

How Did Sunni Islam Begin

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We begin the story from the time of the third *khalifa*, Uthman bin Affaan. Uthman's rule lasted for twelve years. During the first year of his reign he faithfully adhered to the rules set by Abu Bakr and Umar. In the second year of his *khilafa*, he began showing his true colors. Slowly and gradually he removed all the governors in the provinces and replaced them with his kinsmen from Banu Umayya. He misappropriated the treasury by bestowing lavish gifts on his uncles, nephews and cousins. He acquired expensive jewelry for his wife. Ali bin Abi Talib tried to correct him frequently but he was much too confident about his influence among the people and refused to listen. Abu Zarr, the famous Companion of the Prophet, became one of his most vocal critics. Abu Zarr was banished to Damascus. But on Mu'awiya's complaints he was called back. He was then banished to a barren country in Rabza where he died alone and destitute. Uthman had Ammar and Abdullah bin Mas'ood, two other senior companions of the Prophet, beaten up by his thugs when they criticized his policies. He reduced A'isha's stipend from 12,000 per year to 6,000. A'isha promptly joined the group of Uthman's critics and was recorded many times inciting Muslims of Medina to revolt against Uthman's rule. Uthman appointed Walid bin 'Uqba as the governor of Kufa, where he was frequently found dead drunk. He would come and lead prayers while intoxicated not knowing whether he was doing four-rak'at or two-rak'at prayer. Uthman appointed Abdullah bin Abi Sarah (his foster brother) as governor of Egypt. This Abdullah had been, at one point, sentenced to death by the Prophet. Uthman bestowed the duchy of Fadak to Marwan, his cousin and son-in-law. For six years, the trouble remained under covers. Then, things were coming out, and the ugliness of nepotism and favoritism of the *khalifa* became the talk of the town. In the last year of his reign, things came to a boil. A'isha left for Makkah in anger and frustration. A mob of several thousand people came to Medina from Egypt. Similar sized mobs arrived in Medina from Iraq. They first complained to the *khalifa*. Ali came and tried to mediate between the mob and the *khalifa*. At first, it appeared that things would be resolved peacefully because Uthman had agreed to correct his policies. Twice he broke his promise to do that. In the

meantime, the crowds remained in Medina. Finally, they put a siege on the house of the *khalifa*. He was denied water, even though Ali sent his two sons, Hasan and Husayn, to bring water to the beleaguered *khalifa*. On the 18th of Zul-Hijja in the 35 year of Hijra some of the mob entered the house of Uthman and killed him. It is very likely that the killers were in turn themselves killed on the spot. It was a complete chaos in Medina for three days. The mob would not allow the burial of the *khalifa* for three days. He was finally interred in the Jewish graveyard of Medina. (This narrative is formulated from many books including Tabari's *Tareekh*, Ibn Wadhih Yaqoobi's *Tareekh*, Abul Ala Mawdoodi's *Khilafat-o-Mulookiyyat*, and mainly from Taha Husain's *al-Fitnat-ul-Kubra*.)

The mob then turned to Ali. They pleaded with him to take charge of the situation and bring back law and order to the city of the Prophet. In the beginning, he refused. But then he also saw that if he did not intervene, the situation would just get worse.

After the assassination of Uthman, Ali reluctantly accepted the *khilafa*. We can only guess as to what the situation of the community would have been, if Ali were given charge of it 25 years ago, or even 12 years ago. As soon as he had taken charge and news spread to Makkah and other provinces, there was a different kind of reaction from different places. Talha bin Ubayd Allah and Zubayr bin Al-Awwam were the first to swear allegiance to Ali. But soon they broke their pledge to him and moved towards Makkah. A'isha, the daughter of Abu Bakr and a widow of the Prophet of Islam, was returning from Hajj. When she heard the news, she freaked out in anger and frustration. Soon she had joined hands with Talha (her cousin) and Zubayr (related to her by marriage) and a conspiracy was afoot to unsettle Ali. Their apparent motive was a call for revenge for Uthman's blood. Their battle cry was that the legitimate *khalifa* of Muslims was brutally murdered with *zulm* (oppression), the killers had to be found and punished before they (the trio) would accept the rule of the new *khalifa*. In fact, the perpetrators of this conspiracy neither had any right nor authority to start the movement. We shall see that that was all a façade for some other purpose.

The three sped up to Basra where Talha had some land. They incited the people of Iraq against Ali and began plundering the city.

