

Understanding Islam Series One: The Big Picture

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Part Eleven: What happened after Muhammad: the Sunni view?

There are some questions in the lives of all societies that appear not to have a resolution but which require us to understand the different positions of all parties. The question of what should have happened about the leadership of the Muslim community after the death of Muhammad is one of them. Do not ask me to solve a question that has divided Muslims far more intelligent than me for centuries! In this article, I will discuss the Sunni view and in Part Twelve, the Shi'a view.

The word Sunni is derived from the term *sunna* or the customary practice of Muhammad. All Muslims will say that they follow the *sunna* but the term Sunni relates to the largest group amongst Muslims worldwide, who are found throughout the world. They comprise some 85 to 90 per cent of all Muslims. Central to their position is that God does not decree in the Qur'an who was to follow Muhammad, what kind of a leadership that should be or how the question of selecting a new leader should be organised. Further, they hold that Muhammad did not nominate his successor or say how the new leader should be selected. God and Muhammad were silent on the question; therefore it was left up to the community to resolve.

Some things were clear. The most important is that Muhammad was the last prophet and so there was no question of someone taking his place directly as God's messenger amongst them. The community was to be led according to the Qur'an and the lived example of Muhammad. The revelation of the Qur'an ended with the death of Muhammad. Muhammad had been the single head of the community but this did not mean that there was no other form of leadership amongst the Muslims; in Arab tribal pattern, the hereditary leaders still had respect and the system of *shura* – seeking wisdom by consultation – was still in place. Much of Muhammad's authority came from the recognition by his followers that he was the Messenger of God and from his strong personality and charisma. This style of leadership paved the way for a single head of the community after the Prophet but this did not imply a dictator who held all the power in his own hands.

There are sayings reported from Muhammad that indicate that leadership should be based on piety and wisdom; one such records: "Even if he be a black Abyssinian slave, if he is the most wise and pious amongst you, then he should be your leader." There is no reference here to a hereditary principle or socio-political position within the society; the way is open for a meritocracy based on these two qualities. The Arabs valued age and experience, so they would be unlikely to choose a young or untested man as their leader. In the society of that time and place, it was unthinkable that the leader should not be a man and it would be expected that, like Muhammad, he should be ready to lead the men into battle if necessary.

The emergence of Abu Bakr (r632-634)

As soon as rumours began to spread that Muhammad was dead there was consternation in Madina. Some refused to believe it and offered violence to anyone who should say it was true. Some felt that their faith was shattered as it was built on Muhammad and he was dead. Some acted as though they thought that he was immortal. A decisive move was taken to quieten the crowd by Abu Bakr, one of the closest companions of Muhammad. He examined the body, confirmed death and then declared this to the crowd reminding them that Muslim faith was built on God and not on a mortal man. This subdued them but it was clear that strong leadership would be needed to see them through this turbulent time. A group of the leading members of the community, in good Arab fashion, went into a huddle together to discuss the question; thus forming a *shura*. When their deliberations were over, Abu Bakr had emerged as their choice as the head of the community. He was put to the assembly and, as might be expected in Arab society, the people affirmed the choice of their leaders.

Abu Bakr was around the same age as Muhammad, so he possessed the seniority of age and wisdom so highly favoured in that culture. He was one of the first Muslims and had been a close companion of Muhammad throughout his prophetic ministry, so he was steeped in the ways of Islam. He had migrated with Muhammad from Makka to Madina and been someone to whom Muhammad turned to lead the congregational prayers when he was away or ill. On one occasion, it is reported that Muhammad joined the congregation behind Abu Bakr. His daughter, Ayesha, had married Muhammad and so he was in this way related. He was not from one of the dominant clans of Makka or Madina and thus was acceptable to a wide grouping as a supra-tribal leader. He emerged on the basis of his own personal authority rather than any position that he might have held.

