> The position of caliph in Islam was akin to that of the Pope for Christianity. The Abbasid Caliphate is the name of a specific caliphate that was a titular political as well religious title until 945 when the caliphate seeded political and military power to the Buyids. By 1055 there were also caliphates in Egypt, North Africa, and Spain, each claiming religious authority.

<sup>14</sup> The Buyids were the first to use this system, taking power in 945, and were appointed as rulers because they possessed enough power even though they were Shi'a.

key religious battle over the divinity of the Quran. The Caliph sought to claim the Quran as a text written by man, as opposed to a divine object, and thus able to be subjected to caliphal judgment.<sup>15</sup> This policy did not last and was overturned causing the caliphate to suffer a crucial defeat that damaged, but did not destroy its religious importance. It was because of this importance, but not dominance, that Seljuqs and later rulers sought support from both the caliphates and religious scholars—who were becoming more religiously and judicially powerful—as a means of legitimacy and control.

The battle between scholars and the elites over religious power and judgment continued and shifted into the Seljuq period to focus more to law, theology, and Sufism. Schools of Law and theology became closely linked, and these were the institutions being build and patronized by Seljuq elites.<sup>16</sup> Felicitas Opwis argues in her paper on, *Shifting Legal Authority from the Ruler to the 'ulama,* that “the encroachment of the Saljuq political authorities onto the religious arena prompted jurists to tighten their legal arguments in order to bolster their legitimacy in determining the laws of Muslim society not established in the textual sources of the law.”<sup>17</sup> Using a judicial case based on wine drinking, jurists were able to, “ground the jurisdiction of their legal deliberations in the divine scripture” thus superseding even caliphal authority.<sup>18</sup> This is important in understanding how religious authorities too wielded significant power, and why ruling elites wanted their support. While some might disagree about how much the Seljuqs were

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<sup>15</sup>Abbasid Caliph al-Ma'mun (813-833) adopted the Mu'tazili thesis that the Quran was created by man and not of the divine essence. This makes the case that the Quran, and thus the fundamentals of Islam, would be subject to Caliphal authority. There was a lot of disagreement with this policy and in 848-849 the Mu'tazili thesis was overturned. Lapidus, 101-102.

<sup>16</sup> Often times a larger school of law like the Hanafi, Shafi'i, and Hanbali, would also have a smaller theological school with it.

<sup>17</sup> Felicitas, Opwis, *Shifting Legal Authority from the Ruler to the 'Ulamā': Rationalizing the Punishment for Drinking Wine During the Saljūq Period*. In *Der Islam : Zeitschrift für Geschichte und Kultur des islamischen Orients*, (Berlin, W. de Gruyter Berlin), 65.

<sup>18</sup>Opwis, 65.



actually able to, or wanted to, encroach on religious authorities, the ‘ulamas’ power shows their importance and the potential benefits gained by securing their support.

The religious and political motivations of the Seljuq sultans, as well as those of scholars and writers, were not binary and separate entities, but fully present and interconnected in their understandings of how the world works, and how they should rule. I stress that point because it can be difficult for a modern audience to fully grasp the full interconnection of an institution that stressed the power of god above the laws of man. The Abbasid Caliph was the fount of Sunni Islam, but the Great Seljuqs were the keeper of the caliph effectively controlling all major areas of government, and since the Seljuqs were seen as rulers they were praised heavily by later chroniclers who saw them as the embodiment of an era that they created. The Seljuqs benefited politically and religiously from being recognized by the caliph as rightful just Sunni rulers, the Seljuqs needed that holy and stately recognition. They also needed the public, and scholars, which is why they endorsed legal and theological school throughout their realm. At the same time Islam as a religious and in their legal traditions, not just Sunni and Shi’a, was in a period of development leading some to fight others in their writing, and some with fists and swords. These fights involved everyone from the Sultan to the day laborer, because religion was often central to daily life as well as in maintaining political control.