Ali arrived post haste with a well armed force of 700 men. He stopped at a distance from Basra and sent an emissary to Abu Musa Ashari, his governor in Kufa, for raising support from that city. We will see later how Abu Musa worked against Ali's and the community's interests and destroyed peace and any hope for justice in the community for all time to come. Abu Musa hid Ali's letter, threatened Ali's emissary with prison and death, and refused to do anything to help. When Ali received this news, he deposed Abu Musa and appointed a new governor for Kufa. By this time, Ali had received the news about the rebels plundering the city of Basra. Malik al-Ashtar, a general in Ali's army and himself a Kufan, arrived in Kufa and took over the governor's palace while Abu Musa was still preaching in the mosque to the people of Kufa to stay out of trouble.

Three days later, a battle took place between the troops of Ali, and those of A'isha, Talha, and Zubayr on the other side. This battle is known to us as The Battle of The Camel. The trio were defeated thoroughly. Thousands were killed. Talha was killed by Marwan who was actually fighting on the same side. Zubayr deserted the battlefield after Ali was able to persuade him but, was finally killed by a Bedouin. A'isha was sent back to Medina with respect, although after a verbal reprimand-lucky for her!

No sooner than Ali had quelled the Makkan rebellion, the governor of Syria, Mu'awiyah, raised the banner of revolt against the legitimate *khalifa* at Madinah.

Ali wrote letters and tried to persuade him to desist from his sedition. But, Mu'awiyah felt strong enough to stand up to the legitimate authority of Madinah. Ali had to move to Iraq to stop this rebellious movement from Syria. A Battle took place between a Syrian army led by Mu'awiyah and a Kufan-and-Madinan army of Ali. Both sides took great losses.

Finally, the tide of the battle began turning in favor of Ali, until the night came which is known as the Laylat-Al Hareer (the Night of the Rumble). Ali's troops were pressing hard. Ali had been fighting all night. His men were able to gain a lot of advantage for themselves. All indications were that the Syrians have had it. Some reports record that it was at this point that Mu'awiya had run away and saved his life.

Mu'awiya saw the end coming. He was desperate. He had a meeting with 'Amr bin al-'Aas and said that unless they came up with something that was the end. 'Amr advised him to tell his people to raise copies of Qur'an on their lances suggesting an arbitration between the warring parties. That would cause confusion and dissensions among Ali's troops and that would at least give them sufficient time to regroup and re-arm, if nothing else happens. The trick worked. Ash'ath bin Qays of Kinda who commanded 12,000 men, came to Ali and said that they should accept the truce. Ali said that they were just about to win the battle and it was not the time for that kind of discussion. Ash'ath was adamant. He said that Malik al-Ashtar, who was fighting with his troops in the front lines, should immediately be called back otherwise he would not only separate himself from Ali but actually would turn against him and fight him. Ali had no choice, the last thing he wanted was infighting within his own troops. He sent a message to al-Ashtar. He refused to come, leaving his men in the heat of the battle un-commanded. Ali had to send a second message emphasizing the gravity of the situation. Al-Ashtar had to stop fighting and return. He was full of remorse and frustration. Mu'awiya had his wish come true. There was confusion in Ali's troops. The battle was halted.

The raising of the Qur'an meant that the parties would sit down and try to come to a peaceful resolution in view of the Book of Allah. It was decided that two representatives would be chosen, one from each side and their decision after due consideration would be binding on the parties. Ali suggested the name of 'Abdullah bin 'Abbas as his representative, but that was rejected by his own men. He then suggested the name of al-Ashtar, and that too was rejected. One only has to note that in this internal wrangling Ash'ath bin Qays was in the forefront. Ali finally had to agree on Abu Musa

Al-Ash'ari. We have already seen how unsympathetic Abu Musa had been to Ali's thinking from the very beginning. Mu'awiya, of course, chose 'Amr bin al-'Aas as his representative.

The troops retired to Syria and Iraq respectively. Several months later a meeting was held at a place called Adhrooh. 'Amr suggested to Abu Musa that they should both remove their respective candidates from *khilafa* and let the community choose a new person. That would bring lasting peace to the society. Abu Musa was very accommodating to this idea, even though it went dead against the initial premise of this meeting, that the representatives would search the Book of Allah for a peaceful solution of the conflict. Finally in an open assembly they both came together. Abu Musa first spoke and said that he had removed his candidate Ali bin Abi Talib from the office of *khilafa*. Amr stood up and said that he had confirmed his candidate Mu'awiya bin Abi Sufyan in that office. Abu Misa was throwing abuse at 'Amr for deceiving him. The meeting ended in utter confusion. The Syrians took it as a political victory for themselves. Ali's support among his own people dwindled over time after this event.