Abu Bakr did not see himself as being divinely-appointed, like the Byzantine religious-political leaders, who in a sense stood above the law, but rather one who was to lead within the confines of the Qur'an and *sunna* and therefore was open to be challenged by members of the community if he should stray from these sources. He had to continue to earn his living in the first half-year after his appointment until it was agreed to pay him a subsistence stipend from the communal funds.

One of the things that Abu Bakr had to do was to deal with the revolt that almost inevitably followed the death of Muhammad. Some of the desert clans felt that the treaties that they had made with Muhammad were no longer binding after his death. They objected to paying the annual *zakat* contribution to the poor and needy. This *ridda* or breaking out threatened to destabilise the delicate balance between nomads and settled peoples and jeopardise the all-important trade routes and markets. It linked a political end – treason – with a religious means – apostasy. Abu Bakr sent out armies in all directions to crush this rebellion and bring the clans back to their earlier agreements. Such activism also helped to bind the Muslim community together after the death of Muhammad. It was at this time that the great general of the

expansion of the Muslim Empire came to the fore, Khalid ibn al-Walid. One of the characteristics of Abu Bakr's time was that former rebels, who had been brought back under authority, were not trusted to take part in the expansionary expeditions that took place during his reign.

Abu Bakr was marked by his valour in the cause of Islam and by his generosity in buying slaves to set them free; in this way he expended a good deal of his personal fortune. He was noted for his humility and for visiting the sick. He took the responsibility of making the first collected edition of the Qur'an. He is credited with giving drawing up a set of "standing orders" for the conduct of troops in battle, based on the Qur'an and *sunna*, which he sent to Yazid ibn Abi Sufyan as the commander of the army sent to Syria:

- Do not kill a woman, a child or a feeble old man
- Do not cut down a fruitful tree
- Do not ruin cultivated land
- Do not slaughter a camel or a sheep except for its owner
- Do not destroy the date palm or burn it
- Do not conceal plunder
- Do not be cowardly.

The nomination of Umar (r634-644)

Before Abu Bakr died, after only two years in office, he nominated Umar ibn al-Khattab to take his place. This was an innovation in Arab custom but the nomination was subject to the general agreement of the community. Umar was the first to use the title of Caliph: he was the *khalifa* of the *khalifa* of the Prophet, in other words, the successor to Abu Bakr. In time the simpler title *Amir al-Mu'minin*, "Commander of the Faithful" was introduced. The term "Commander" should not be taken in too authoritarian a sense; there was no real centralised government amongst the Arabs at this time but a commonwealth of local rulers with Caliph Umar as the counsellor and guide rather than the absolute military commander.

Umar was a man of proven ability and presided over a two-directional expansion of the community. He sent men to Iraq to conquer the Sasanians and another army to Syria to claim territory off the Byzantines. Both campaigns were successful and modern Iraq and Syria came under Muslim rule. Crucial in this development was Umar's decision to reverse Abu Bakr's policy and enlist the former rebels, which added substantial numbers of armed men and effectively united the settled and nomadic communities. In Iraq, the garrison towns of Basra and Kufa became important centres of power in the region.

Umar originally had been a noted opponent of Islam and his conversion is related to an incident in which he heard his own sister and her husband, who had become Muslims, reading a portion of the Qur'an. When he eventually read this too, it led to his making his *shahada* in front of Muhammad. He was renowned for his austerity of life and there are several records of his going around in patched clothing. He was a

noted warrior and defender of the faith. He had a wide knowledge of the teachings of the Qur'an and *sunna*. He established many institutions in the infant Muslim community, which set things in order for the expanding empire, for example, he established *qadis* or judges for the provinces.

The *shura* chooses Uthman (r644-656)

Prior to his death by an assassin's knife, Umar appointed a *shura* to act as an electoral college to decide on the appointment of his successor between themselves. It comprised of six leading members of the Makkan community. They took soundings from other leaders in Madina and short-listed two of their number: Ali ibn Abi Talib and Uthman ibn Affan. A critical precondition that they made was that the chosen candidate should continue with the policies of Abu Bakr and Umar. Ali refused to accept this requirement and thus ruled himself out. Uthman agreed to it and so was chosen to succeed Umar as Caliph. Uthman was a leader of the Umayyad clan of the tribe of Quraysh and thus can be thought of as belonging to the Makkan aristocracy. He was a natural conservative leader and knew well the social structure and trading interests of the Makkans.