### **EVIDENCE AND ANALYSIS**

At the dawn of Seljuq rule in the early to mid-eleventh century, Islam was growing, both in the population and as an intellectual and theological study which was becoming more focused on ideas of jurisprudence. Madrasas were being constructed by the Seljuqs in towns throughout

their empire, and the public was becoming majority Muslim.<sup>19</sup> The debate between scholars today, is whether these changes constitute a “Sunni revival” and whether the Seljuqs as the leading Sunni force had anything to do with it. The term itself was used in the 1960 to describe the pro-Seljuq sources that detailed the Seljuqs rescue of the Shi’a dominated Abbasid Caliphate, and came to “indicate the reign of the Great Seljuqs and of later Sunni dynasties such as the Zangids and the Ayyubids.”<sup>20</sup> The focus in Seljuq times is on their defense of Sunnism against Shi’a groups like the Isma’ili and the Fatimid Empire, as well as their patronage of Sunni scholarship and public institutions. Different scholars put different emphasis on the time range, some like Makdisi pushing it to before the Seljuqs.<sup>21</sup> Others disagree with the word revival and the implication that Sunnism was dying or stagnating before. Renterghem, focusing on public works in Baghdad, disagrees with the focus on Madrasa as a “unifying movement identified with the ‘Sunni revival.’”<sup>22</sup> Daphna Ephrat, writing in 2011, sees “Sunni revivalism” in a social context, not as a planned strategy by the ruling elites, but as a social movement emerging, “out of internal dynamics and its construction occur[ing] independently of the sphere of governmental authority.” Ephrat does however concede that, “the Seljuq rulers, collaborating with this camp, contributed or at least facilitated the process of forming the Sunna and Consolidating its form of organization.”<sup>23</sup> Clearly the topic, and the term, has been debated and studied extensively and continues to be a point of interest and contention.

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<sup>19</sup> Lapidus, 94-108

<sup>20</sup> Vanessa Renterghem, *Controlling and Developing Baghdad: Caliphs, Sultans and the Balance of Power in the Abbasid Capital (mid-5<sup>th</sup>/11<sup>th</sup> to late 6<sup>th</sup>/12<sup>th</sup> centuries)*. In *The Seljuqs: Politics, Society, and Culture*. Edited by Lange, Christian and Songul Mecit, (Edinburgh, Edinburgh University Press, 2011), 120.

<sup>21</sup> Renterghem, 122.

<sup>22</sup> Renterghem, 123.

<sup>23</sup> Daphna Ephrat. *The Seljuq and the Public Sphere in the Period of Sunni Revivalism: The View From Baghdad*. In *The Seljuqs: Politics, Society, and Culture*. Edited by Lange, Christian and Songul Mecit. (Edinburgh, Edinburgh University Press, 2011), 153.

Ephrath's explanation is important not because it might be the most correct, but because it understands the term in a new way, looking at the power that social groups in Baghdad had on religious developments. Of course the people building the mosques and madrasas and funding new scholarship were influential, but it is easy to see how money can create physical structures with physical impact, and more difficult to see how social groups in Baghdad, who go to the mosques can have as big an effect, or even be more influence. One of the issues with Ephrath's research is also one of its strengths, and that is in its use of space. Ephrath's research which is "grounded in the context of Seljuq Baghdad" is strong because it is able to identify key workings in a major city, and by narrowing the focus is able to delve more deeply into the connection between officials and the public.<sup>24</sup> At the same time more research must be done in a wider context of other cities across the Seljuq Empire which could be significantly different due to size, leadership, cultural, and religious background. Baghdad was one of the most significant cities in the Muslim world at the time, and its uniqueness could also have expressed itself in how officials and the public interacted.

