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Course title: Islamic History B: From the Crusades to the
'Gunpowder Empires'

Title of Work: Outline the main religious and political
changes brought about by the arrival of the Seljuks into the
Muslim world.

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The Muslims were religiously and politically fragmented during the mid-tenth and eleventh centuries. However, these conditions witnessed profound changes when the Seljuks came onto the scene. The emergence of the Seljuks as the new ruling elite was often called the period of Sunni revival. Sunni Islam became a leading player again after it overthrew the Buyyid Shi'i dynasty in Baghdad and parts of Iran. Moreover, they sponsored Sunni religious institutions and religious scholars until it reached extraordinary heights.¹ The ascetic and mystical movement known as Sufism also gained a much wider popularity and acceptability.² In terms of political achievements, the Seljuks were the first Muslim dynasty that successfully conquered a significant part of Anatolia, and opened the new channel for subsequent dynasties to defeat the Eastern Roman Empire in later centuries.³ However, with new political infrastructure, such as the atabeg system and the shared power among the whole family members, that the Seljuks introduced into the Islamic polity, in a long term, it causes the fragmentation to the consolidation and unity of the state.⁴ When looking at the works of various historians, it became clear that these religious and political changes are controversial. Therefore, it is the purpose of this essay in discussing and clarifying these controversies.

The advent of the Seljuks in the Islamic territory in the mid-eleventh century was frequently called the period of "Sunni revival" because they successfully overthrew the Buyyid Shi'i dynasty who had controlled Baghdad since the mid-tenth century. However, some historians argue that the Sunni revival was not caused solely by the Seljuks, it was rather a continued process that had already begun since the late tenth century when caliphs were able to assert a greater measure of authority, both in religious and political spheres, in close alliance with the Hanbali religious movement.⁵ Moreover, the caliph Al-Qadir (991-1031) and his successor al-Qaim has already proclaimed a document which became known

¹ Daphna Ephrat, 'Religious Leadership and Association in the Public Sphere of Seljuk Baghdad', in M. Hoexter, S.N. Eisenstadt and N. Levtzion (ed.), *the Public Sphere in Muslim Societies*, (New York: State University of New York Press, 2002), 32.

² A. C. S. Peacock, *the Great Seljuk Empire*, (Edinburgh: EUP, 2015).

³ Amanda Mazur, How important was the Battle of Manzikert in 1071 to the Rise of the Seljuk Turks? http://www.academia.edu/225745/How_important_was_the_Battle_of_Manzikert_in_1071_to_the_Rise_of_the_Seljuk_Turks (17 February 2016).

⁴ I.M Lapidus, *Islamic Societies to the Nineteenth Century: A Global History*, (Cambridge: CUP, 2012).

⁵ Peacock, *'the Great Seljuk Empire'*.

as the 'Qadiri-Qaim Creed' that sought to define the caliph's position as the defender of Sunni Islam.⁶ Although the caliphs were in a position to speak and act for themselves, they still had a lack of independent military power and financial resources, thus, it would take many decades or even century to depose the Buyyid dynasty and revitalise a full scale Sunni Islam. Therefore, the intervention of an external force like the Seljuks who had a very strong military power was a significant factor in removing Shi'i domination and replacing it with Sunni Islam. However, their success was limited in the eastern part of the Islamic domain.

The Seljuks were less successful in ousting another Shi'i sect in the western territory especially in Egypt where it was in the hands of the Ismaili Fatimid dynasty. Sauders argues that the restoration of Sunni Islam would not be completed, if this stronghold of Ismaili Shi'i dynasty has been in existence.⁷ The Seljuks actually failed to extinguish the Fatimid dynasty, and allowed them to stay in power for another hundred years. Meanwhile, the Sunni revival during the Seljuk period had driven the radical Ismailis, known as the Assassins, to take extreme action.⁸ In 1090, a Persian leader of the group, Hasan I-Sabbah, seized the fortress of Alamut in northern Persia and turned it into the headquarters of a terrorist camp that aimed to kill its principal enemies, and one of their first victims was Nizam al-Mulk, who had long advised the Seljuk sultans to crush them.⁹ Soon after the assassination of Nizam al-Mulk in 1092, the subsequent Seljuk sultans moderated their position and even allowed a few Shi'is to work in high government positions in the twelfth century.¹⁰ This indicates that the Seljuk program aiming to counter the Shi'i dynasty in Egypt was unsuccessful especially in military terms. In religious term, the Seljuks gained significant achievements.

