AHL AL-DHIMMAH (AHL AL-ZEMMAH)

The idea of this category of the population of the rising Arab empire originated in the lifetime of the prophet Muhammad. This was at the time when he invaded the oasis inhabited by the Jewish tribe of Khybar, who automatically became distinguished as Ahl al-Dhimmah, or protected “people of the covenant,” with rights and duties toward the Muslim states. During the period of the great conquests, mainly in the first Hegira century under the Orthodox caliphate, the world was evenly divided according to Muslim canon law into what was known as Dar al-Islam, the Muslim territory, and Dar al-harb, the territories conquered by the Muslim hosts but inhabited by religions other than Islam. Christians or Jews were described as Ahl al-Kitab, that is, people of the Scripture. Those willing to submit to Muslim rule became distinguished as Ahl al-Dhimmah, or Dhimmis, with the right of protection from foreign inroads by the Muslim military power, with the security of personal property, and with limited freedom to practice their religion.

First, Dhimmis were required to disarm completely and to submit to Muslim rule. Any person found to be armed was either killed or enslaved. Second, Dhimmis were allowed to practice their own faith within churches or synagogues established prior to the advent of Islam, but building of new religious houses was prohibited. It was understood that liturgies would be performed quietly, without ostentation or the organization of open processions or any other function that might prove offensive to Muslims. Each community was under the hegemony of a religious leader answerable to the Muslim governor. Throughout the Middle Ages, Coptic patriarchs bore the burdens of the community vis-à-vis the Muslim caliph, sultan, or governor. Third, the Dhimmis were liable to pay a tribute known as JIZYAH (poll tax) fixed by the Muslim authority on all able-bodied men, thus excluding women and children. Initially, the jizyah established by Caliph ‘Umar ibn al-Khattab (634-644) was fixed at forty-eight dirhams for the rich, twenty-four for the middle class, and
twelve for the poor (Bar Ye’or, 1985, p. 185).

The *imam* was permitted to levy the enormous sum of one thousand dinars on those whose wealth was acquired by treachery from Muslims, thereby dispossessing the culprit of most of his fortune. Dhimmis were also subject to the imposition of the KHARAJ, an annual tax on land used for agriculture. According to Muslim *canon* law, the conquered land belonged to the Muslim state, but it was considered expedient to allow those who occupied it to use it because, in *utilizing* it, they could render a percentage of its crops to the state in kind to be commuted later into currency. If a *Copt* apostatized to Islam, he remained liable to render the *kharaj* but not the *jizyah*. The *kharaj* taxation disappeared as other levies, such as the ‘*ushr* (tithing) and the *zakat* (charitable gifts) emerged. At certain times, a third, irregular tax was imposed when the need arose for the support of a military at a time of extremely expensive campaigning; but this was left to the whim or discretion of the ruler, with no fixed dimension.

On the social front, the Coptic Dhimmis were required to wear a vestment distinctive from that of the Muslims. They were also required to ride only donkeys and to desist from the use of horses. They were supposed to rise in the presence of Muslims. They were subjected to certain legal disabilities, though they were protected by criminal law. Though technically they were deprived of occupying administrative positions in the Muslim government, the Islamic rulers continued to employ them because they were the able accountants and knowledgeable administrators without whom the economy of the country would collapse. At times, they were dismissed from office by a bigoted ruler, but they were *gradually* reinstated as it became evident that they were necessary for the conduct of affairs. Numerous Copts reached the highest positions in the administration of Egypt.
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