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ABSTRACT

“Jizya: An Example of Continual Reinterpretation and Reform with a
Contemporary Qur’ānic Reinterpretation”

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Jizya is a popular point from which modern-day detractors of Islam attack the religion as inherently intolerant and oppressive, and recent developments in Egypt have sparked fearful articles on a variety of conservative news websites and blogs about the threat *jizya* poses to Christians in the Muslim world. However, the long and complex history of *jizya* shows such a wide variety of understandings and implementations that it becomes clear that there has been no general agreement among Muslims on just what the term means. This ambiguity of definition in both history and tradition has led individual Muslim jurists and scholars throughout history to define and understand the term according to the particular circumstances of their own milieus. In certain times and places, *jizya* as it was applied, was indeed an oppressive tax burden that led some to convert to Islam. Nonetheless, the wide variety of understandings and implementations of *jizya* indicates that both the meaning and the significance of the term for Muslims are not fixed. Indeed, *jizya* as a poll tax applied to non-Muslims disappeared with the emergence of the modern nation-state and changing attitudes toward religious diversity. The variety of interpretations and implementations of *jizya* in response to differing times and circumstances provide a clear example of ongoing reform in *Islamic Law*, and a detailed analysis of Qur’ānic usage offers an example what that reform might look like today, from a Qur’ānic viewpoint.