When determining change on the level of a religion as vast as Islam, and in a region as vast as the Middle east it is hard to use such a narrow term as "Sunni revival" without first specifically defining its parameters, none of which has been agreed upon, and because of that the general term "Sunni revival" is inadequate in its application and its historical usage. As many scholars have pointed out, there were many factors at play during a long period of Islamic development, from rulers to social groups, and religious scholars. It would not be difficult to imagine that all of these interconnected groups had some level of impact on the way Islam, both Sunni and Shi'a, developed. Just like how today, social and religious movements can have

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<sup>24</sup> Ephrath, 139.

political impacts. Because of those issues I believe a term more like planned religious determinism is useful for the research I am doing to express the concerted effort on the part of many different groups including, religious scholars, rulers, and the general public, to understand and develop Islam in their time. Seljuqs and later rulers planned to position themselves on the winning side of Islam. Writers, jurists, and religious scholars used different means to understand, and convince others, that Islam worked the way they understood it. Each group vying for their own goals and what they thought Islam was or should be.

Political entities with religious motivations ultimately have religious consequences, influencing religious figures and movements. It does not make sense to say that the Seljuqs had no hand in religious development when they were actively funding one part of that development while militarily suppressing another. Building madrasa for specific legal and theological schools affects the future generations of Islamic scholars which is one of the most significant affects that a government could have—influencing the future generation of thinkers. At the same time Shi'a Islam was being suppressed both militarily and politically, although as to how aggressive Seljuq anti-Shi'a activities were is still debated. The Seljuqs were not the first elites to give money to scholars, but the system that they created, one based on gaining religious legitimacy to cement their leadership position, was effective, and popular enough to be followed by Seljuq successor states in Syria and Mesopotamia.

Strategies like building mosques and madrasa, as well as supporting religious scholars and chiefly winning military engagements all added to the Seljuqs airs of legitimacy. The impressions from writers, public and the elites, was a cornerstone of creating an aura of genuine Islamic legitimacy that bolstered the empire, especially as more of the general public was converting to Islam. Other writers and social groups could support Islamic legal development

and create public works, but the Seljuqs were the military controllers of the region, and casting their victories as victories for Islam made all the difference. In one story from the *The Book of Government: or Rules for Kings* written by Nizam al-Mulk, who was vizier to Alp Arslan and Malik-shah, tells how after a Seljuq victory the caliph dismissed his vizier at the behest of the Seljuqs because the vizier criticized the victory.<sup>25</sup> The next day, when the vizier goes to mosque to pray the local inhabitation force him to leave for his arrogance of insulting the Seljuq victory.<sup>26</sup> What this story shows is a religious connection to military conquest, both in the form of the caliph's intervention, and the local population's dismissal at the mosque. The Seljuqs were appreciated and gained power through conquest, not just by the caliphate or other elites, but by the people themselves, and that power could be religious in nature especially since many of the Seljuqs perceived victories were against heretical non Sunni Muslims. This story is a physical manifestation of the perceived legitimacy of the Seljuqs. The events are caused by the fact that the Seljuqs had physical power demonstrated by their victory, and that physical power manifested itself religiously. Both in the way the caliph dismissed the vizier, and in how the crowd at the mosque removed the dissenter. While this tale highlighted the Seljuqs power, Nizam al-Mulk also included several about the caliph and their unique position in Islam's power structure.

In *The Book of Government: or Rules for Kings*, Nizam al-Mulk writes many stories that detail the religious power as well as potential military power of the caliph. When the caliph is faced with an attack on Baghdad he marches out to meet his attacker Ya'qub ibn Laith, who has sworn allegiance to Isma'ilis, and who has superior numbers.<sup>27</sup> The caliph remarks, "I am not

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<sup>25</sup> Nizam al-Mulk, *The Book of Government or Rules for Kings*, Translated by Darke, Hubert. (London, Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1978), 152.

<sup>26</sup> Nizam al-Mulk, 152.