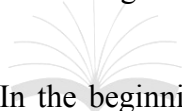
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Mu'awiyyah's Intrigues, Plunder And Killings

There are reports that Mu'awiya had offered bribes to Abu Musa even before the Battle of Siffeen. Abu Musa, who was not sympathetic to Ali's cause in the first place, actually thought that an elite group of aristocrats of Hijaz should rule the community and he had his eyes on 'Abdullah bin 'Umar for the position of Khaleefa. The fighting at Siffeen was stopped for one reason and one purpose: that both parties would try to find a solution through the Book of Allah. At the meeting at Adhrooh he must have realized that the Book of Allah was not near anywhere on the agenda. He should have stopped then. Even if we do not go deep into the situation, the facts tell us that either Abu Musa was a dumb idiot or he was a dirty double crosser. By his actions at the arbitration of Adhrooh he had destroyed any hope for peace and stability in the Muslim community for a long time to come.

Mu'awiya was emboldened by his success at the arbitration fiasco. Things had gone in his favor beyond his wildest dreams and far deeper than he could ever hope and expect. He put his machinery in full gear to attack Ali's institutions, which were basically the institutions of Islam. He sent armed parties to raid the border towns in Iraq. Supporters of Ali were not safe on the highways. At the same time he began a propaganda war. The official pulpits were used in Syria to abuse Ali. The practice continued for nearly ninety years. Children were raised on the hatred of Ali. A new generation of Ali-haters were ready to fight twenty years later. It was basically these people who would butcher the family of the Prophet at Karbala in the 61st year of Hijra.

The following year, Mu'awiya sent a strong contingent to attack Egypt where Muhammad bin Abi Bakr was in charge as Ali's governor. The Egyptians were defeated and Muhammad bin Abi Bakr was brutally killed. Ali was greatly aggrieved. So was A'isha when she got the news of her brother's brutal killing.



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In the beginning of the 40th year of Hijra, Mu'awiya organized a raiding force under the command of Busr bin Abi Artat and sent him off towards Arabia Proper. Busr razed Mecca and Medina killing men, women and children and looting the two cities. Moving down south, he continued with the rampage in Najran and continued towards Yemen. Ubayd Allah bin Abbas had left his two young sons with a tribal leader in the desert. Busr attacked the camp where they lived and wanted to kill them. The tribal leader came out in the open and refused to hand over the children. He was killed and then the children were killed by slitting their throats. The Bedouin women came out weeping and lamenting for this and said that even in the period of Jahiliyya the Arabs did not use to kill little children. The full story of Busr's gory adventures in Arabia will be found in Madelung.

On the other hand Ali had to confront the misguided Khawarij who had seceded from him, and were now out to fight him. Ali, with his selected supporters, fought these fanatic zealots with the single purpose of upholding the Islamic law and successfully

eradicated the Arab lands of their presence. Their survivors ran off into far off areas of the deserts and continued as lone guerilla fighters.

On the 19th of Ramadhan in the same year, Ali was wounded in the mosque of Kufa at the hands of Ibn Muljim al-Muradi, a Kharijite, while doing a pre-morning prayer. He was alone in the mosque at the time. News spread in Kufa as people began to arrive in the mosque for morning prayers. Ibn Muljim was rounded up quickly. Three days later, Ali succumbed to his wound.

After the passing away of Imam Ali, a meeting was held in the mosque in which Imam Hasan, his eldest son, spoke and so did Abdullah bin Abbas. Hasan bin Ali was unanimously elected as the *khalifa* of the Muslims. This was the first universal election in the Muslim community in peaceful circumstances in which all classes had participated.

On the other hand, Mu'awiya's intrigues were in full swing, now that Ali bin Abi Talib was no more. Hasan bin Ali had meetings with his supporters in Kufa and they all agreed that Mu'awiya had to be stopped. Hasan moved to Mada'in. Then he noticed a very definite lack of resolve among his people. One of the Kharijites attacked him and he was wounded. He himself was determined for a fight but circumstances forced him to modify his plans. He had to come to terms with Mu'awiya. He abdicated from the worldly rule of the community and retired to Medina.

Ahl-al-Sunna wal-Jama'a

The following year Mu'awiya went to Hajj. On the way back he stopped in Medina and people pledged their allegiance to him in the mosque. At this point Mu'awiya addressed the people and said "I have not taken over power to make you perform salat and fasting and Hajj and make you pay zakat. You do all that already. I have taken the rule because I wanted power over people. Now everything is under my feet. I will do as I please."

This speech and its contents have had long term effects on the Muslim psyche. It showed that the *khalifa* was not interested in upholding the law of shari'a. He was only interested in holding power over people he ruled. This was the first indication in the thinking of the community about the separation of State from religion in the Muslim community. Imam Ali had fought relentlessly all his four years of rule to hold the community together. Mu'awiya's one action undid all that.

Mu'awiya termed that year 'Aamul Jama'a (the year of the community). It was from this that the term Ahl-as Sunnat wal-Jamaat was coined for the general Muslim community, later on. This is the point in time when we can identify the existence of the large majority of Muslims under the government of the time, who later became the larger community of the Sunni Muslims.