The scholars generally speak of "two halves" of Uthman's reign. In the first six years, he carried on much as his predecessors but in the second six years, he attempted to assert his authority more directly over the expanding empire. To this end, he appointed Umayyad clan members as provincial governors. They owed their allegiance to him through the clan system. On the whole, they were competent and effective governors.

The next development was to use the provincial structures to send out armies; from Egypt into North Africa, and from Iraq into the remaining Sasanian territories. During this time a flood of wealth came into Muslim hands. Four-fifths of this wealth was distributed locally and one-fifth was sent to the Caliph's treasury in Madina. The way that Uthman distributed this wealth in Madina, according to the clan patronage model, led to accusations of nepotism.

Uthman's desire to impose centralised authority over the districts led to tensions with the leadership in Kufa and also with the Egyptians. Eventually the Egyptians sent a delegation to Madina to argue their case with Uthman. They were joined by some disgruntled people from Kufa. In the end, the discussions became heated and one of the Egyptian delegation killed Uthman.

Uthman had the distinction of being married to two of Muhammad's daughters: first to Ruqayyah, then, after her death, to Umm Kulthum. He also migrated twice: first with the group to Abyssinia and then later to Madina. He is recorded as one of the first four male converts to Islam and as someone who had memorised the entire Qur'an.

Ali by popular acclaim (r656-661)

There was chaos in the Muslim community after the assassination of Uthman. Eyes turned towards Ali as the natural choice and after a few days he was persuaded to accept the Caliphate. He had wide support amongst the people of Madina but some of the leading members of the Makkan Quraysh tribe opposed him for fear of his radical egalitarian ideas. This Makkan group enlisted the support of Ayesha, one of Muhammad's widows, and it came eventually to civil war, resulting in the Battle of the Camel, so called because Ayesha sat on her camel to the rear of the fighting and encouraged the troops. Ali won a decisive victory, the Makkan leaders who opposed him were killed in the battle and Ayesha withdrew from public life.

Ali began to interpret the teaching of the Qur'an and *sunna* in ways that were applicable to the contemporary circumstances. In addition to the support of the people of Madina, Ali had support from the leaders of Kufa and Basra in Iraq, as well as from Egypt but not from the province of Syria under the Umayyad governor, Mu'awiya. He wanted the death of his kinsman, Uthman, to be more energetically investigated and revenge to be taken on the perpetrators. This opposition led to the Battle of Siffin in 657. It is recorded to have lasted for three months but most of this time was taken up in negotiation and occasional skirmishes. When battle proper was entered, the Syrians put copies of the Qur'an on the ends of their lances and thus sought arbitration. When Ali agreed to arbitration, a group from his side objected as they argued that this usurped the right of God to judge between them on the battlefield. They left Ali's camp and were known as the Kharijites, or "those who go out." They set up their own little republics in opposition to Ali, who eventually crushed them. It was one of these Kharijites seeking revenge, who assassinated Ali in Kufa in 661.

In addition to being the cousin and son-in-law of Muhammad, Ali is recorded as one of the first male converts to Islam. He was outstanding in battle, often being sent out into initial single combat with the enemy and being entrusted with bearing the Muslim standard in battle. He was widely respected for his knowledge of Qur'an and *sunna*, and for being a wise judge.

The rise of the dynasties

After Ali's death, Egypt sided with Syria and Mu'awiya became the Caliph, which brought in the first dynasty amongst the Muslims, with his Umayyads keeping the power amongst themselves until they were overthrown in 750. They moved their capital to Damascus and this period saw a substantial expansion of the Islamic Empire: north, east and west. This resulted in huge wealth flowing to the centre, which helped to keep the Umayyads in power.