<sup>27</sup> Nizam al-Mulk, 17. Isma'ilis was a militant Shi'a group who started several rebellions in Seljuq territory.

afraid because my forces are few and yours are many [...] Those troops which you have really belong to me.”<sup>28</sup> The caliph then sends a man to announce Ya’qub’s betrayal to his men. Having listened to a long speech about Ya’qub’s betrayal, his men say, “we thought that he was coming to your presence in obedience to your command; now that he has declared his opposition and rebellion, we are with you, and as long as we have life, we shall wield the sword on your behalf.”<sup>29</sup> This is a small part of a longer parable, but what this passage shows is the significant potential power of the caliph, even when they may be militarily weak their position as religious successor to the Prophet is immense, even enough for the vizier Nizam al-Mulk to include it in the opening section of his book. It is also important to recognize the time period Nizam al-Mulk was writing, as the caliph had been traditionally very weak militarily for centuries. So from that we can see the importance that the caliph possesses as a conduit of spiritual gravitas, and the Seljuqs were well aware of the necessity to appear as part of that tradition.

The caliphates powerful religious and judicial position is counter balanced by the growing power of Islamic law created by dedicated judges as portrayed by writers like Nizam al-Mulk—even going so far as to show the potential for judicial power to supersede the caliph. The story starts by describing a powerful sultan who continued to achieve great deeds in search of greater titles. The sultan tries many times even sending a man to continually petition the caliph, but the caliph denied him every time. As his last ploy he writes to the highest judge in Baghdad saying,

“if a king were to [...] wield his sword for the glory of Islam [and achieve great deeds] and all his requests met with no response from the caliph; would then it be lawful for him to install a descendant of The Prophet as the caliph’s deputy and to submit to his authority, or not? [...] the judge read it and pronounced that it was lawful.”<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> Nizam al-Mulk, 17.

<sup>29</sup> Nizam al-Mulk, 17.

<sup>30</sup> Nizam al-Mulk, 155.

This passage is quite striking for several reasons. Firstly it shows the authority of judges by the late eleventh century, in that they are powerful enough to legally allow the caliphate to be subverted and another set in his place, albeit a deputy. It is also important to remember that the Sultan is the one who is given the right to install the caliph's deputy giving the sultan even more power. As a source this is plausibly reliable because Nizam al-Mulk is making a larger point in the story about bestowing titles, not about judicial power. This passage about judicial power is a mere plot point to the overall narrative and because of the fact that judicial power is not a main point, Nizam al-Mulk would not have a reason to inflate or overestimate judicial power, in fact if he did, the parable might be less convincing to his contemporaries since a key factor of the plot would seem ridiculous. At the same time some caution must be used as more elements may be at play.

This type of judicial power plays a role throughout *The Book of Government or Rules for Kings*, by contrasting the level of religious judgment verses the level of political judgment. In many cases Nizam al-Mulk indicates that it is only through pious action and faith in god, or in power given to an individual because of their faith, that certain tasks can be accomplished. In one parable a man is cheated by an Amir, and no amount of pleading, legal documentation, or help from the authorities can get the man's money back. Finally an old tailor is able to get the man's money back because his piousness has given him the ear of the caliph.<sup>31</sup> And because of the Amir's fear of the caliph's punishment, he pays the man his due. As Nizam al-Mulk writes, "There are many stories of this kind," which show how spirituality and piousness is praised

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<sup>31</sup> The Tailor has an entire side story about how he was able to get the ear of the caliph found in Nizam al-Mulk, *The Story of the Turkish Amir and the severity of al-Mu'tasim*, 50-59.

highly, and how that relates to judgment.<sup>32</sup> Of course it must be recognized that this is an ideal text whose purpose is to show the best of what a ruler should be and how the world should work.

