

B 5. Background context

A critical question arose after the death of Prophet Muhammad about who should take on leadership of the Muslim community. This was not a matter of arbitrary choice but rather the Muslim community was obliged by a verse of the Qur'an which said that when God and his Messenger decide upon a thing, the faithful man or woman has no choice but to obey (Q. 33:36). Looking at the message of the Qur'an and the teaching of the Prophet, his *sunna*, both of which were common to all Muslims, it was a question of whether these two fundamental sources had laid down who should assume leadership of the community. For what was later to be called the Sunni tradition, it was clear that no such guidance had been given and thus it was a matter for the community to decide for itself. For those who would later be called the Shi'a tradition, the answer was quite different. They interpreted verses of the Qur'an and events in the life of Muhammad to lay down clear guidance to the effect that leadership was to come from the Ahl al-Bayt or the Family of the Prophet descended in the blood-line from his daughter Fatima and her husband, the cousin of Muhammad, Ali. For a full description of these different interpretations go to [What happened after Muhammad? The Sunni view](#) and [What happened after Muhammad? The Shi'a view](#).

The heads of the community in the Sunni tradition were called caliphs. The third caliph, Uthman, was a member of the Umayyad clan. When Uthman was assassinated, many of the Umayyads did not think that his successor as caliph, Ali, the cousin of Muhammad, adequately pursued the assassin and thus failed to bring him to justice. This led to one of their number, Mu'awiya, who had been appointed as governor of the province of Syria, refusing to accept the authority of Caliph Ali. This resulted in tension between the two groups, which led eventually to the Battle of Siffin. This concluded in a stalemate with Mu'awiya retaining his powerful base and an army in Syria, while Ali moved his capital to Kufa in Iraq. After Ali's death in 661, Mu'awiya retained his position of power and claimed leadership of the whole community, leading to the establishment of the Umayyad Dynasty. Things deteriorated so that the leading members of the clan failed to live according to the high ideals of Islam, ranging from their personal lives to the way that common funds were used. This set the context for the tensions and eventual battle with Hussain and his companions at Karbala, which is the subject of this study.

The Shi'a understand their Imams to be more than mere community leaders. They were persons of the highest spiritual excellence, who had been most thoroughly purified by God (Q. 33:33) and thus rendered sinless and infallible in word and deed. They were possessed of a special inner light from God, which acted as a divine inspiration to enable them infallibly to interpret the Qur'an and Muslim way of life. This led to the exalted position of Imam Hussain in the eyes of his followers and placed upon him the duty of leadership by example, which meant opposing the corruption that they saw had set in with the Umayyad Dynasty, hence the catastrophic events of Karbala.

To explore more fully the shrine of Imam Hussain in Karbala and the activities associated with it, go to the International Media Centre site:

<https://www.imhussain.com/english>.