The Seljuks were also credited as the protectors of Sunni Islam because of their policy of sponsorship towards Sunni religious institutions and religious scholars. This policy was evident in the foundation of madrasas, and the best-known madrasa established by Nizam al-Mulk was the Nizamiyya madrasa in Baghdad and many other cities in Iran

⁶ Peacock, *'the Great Seljuk Empire'*.

⁷ J. Sauders, 'the Seljuk Turks and Their Place in History', *History Today*, May 1, 1962, Vol. 12(5), 343.

⁸ Ibid, 344.

⁹ Ibid, 344.

¹⁰ Moojan Momen, *Shi'i Islam*, (London: Oneworld publications, 2016).

especially in Nishapur.¹¹ Safi argues that the purpose of constructing this madrasa was to counter the teaching of Ismailis who built Al-Azhar institutions in Cairo in 970.¹² According to Fischer, the Nizamiyya madrasa became a nation-wide public system of education during the Seljuks era.¹³ Another purpose of this institution was to unite the polarised Sunni legal schools that occurred at the beginning of the Seljuks period when the Sultan Tughril and his vizier exclusively patronised the Hanafi and exiled many Shafi'i-Ashari scholars.¹⁴ By the twelfth century, it is evident that the four Sunni madhhabs had been consolidated and united.¹⁵ The ulama also played a significant role in this era. According to Ephrat, ulamas were the sole civilian elite that could bridge the gap between the Seljuks military elite and the indigenous population.¹⁶ Therefore, both learning institutions and the ulama were the main Seljuk machines in legitimising their regimes, creating loyalty among the local population, consolidating disputes between different Sunni legal schools, and countering the teaching of Ismaili in Egypt.

Along with the madrasa, the khanaqah also proved to be a crucial institution for the Seljuk state in patronising Sufis.¹⁷ Prior to the rise of the Seljuks, Sufism had existed at the margins of Muslim social life. The practice of Sufism had been limited to small circles; teachers and students met in mosques or private homes. The spread of khandaqahs and the integration of Sufism into madrasas where it could be practiced and taught freely shows that Sufism was rapidly well-recognised and accepted within Islam.¹⁸ Moreover, Sufis easily found protection from princes and powerful personalities, and the greatest of their protectors was the vizier Nizam al-Mulk who also appointed al-Ghazali, one of the greatest ulama of his day, to professorships at the Baghdad and Nishapur Nizamiyya madrasas.¹⁹

¹¹ Ephrat, *Religious Leadership and Association*, 32.

¹² Omid Safi, *the Politics of Knowledge in Premodern Islam: Negotiating Ideology and Religious Inquiry*, (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2006), 96.

¹³ Michael Fischer, *Iran: From Religious Dispute to Revolution*, (London: University of Wisconsin Press, 2003), 38.

¹⁴ Safi, *the Politics of Knowledge in Premodern Islam*, 96.

¹⁵ Ephrat, *Religious Leadership and Association*, 32.

¹⁶ *Ibid*, 32.

¹⁷ Safi, *the Politics of Knowledge*, 106.

¹⁸ Margaret Malamud, Sufi organisations and structure of authority in medieval Nishapur, *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, 1994, Vol.26 (3), 436.

¹⁹ A. Bausani, 'Religion in the Seljuq Period', in J.A. Boyle (ed.), *the Cambridge History of Iran Volume 5: The Saljuq and Mongol Periods*, (Cambridge: CUP, 2008), 301.

After the defeat of the Byzantine army in 1071, the Seljuks also brought Sufi scholars into Anatolia and provided them with schools, hospitals and endowments.²⁰ In later centuries, it is evident that Sufism became a significant part of Ottoman society. Therefore, these clearly show that the Seljuks patronised Sufi Islam and integrated Sufis into the Islamic system through the foundation madrasa and khandaqah.