How do these competing ideas of who claims power, the Seljuqs, Caliph, Judges, and common people, allow us to understand the period? What does it mean that the writer of these stories is at least somewhat aware of this complex power dynamic, but gives no indication that any are more powerful than another? One thing this many indicate is an astute understanding of the volatile political landscape at the time. Some scholars even credit Nizam al-Mulk with the idea of building madrassas, strengthening his image as an intelligent vizier, and possibly even the most influential figure in the Seljuq government.<sup>33</sup> Either way, he shows that any group could have the upper hand at any moment, which stresses the importance of building madrasa and patronage of scholars so the Seljuq may continually maintain a power hold on the religious elites, and from that religious legitimacy gain a stronger hold on the larger populace. Muslims were struggling against itself to determine the direction Islam would go, and the Seljuqs relished the opportunity to influence that outcome and benefit from an Islamic consensus.

Indeed, many of the Seljuq Sultans pursued religious legitimacy both in public and in their own lives, which can be seen in their later portrayal, especially the first three sultans who were particularly praised as religious. The first sultan, Tughril Beg is described in several accounts by later poets and scholars as, “valiant, mild, noble; diligent in good deeds, Friday prayer, and fasting on Monday and Thursday; and perfuming himself with precious morals . . . He was great in pious benefaction, avid for building mosques.”<sup>34</sup> What this passage details are the

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<sup>32</sup> Nizam al-Mulk, 59.

<sup>33</sup> Carole Hillenbrand, *The Crusades: Islamic Perspectives* (New York: Routledge, 2000), 16.

<sup>34</sup> D.G. Tor, ‘Sovereign and Pious’: *The religious Life of the Great Seljuq Sultans*. In *The Seljuqs: Politics, Society, and Culture*. Edited by Lange, Christian and Songul Mecit (Edinburgh, Edinburgh University Press, 2011), 41



high standards that chroniclers thought of Tughril Beg, part of which is the emphasis put on his pious qualities. Tughril Begs fasting, his good deeds and his prayer are all important characteristics that he is attributed with, but what is equally important is the description of his piousness and generously of building mosques. In many cases these accounts are from later writers like Al-Husayni and Ali b. Muhammad al-Bundari, who were living in the end of, or after the Seljuq period.<sup>35</sup> This makes their motives more difficult to ascertain since they are not being directly employed by the Seljuqs. Whatever the many reasons may be for why the early Seljuqs were particularly noted for their piety the fact that the chronicles noted it is important because it recognizes Seljuq piety as a beneficial attribute in a leader.

The first three great Seljuq Sultans are all praised for their pious nature, each with different religious forms of expression. Tughril is noted as being an avid builder and fasted often. Alp Arslan is seen as steadfast in his pursuit of improving his conduct based on Islamic law, as well as vigilant in “in preventing his soldiery from appropriating the property of his subjects.”<sup>36</sup> Malik-shah and his sons are also seen as pious, and it is not until Sultan Mahmud that piety is no longer present in nearly the same level. That’s not to say that Mahmud and his brother Tughril II are seen badly, they are seen as intelligent and generous, but specifically not pious.<sup>37</sup> This trend continues as by Muhammad II, in the mid twelfth century, is seen as impious and is charged with drinking wine during the days of Ramadan.<sup>38</sup> That is not to say all later Seljuq sultans were impious, but it is important to see in the literature that those praised the most for being genuinely religious also happen to be those who are most successful in battle and who had the strongest military control. This indicates that military political power and religious devotion can have a

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<sup>35</sup> Tor, 57.

<sup>36</sup> Tor, 43.

<sup>37</sup> Tor, 44.

<sup>38</sup> Tor, 45.

genuine connection and bolsters other people's perceptions of acts involving one or the other, as well as implying that religious piety in a leader grows in relation to the physical power they can exert.

Towards the end of the eleventh century, the Seljuq Empire was at a significant crossroads where many aspects of earlier Seljuq sultan life was changing. The Seljuqs were losing their nomadic past, and becoming more sedentary as well as more culturally Arabic and Persian, while at the same time growing weaker and being perceived by later writes as less genuinely religious. Carole Hillenbrand in an essay on, *Aspects of the Courts of the Great Seljuqs*, writes,

“The first two Seljuq sultans, Tughril and Alp Arslan, spent most of their time in the saddle, criss-crossing enormous tracts of land in pursuit of territory and booty. [...] Sultan Malik-shah represents an important transition in Seljuq history. At this point there seems to have been a greater tendency for the Seljuq sultan, and therefore the court attending him too, to stay in one place for at least certain periods of time.”<sup>39</sup>

Hillenbrand does also point out that Malik-shah still did spend time moving around the empire, but he began the process that later Sultans would follow of being much more sedentary compared to the Tughril and Alp Arslan the most culturally nomadic Sultans.