However, scholars such as Amir Ali have said that the proper Sunni Community did not take shape completely until the second Abbasid *khalifa* named Al-Manoor (754-775, A.D.).



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Let us complete the rest of the story of Mu'awiya's period in power.

Mu'awiya had realized that although he had taken the power away from the family of the Prophet in a bloodless coup (that was the treaty with Imam Hasan) and he had won the game of politics, his legitimacy as the *khalifa* of Muslims was still suspect. He was made aware of this so much more by the fact that there were a number of the Shi'a who openly disagreed with him and they continued to protest publicly about his oppressive policies, particularly his orders for Imam Ali's cursing from the official pulpits in the Muslim kingdom. While he needed the title of *khalifa* for himself to hold the kingdom, he wanted absolute power over the people so that he could pave the way for the succession of his own son Yazeed to the throne. That was rather impossible as long as any charismatic member from the family of the Prophet was around.

Hasan bin Ali was one such person. Even though Hasan bin Ali had been living a quiet life in Medina, his mere presence was a thorn in Mu'awiya's side.

Mu'awiya finally found a way out of that situation. He conspired with one of the wives of Imam Hasan and she poisoned him to death in the 49th year of Hijra.

The anti-Ali tirades were being broadcast openly from now on, from each and every pulpit in the Muslim kingdom. The population of the Shi'a had to take a low profile. The family of the Prophet were bound by the treaty Imam Hasan had signed with Mu'awiya, even though he himself was not respecting any of the conditions in the contract. But there were some who could not take all that. Among them were Hujr bin Adi and his supporters in Kufa. When the governor of Kufa, Ziyad, who had been declared by Mu'awiya to be his father's (Abu Sufyan) bastard son, would go on to the pulpit and would begin abusing Imam Ali, Hujr and his companions would stand up and try to shout him down. Ziyad complained to Mu'awiya about it. Mu'awiya ordered him to arrest Hujr and his companions and send them to Damascus with a charge sheet. Ziyad complied. Hujr and his companions were tortured and then killed on Mu'awiya's orders at a place called Azra.

Hujr and his companions had no political ambitions. They were not aspiring to any public office. Nor did they have anyone else in mind whom they wanted installed in high office. We will have to conclude that Hujr and his people's open and public protests were fired by a zeal that was motivated by something other than hope and expectation for any kind of worldly gain. He also knew that by doing what he was doing, he had endangered his own life and property. Finally, he and his companions were tortured and brutally killed on Mu'awiya's orders.

Hujr's and his people's stance was totally religious. It cannot, by any stretch of the imagination, be termed as political in nature. This is the true Shi'a way of thinking. We will see how this thinking manifests itself ten years later at Karbala and leaves an indelible mark in the pages of human history.

An analogy can be drawn from what is going on today in some European cities against hijab-wearing young women. Some of them have lost their jobs, others have been turned away from schools. At least in one instance, a young woman was actually physically dragged out of the classroom by the teacher because she came in wearing a head scarf. Those women, when they wear a head scarf, in their opinion, are fulfilling their religious duty to dress up properly in public. The outsiders consider it a political statement. This is how we should look at the Shi'a stance when it comes to preserving and protecting the religious glory of the Ahlul-Bayt. When the Shi'a uphold the sole right of the Ahlul-Bayt to rule after the Prophet, they actually are fulfilling their religious duty. The outsider, who has not gone deep into the Shi'a psyche and the beliefs, consider this as a political movement.

What is being missed in all this argumentation and back-and-forth debate is that by ignoring the Ahlul-Bayt, the larger Muslim community is going into a loss. It is their own loss; the Ahlul-Bayt neither did gain anything in the past for their spiritual leadership, nor will they gain anything in the future. The various ruling groups in Muslim history in the past came to fore for their own selfish reasons and their own vested interests. As opposed to that, the Ahlul-Bayt's total contribution to Islam has been one sacrifice after another- sacrifice of life, property and honor. Once again, Karbala is the epitome of that series of great sacrifices in the way of Islam and humanity.

Having said all that, Amir Ali, a respected scholar of Islamic history, has asserted that the establishment of the Sunni establishment in Islam owes to the rules of the Abbasid dynasty.

Let us complete this discussion with a quotation from Amir Ali which concludes our point as to 'when did the Sunni Mazhab begin?'.

“The Omaeyyeds called themselves Amwis (Children of Umayya). As yet the name of Ahl-us-Sunna wal Jama’at was wholly unknown. Under Mansur and Haroon this designation first came into existence.” (Ali, p. 324)



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Citations

Ali, Amir. Spirit of Islam: A History of the Evolution and Ideals of Islam with a Life of the Prophet. Low Price Publications, 2010.