

Sunnī-Shī‘ī Schism: A Brief Overview of the Arabic Sunnī Literature

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Abstract: In Sunnī literature, the death of ‘Alī b. Abī Ṭālib (d. 40/661) marks the end of the era of the Righteous Caliphate (*al-khilāfa al-rāshida*), where caliphs were chosen through mutual consultation (*al-shūrā*), and the beginning of the hereditary monarchical rule (*al-mulk al-‘adūd*) introduced by Mu‘āwiya b. Abī Sufyān (r. 40-60/661-680) and continued throughout the Umayyads (40-132/661-750) and their Abbasid successors (132-656/750-1258). The Shī‘īs on the other hand considered ‘Alī the first of their divinely guided Imāms and the prophet’s rightful heir and true successor. This article provides a brief overview of the Sunnī-Shī‘ī split as represented in the Arabic Sunnī Literature.

Keywords: Early Islamic history, Sunna, Shī‘a, First Islamic Civil War (*al-fitna al-kubrā*), Second Islamic Civil War (*al-fitna al-thāniya*)

‘Alī b. Abī Ṭālib occupies an illustrious position in both Sunnī and Shī‘ī sources. He is always praised for his piety, justice, erudition and military prowess. ‘Alī is also known to have been the first (young) male convert to Islam and the prophet’s most intimate disciple. He participated in almost all military expeditions during the prophet’s lifetime, serving twice as commander and often as standard-bearer. He had also served the prophet as a secretary, missionary and diplomat. After the prophet’s death in 11/632, ‘Alī continued to play some role during the reign of the prophet’s successors, i.e., Abū Bakr *al-Ṣiddīq* (r. 11–13/632–634), ‘Umar b. al-Khaṭṭāb (r. 13–23/634–644) and ‘Uthmān b. ‘Affān (r. 23–35/644–656). The caliphate of ‘Uthmān ended with his assassination in 35/656 by a faction of disaffected tribesmen mostly from Egypt. ‘Alī was then elected as the new caliph (r. 35–40/656–661). As a close kinsman of the murdered caliph ‘Uthmān, Mu‘āwiya b. Abī Sufyān,¹ then governor of Syria, refused to pledge his allegiance to ‘Alī before exacting revenge on ‘Uthmān’s murderers. Although pledging allegiance to ‘Alī in Medina, Ṭalḥa b. ‘Ubayd Allāh (d. 36/656) and al-Zubayr b. al-‘Awwām (d. 36/656), two close companions of the prophet who were promised paradise, moved to Mecca and campaigned for vengeance for the blood of ‘Uthmān. Later, ‘Ā’isha (d. 58/678), daughter of the first caliph Abū Bakr and the prophet’s most-beloved wife, joined the latter two in Mecca, and all three marched in an army towards Basra. According to Sunnī historiography, al-Zubayr, Ṭalḥa and ‘Ā’isha supposedly did not form

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¹ See Hinds, M., “Mu‘āwiya I”, *EP*, 7, 263–268.

their alliance to challenge 'Alī's authority as caliph but rather to exact vengeance on the murderers of 'Uthmān and to achieve *iṣlāḥ* (reconciliation) in the Muslim *nation* whose unity was at stake. On the ground, the conflict escalated by the arrival of their army at the outskirts of Basra. All attempts to avoid any clashes between their army and 'Alī's were in vain when some soldiers of both sides were killed treacherously under the cover of darkness. This in turn led to the First Islamic Civil War (*al-fitna al-kubrā*) that included two consecutive battles: the Battle of the Camel,² also known as the Battle of Basra, that took place between 'Alī's army and the army of Ṭalḥa, al-Zubayr and 'Ā'isha in 36/656; and the Battle of Ṣiffīn between 'Alī's army and Mu'āwiya's Syrian army in 37/657.³ The Battle of the Camel ended in a victory for 'Alī's army while the Battle of Ṣiffīn ended in stalemate after submitting the dispute to arbitration that was doomed to failure. 'Alī's acceptance of arbitration led to the emergence of the Kharijites/*al-Khawārij* (the leavers/dissidents)⁴ in his army because they were locked on the military solution and considered the arbitration incompatible with God's judgment (*ḥukm Allāh*). They became fierce enemies to 'Alī and even declared him, Mu'āwiya and the two arbitrators, 'Amr b. al-ʿĀṣ (d. 43/664) and Abū Mūsā al-Ashʿarī (d. 52/672), as apostates. At last, 'Alī had to fight against some of his former adherents. The two armies met at al-Nahrawān⁵ on 9 Ṣafar 38/17 July 658, and the Kharijite army was crushed. A Kharijite rebel later assassinated 'Alī in 40/661.⁶ 'Alī's partisans (*Shīʿat 'Alī*) then selected al-Ḥasan (d. 50/670), 'Alī's eldest son, to succeed his father. Few months later, al-Ḥasan stepped down in favor of Mu'āwiya who thus became the sole legitimate sovereign of the Muslim community and founded a hereditary dynasty that will rule for almost ninety years (41–132/660–750). The year 41/661 is highly venerated in Sunnī historiography as the “Year of Unity” (*ʿām al-jamāʿa*). Although the *fitna* was provisionally terminated by the resignation of al-Ḥasan, its consequences were in play. It ended the unity of the early Islamic nation (*umma*) by creating permanent theological disagreements that continue up to the present. This one nation split up into three: Sunnīs, Shīʿīs and Kharijites. Each will later split into sects. For the Sunnī historians, the death of 'Alī marks the end of the era of the Righteous Caliphate (*al-khilāfa al-rāshida*), where caliphs were chosen through mutual consultation (*al-shūrā*),⁷ and