At the time of Malik-shahs death in 485/1092 and heading into the new century (the sixth century) in the Islamic calendar, the Middle East was in a political mess with the Seljuq Empire in the midst of civil war.<sup>40</sup> Malik-shahs sons Barkyaruq and Muhammad engaged in military conflict until Barkyaruqs death in 498/1105, all the while the first Crusaders had conquered Jerusalem and claimed Palestine and parts of Syria.<sup>41</sup> Of course there were also requests for assistance made to Barkyaruq during the crusaders march into Syria and Palestine, but as it was

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<sup>39</sup> Hillenbrand, 23.

<sup>40</sup> Carole Hillenbrand, *The Crusades: Islamic Perspectives*. (New York: Routledge, 2000), 38.

<sup>41</sup> Hillenbrand, *The Crusades: Islamic Perspectives*, 38-40.

during a civil war, Barkyaruq was clearly more militarily invested elsewhere.<sup>42</sup> Ibn al-Jawzi even mentions that there, “were many calls to go out and fight against the Franks and complaints multiplied in every place.”<sup>43</sup> Ibn al-Qalanisi along with other writers tell stories of people breaking the pulpits during Friday prayer and weeping at the destruction caused by the crusaders. Some armies did set out at the sultan’s behest but all of them ended in total failure and infighting.<sup>44</sup> The weakened state of military resources as well as the continuing political instability denied any real attempt on the part of the Great Seljuqs to directly do anything about the crusaders. Even when Sultan Muhammad sent another army in 1115, the Seljuq sultanate had already lost too much local control as the cities of Aleppo and Damascus sided with the Crusaders.<sup>45</sup>

The events detailed in the previous paragraph, happening in the wake of the first Crusade, detail the importance and strategy of maintaining religious control while also demonstrating the power loss when the systems that the Seljuqs put in place fail. In a turn of events, the Seljuqs failure to maintain power led to dissenting opinions from all levels of society that lost them control over the western areas of their empire. However, even this religious expression against the Seljuqs was acknowledged by them as the Sultan eventually did send armies to fight in Syria. Even in the midst of civil war Barkyaruq could not completely alienate religious voices. To add to the growing Seljuq concerns, regional factionalism was rampant and had destroyed any chance of a unified Seljuq response in any significant capacity. The reins had slipped from the hands of

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<sup>42</sup> Hillenbrand, *The Crusades: Islamic Perspectives*, 78-81.

<sup>43</sup> Hillenbrand, *The Crusades: Islamic Perspectives*, 78.

<sup>44</sup> Hillenbrand, *The Crusades: Islamic Perspectives*, 79.

<sup>45</sup> Hillenbrand, *The Crusades: Islamic Perspectives*, 80.

the Seljuq sultan and signaled the start of a race between Seljuq successors to see who could become what the Seljuq once were.

This loss of political control on the part of the Seljuq Empire was in part due to the system of atabegs that they used extensively throughout the empire. Along with the conflict at the highest levels of government, governorships and controls of major cities were quickly becoming hereditary positions. An atabeg was a person who was charged with raising a young prince who had lost their father and tasked with the duty of taking care of them until they could assume the position, the term also began to refer to a governorship. At the same time the atabeg was within their right to marry the prince's mother, and take more permanent power, or if the prince died the atabeg could assume control. This system could be easily exploited, and resulted in a new political environment in the region.