In terms of political achievements, the Seljuqs successfully conquered a significant portion of Anatolia and caused a huge penetration of Turks into this territory.²¹ This began particularly after the Byzantines were decisively defeated by the army of Seljuks, under the command of Alp Arslan (1063-1072), at the battle of Manzikert in 1071.²² Prior to the arrival of the Seljuks, the Arabs had been attempting to invade this region since the period of the Umayyad Empire, but they failed and were defeated. Thus the victory of the Seljuks over previously undefeated Byzantine army brought major changes in the Islamic history. This led some historians to conclude that 'this victory was one of the most decisive factors in the gradual demise and the eventual fall of Byzantium to the Ottoman in 1453'.²³ However, the time between the battle of Manzikert and the fall of the Byzantine Empire, was almost 4 centuries, thus it could be argued that this battle did not directly cause the fall of Constantinople, rather it was one of the first instances in which the Turkish Muslims were able to successfully attack the Eastern Roman Empire in later centuries. This huge political achievement significantly linked to the consolidation of the Seljuk government in the early period of their rule.

The new political structures that the Seljuks introduced into the Muslim lands, such as shared rule among the members of the ruling clan as well as the atabeg system, were not beneficial to the state in the long run. According to Lapidus, these new systems caused a strong political unity during the first three powerful sultans (the Great Seljuks), and after the death of sultan Malik Shah and his powerful vizier, Nizam al-Mulk, this political

²⁰ Lapidus, *Islamic Societies to the Nineteenth Century*, 426.

²¹ Saunders, *the Seljuk Turks*, 345.

²² Edmund Herzig and Marina Kurkchyan, *the Armenians: Past and Present in the Making of National Identity*, (London: Routledge, 2004).

²³ Mazur, *How important was the Battle of Manzikert?* (17 February 2016).

consolidation eventually caused fragmentation and disunity.²⁴ Furthermore, disputes over succession, after the death of Malik Shah in 1092, among the rival candidates of the Seljuk family gave a further strength to the position of the guardians (atabegs) of the princes, and allowed them to establish their own independent dynasties.²⁵ The guardian's dynasties were mostly built in north-western region of Seljuk domain such as Zangi of Mosul, the Salghurids of Fars, and the Burids of Damascus.²⁶ Therefore, the fragmentation of Seljuk political unity was undoubtedly caused by these new infrastructures. However, one more important factor that contributed to the weakness of the Seljuk dynasty in later years is that there was no powerful vizier like the vizier Nizam al-Mulk who had the capacity to bring together polarised parties within Islam and who could give effective advice to the Sultan in almost all political issues.

In conclusion, from the mid-eleventh century onwards, it is evident that Sunni Islam in Iraq and eastern Islamic territories were united again after being under the domination of the Buyyid Shi'i dynasty since the mid-tenth century. Anatolia became one of the main destinations for Turks to settle their communities after the Byzantine armies were defeated in 1071 and lost a significant portion of land to Islam. Sunni scholars, Sunni legal schools, and Sufism were also consolidated and well-supported through the madrasas and khanaqahs that were established in various cities in Iraq and Iran. All of these massive political and religious changes were undoubtedly caused and sponsored by the Seljuks who arrived into the Islamic territories in the eleventh century. However, some of those changes and successes were limited and lasted only for a very short period of time. In Egypt, the Fatimids which were another Shi'i branch continued to be the Seljuk rival and a competing dynasty throughout the eleventh and twelfth centuries. Moreover, after the death of sultan Malik Shah, and his vizier, Nizam al-Mulk, in 1092, only less than a century after they appeared in the Islamic lands, the strong Seljuk dynasty had to confront the problem of the fragmented governments and the rise of small independent provinces and made them unable to oppose challenges from external invaders.

²⁴ Lapidus, *Islamic Societies to the Nineteenth Century*.

²⁵ Peacock, *the Great Seljuk Empire*.

²⁶ Ibid.

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