² So named because the battle took place around the camel on which 'Ā'isha was seated. For further details of the battle, see Vecchia Vaglieri, L., “al-Djamil”, *EP*, 2, 414–416.

³ See Lecker, M., “Ṣiffīn”, *EP*, 9, 552–556; Hinds 1972, 93–129.

⁴ Levi Della Vida, G., “Khāridjites”, *EP*, 4, 1074–1077.

⁵ Morony, M., “al-Nahrawān”, *EP*, 7, 912–913.

⁶ For a full biography of 'Alī, see al-Yaʿqūbī, *Taʾrīkh* (1883), 1, 206–256; al-Ṭabarī, *Taʾrīkh* (1967–1971), 4, 427–575; 5, 5–163; Ibn al-Athīr, *al-Kāmil* (1987), 3, 81–274; Ibn Kathīr, *al-Bidāya wa-l-nihāya* (1990), 10, 411–686; 11, 5–142; Ibn ʿAsākir, *Taʾrīkh madīnat Dimashq* (1995–2000), 42, 3–589 [no. 4933]; Ibn al-ʿImād, *Shadharāt al-dhahab* (1986–1993), 1, 200–227; Ibn al-Jawzī, *Mirʾāt al-zamān* (2013), 6, 47–489; al-Masʿūdī, *Murūj* (2005), 2, 273–331; Abū Nuʿaym, *Maʾrifat al-ṣaḥāba* (1998), 2, 1968–1970 [no. 2026]; Ibn al-Athīr, *Usd al-ghāba* (2012), 871–888 [no. 3790]; Abū al-ʿArab al-Tamīmī, *Kitāb al-Miḥan* (2006), 75–96; Ibn Qutayba, *al-Maʾārif* (1981), 203–218; Khalīfa b. Khayyāṭ, *Taʾrīkh* (1985), 180–202; Ibn Ḥajar, *Taqrīb al-Tahdhīb* (2000), 698 [no. 4787]; Ibn al-Jawzī, *Ṣifat al-ṣaḥwa* (2012), 116–124; Ibn Saʿd, *Kitāb al-Ṭabaqāt al-kabīr* (2001), 2, 291–293; 3, 17–38; 8, 134; Ibn Qunfudh, *Kitāb al-Wafayāt* (1983), 28 [no. 40]; al-Dhahabī, *Taʾrīkh* (1990–2000), 3, 621–652; al-Dhahabī, *Tajrīd* (1985), 1, 392 [no. 4636]; al-Dhahabī, *Tadhhīb Tahdhīb al-Kamāl* (2004), 6, 467–472 [no. 4790]; al-Dhahabī, *Duwal al-Islām* (1999), 1, 27–35; al-Dhahabī, *Siyar* (1981–1996), 225–285; Ibn Ḥajar, *Tahdhīb al-Tahdhīb* (1995), 3, 169–171; Ibn ʿAbd al-Barr, *al-Isṭīʿāb* (1992), 3, 1089–1133 [1855]; Ibn Ḥajar, *al-Iṣāba* (1853), 4, 269–271 [no. 5682]; al-Mizzī, *Tahdhīb al-Kamāl* (1980–1992), 20, 472–490 [no. 4089]. See also Vecchia Vaglieri, L., “ʿAlī b. Abī Ṭalīb”, *EP*, 1, 381–386.

⁷ Ayalon, A., “Shūrā”, *EP*, 9, 504–506.