One of the most effective uses of this political system is seen in the Zengid dynasty's rise. Zengis father was a powerful atabeg in Damascus, controlling most of the power in Syria until his death in late eleventh century, and it is because of his father's power that Zengi was later able to assume the position as atabeg of Mosul. Zengi then expanded to Aleppo in 1128, and by this point he was powerful enough to assist in a new Sultans rise to power.<sup>46</sup> Ultimately it was this system that lead to the rise of these powerful decentralized polities, although it must be noted that while they held significant military power they still were seen as part of the Seljuq Empire, albeit in the same way that the Seljuq sultans were "given" their position by the caliph. This is the direct effect of the Seljuqs political landscape, wide spread independent powers who recognize the strategies necessary to secure power, the same strategies used by the Seljuqs.

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<sup>46</sup> Lapidus, 289.

atabegs positioning themselves in legitimate hierarchies of power as a means of legitimizing their authority while also undermining that structure in practice to accumulate more power.

At the same time the atabegs were not the only entities taking power, intentionally or otherwise, from the sultans. Amirs and common soldiers also created hereditary landed holding using a tax collecting system designed to make it easier on the government. The iqta is a system where a soldier instead of getting paid directly from the government is allowed to collect taxes from a certain area instead.<sup>47</sup> This was a system used since the mid tenth century by a variety of ruling dynasties, and while the central government was strong, “assignees were held to their military responsibilities and rotated at the will of the ruler; hereditary succession was not permitted.”<sup>48</sup> It is easy to see why this system, which allows for the government to not spend money collecting taxes or paying soldiers directly, would be popular in an empire with the power to keep everyone in check. The problem comes when the empire is weaker and cannot exercise control over these independent, now landholders across the empire. As Ira M. Lapidus writes in his book, *A History of Islamic Societies Second Edition*, “assignees usurped the land and turned their tax-collecting rights into property [...] hereditary control of rural districts in the hands of military assignees gave rise to virtually independent principalities in Mesopotamia and Syria.”<sup>49</sup> This added to the other already spiraling issues and became the eventual end for the Seljuq Empire, and although the Seljuqs were not the first to implement the iqta system what is important is the fact that their wide spread use of it completely destabilized the region leading into the crusading period, and allowed for Muslim Vs. Muslim conflict to flourish as a means of territorial and political expansion.

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<sup>47</sup> Lapidus, 106.

<sup>48</sup> Lapidus, 122.

<sup>49</sup> Lapidus, 122.

The soldiers themselves, many of them being mamluk soldiers, played a large part as a diverse, but militarily and politically significant group in the development of Islamic governments and in the political development across Seljuq land. The mamluk institution itself had been used by the Abbasid Caliphate since the tenth century and was coopted by the Seljuqs after the sultans were unable to cope with the pastoralist lifestyle of the Turkomen who made up a majority of their standing army.<sup>50</sup> What makes the mamluks particularly important is that they combined with other factors also happening across the Seljuq Empire to add another factor to the dissolution of the Empire. Mamluks were highly trained and skilled warriors who could rise through the ranks and reach positions of significant power, like amir or atabeg. Mamluk were seen as being totally devoted to their masters, and however true that might have been, although it probably was not true in every case, once their master passed, they found themselves in positions of power where they could then pursue their own agenda. This new ruling elite, that eventually founded the Mamluk Empire in Egypt, allowed for a range of skilled militarily keen politically powerful principalities to rise on the eastern side of the Seljuq Empire and would eventually side with the crusaders over the Seljuqs in 1115.

The military legacy of the Seljuqs is summarized in these four systems, atabegs, amirs, mamluks and the iqta, and they created the environment that the Middle East and Islam would inhabit for two centuries. The breaking up of large areas of land into independent polities is in direct response to the structure the Seljuq Empire put in place. Had the Seljuqs controlled less territory or had a stronger central government than these systems would not have created such turmoil, but because so much of the Middle East was under these systems it created an

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<sup>50</sup> Lapidus, 122-125.

environment that lead to internal conflict between growing politically motivated atabegs, amirs, and mamluks.

Other scholars opinions must be recognized, and the issues of my own argument must be examined as well. The Seljuq Empire were not the first to institute many of the political structures in their empire and so it could be argued that the Seljuqs did not do anything remarkable, but inhabited a flawed political system, and the effects of these systems would happen regardless of political entity be that Buyid, Abbasid, or Seljuq. The religious motivations of the Seljuqs and their influence on Islam and the “Sunni revival” was minimal, compared to the religious scholars and jurists who developed Islam and were the real group responsible for this “revival.” In this way the Seljuqs could be seen as nothing more than a nomadic placeholder who caused more chaos in the Islamic world than anything else.

While it is true that most of the political structure and institutions, from government employees to the collection of taxes were already in place by the time of the Seljuqs, their place in the government as sultans and amir was unique. The connection to the caliph and the role that the caliphate played in Seljuq politics was unique, in that the caliph relied on Seljuq power, and Seljuqs relied on caliphal religious legitimacy while both groups had religiously aligned goals. The Buyids before them were not Sunni and they did not have the military power or regional control that early Seljuqs had. So it is the case that the politics and religion of the Seljuqs, many of which were borrowed from other cultures, came together to create an unstable environment that legitimized a dynasties right to rule through its religious and military actions.

## **CONCLUSION**

The Seljuqs arrived from Khwarazam and Transoxania and conquered the Middle East in decades cementing their place as the dominant Sunni rulers, and defenders of Sunni Islam. They inherited culture and customs from Persian Sassanid, Arabian, Islam, and brought some of their own uniquely nomadic and Turkic culture as well. From these roots they helped influence the course of Islam and dramatically shaped the political structure of the near east. From Seljuq political development came a new way of understanding how rulers could, and should be interacting with religious scholars and Islam itself. A new wave of counter crusaders grew from the muddled politics on the edges of Seljuq territory. These new rulers would be remembered in their own right as truly pious holy warriors fighting the crusaders.

In our present time, as always, history is an active agent that is used for political purposes, and this research has implications not just in how it is used or misused in the United States, but also in protecting the history that has been and is being destroyed in the Middle East today. The history that is being destroyed needs to be protected and that starts by spreading awareness that this history exists and that it is disappearing. At the same time, in this country Islam is a political issue, one where history is often used to promote an idea that Islam is an “other” or backwards group further exacerbating any discussion on the topic. While this research does not speak to that issue directly it is part of a larger topic that needs to be explored and understood by a wider audience in the hopes that Islam will not be used as a fear mongering topic, and as a means to denigrate a wide diverse group of individuals over the actions of a select few. In the Seljuq period there were Turks, Arabs, Kurds, Byzantines, Persians, Franks, Jews, Muslims, and Christians, and pliantly more, and each of these identities was not and is not mutually exclusive.



This next step in this research aims to bridge a gap of wider Islamic history and the Crusades. Clearly, the way in which "countercrusaders" engaged with Latin Christians in the eastern Mediterranean was strongly influenced by trends and past precedents that were not directly linked to interaction with the Latin West. This raises the question of the broader Islamic context of the crusades, as they were experienced and engaged with by Muslims. My next project will be to investigate this broader context, looking at the crusading phenomenon from a wider Islamic perspective not just those buffering the larger Islamic world from the Crusader states, and trying to understand the change that was occurring in Islam in response to internal and external forces. Questions like, did Islam change in response to the Crusades? How did Muslims see the Crusaders before during and after the Crusades to the Levant? How has Islamic historiography of the Crusades changed? The reason that this type of research, and this research specifically, is important is several fold. Crusades history as well as Islamic history has focused on their respective sides for much of their study, and have not had significant crossover, although that is fortunately changing. Even Islamic histories of the crusades have mainly focused on the Muslim populations and rulers around the Levant, and have not gone further afield to the seat of Islamic power in the east.

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