the beginning of the hereditary monarchical rule (*al-mulk al-‘aḏūd*) introduced by Mu‘āwiya and continued throughout the Umayyads and their Abbasid successors. The Shī‘īs on the other hand considered ‘Alī the first of their divinely guided Imāms and the prophet’s rightful heir and true successor. The accession of Yazīd b. Mu‘āwiya (r. 60–64/680–683) after his father’s death provoked a Second Civil War. Al-Ḥusayn b. ‘Alī (d. 61/680) and ‘Abd Allāh b. al-Zubayr (d. 73/692), son of al-Zubayr b. al-‘Awwām, withheld giving their pledge of allegiance to Yazīd’s governor of Medina and fled to Mecca under the cover of night to take refuge in the Sacred Sanctuary (*al-ḥaram*). ‘Alī’s partisans in Kūfa, the veterans of the first *fitna*, contacted al-Ḥusayn in Mecca and implored him to come to Kūfa to lead an uprising against the Umayyads. Al-Ḥusayn accepted the invitation and delegated his cousin Muslim b. ‘Aqīl (d. 60/680) to closely observe the situation in Kūfa and take the oath of allegiance (*al-bay‘a*) from the Kufan tribesmen on his behalf. Once Ibn ‘Aqīl reached Kūfa, Kufans flocked to welcome him and pledge allegiance to al-Ḥusayn. The supporters counted as many as eighteen thousand men. Ibn ‘Aqīl happily wrote to al-Ḥusayn urging him to hasten his departure. Accompanied by his household and a small group of loyal supporters, al-Ḥusayn moved from Mecca to Kūfa. The governor of Kūfa, al-Nu‘mān b. Bashīr (d. 65/685), a companion of the prophet, did not take action against the Kufan supporters of al-Ḥusayn. Instead, he ascended the pulpit and preached the people not to rush into discord and turmoil. The news reached Yazīd in Damascus who then dismissed al-Nu‘mān and appointed ‘Ubayd Allāh b. Ziyād (d. 67/686), then the ruler of Baṣra. He requested him to speedily arrest Muslim b. ‘Aqīl and kill him before the arrival of al-Ḥusayn. Ibn Ziyād reached Kūfa in disguise, wearing a black turban and veiled. He succeeded in deceiving the people of Kufa and its dismissed governor into believing that he is al-Ḥusayn, which leveraged him into securing full control over the governor’s residence (*dār al-imāra*). He then delivered a short incentive speech to the people gathered around the governor’s residence. He also summoned the tribal notables (*‘urafā*, sing. *‘arif*) asking them to discourage the people around Muslim b. ‘Aqīl. Driven by fear of Ibn Ziyād’s severe punishment as propagated by the tribal notables, al-Ḥusayn’s supporters began to disperse one after another and Muslim finally found himself literally alone that he could not even find anyone to guide him along the way. Later, he was caught and beheaded. Ibn Ziyād then sent a patrol of strong cavalry to block al-Ḥusayn’s way to Kūfa. The Umayyad troops forced al-Ḥusayn and his followers to entre in the desert plain of Karbalā’, located fifty miles to the northeast of Kūfa. With only tens of infantry and cavalry who refused to desert him, al-Ḥusayn took to the battlefield and fought heroically until he and most of his close relatives and loyal supporters met their inevitable death on the day of ‘Ashūrā’ (10 al-Muḥarram, 61/10 October, 680). His head was cut off and sent to Yazīd in Damascus. The women and children of his family were also taken to be presented before Yazīd. ‘Alī b. al-Ḥusayn known as Zayn al-‘Ābidīn (d. 95/713), who did not take part in the fight because of his illness, was the only son of al-Ḥusayn to survive the massacre. Al-Ḥusayn’s tragic death has not only triggered continuous rebellions against the Damascus-based Caliphate but also generated theological debates among the early Shī‘ī

community, which were to play a significant role in the formation of the Shī'ī identity. Shortly after al-Ḥusayn's death, two movements emerged: (1) the movement of the Penitents (*Tawwābūn*),⁸ established in 64–65/683–684 by a group of remorseful Shī'ī Kufans who profoundly blamed themselves for failing to support al-Ḥusayn at Karbalā', and (2) *al-Mukhtāriyya* (later developing into *al-Kaysāniyya*),⁹ led by al-Mukhtār b. Abī 'Ubayd al-Thaqafī between 66/686 and 67/687. These two movements, particularly the latter and its subsects, introduced some new concepts that later became fundamental creeds in Shī'ī belief, such as *al-Mahdī* (God-guided One),¹⁰ *badā'* (God's abrogation of His earlier decision),¹¹ *ghayba* (occultation),¹² and *raǧ'a* (return of the hidden Imām).¹³ These new theological and soteriological notions intensified the Sunnī-Shī'ī split and laid the foundations for the development of the early Shī'a to become sectarian.¹⁴

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⁸ Denny, F.M., "Tawwābūn", *EP*, 10, 398.

⁹ Madelung, W., "Kaysāniyya", *EP*, 4, 836–838.

¹⁰ Madelung, W., "al-Mahdī", *EP*, 5, 1230–1238.

¹¹ Goldziher, I., [Tritton, A.S.], "Badā'", *EP*, 1, 850–851.

¹² Macdonald, D.B., [Hodgson, M.G.S.], "Ghayba", *EP*, 2, 1026.

¹³ Kohlberg, E., "Radǧ'a", *EP*, 8, 371–373.

¹⁴ For more about Sunnī-Shī'ī split, see Kohlberg 2016, xv–xxxvii; Hodgson 2016, 3–15; Crow 2016, 41–81; al-Qāḍī 2016, 169–193; Anthony 2012, 19–135; Shahin 2012, 177–208; Haider 2014, 32–39, 53–81, 85–86; Haider 2018, 209–222; Petersen 1964, 9–12, 28–51; Abbās 2017, 27–171; Madelung, W., "Shī'a", *EP*, 9, 420–424.

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