

The Sunni perspective on Ali and Mu'awiya

A key distinction between the Sunni and Shi'a perspectives on Islam is the question of who should take on leadership of the Muslim community after the death of the Prophet Muhammad. As we will see, the Shi'a understood that Ali had been divinely appointed but this view was not shared by the Sunnis. They understood Ali to be the fourth of the Rightly-Guided Caliphs, appointed by the community in succession to the first three Rightly-Guided Caliphs: Abu Bakr, Umar and Uthman. For a fuller treatment of these two perspectives see the opening paragraphs of the Background Context article and the references contained therein.

All Muslims have a special regard for the first generation of Muslims, referred to as the Companions of the Prophet Muhammad, although the criteria for who should be accepted as a Companion differs between groups. Many Sunni scholars take an all-embracing definition of a Companion as “someone who saw the Prophet as an adult, while a Muslim, and died a Muslim.” Companions are seen to be referred to in a verse of the Qur'an (Q. 58:22), which says that “God is content with them and they are content with God. They are the party of God.” This is particularly apposite in the case of Mu'awiya, who figures in a bad light in Shi'a understanding as reported in *Hussain and the Struggle for Justice*. Mu'awiya is recorded to have converted to Islam at the fall of Mecca in the year 630, when he was an adult in his early twenties. He is thus regarded by this Sunni definition as a Companion and the Shi'a allegation that he was implicated in the death of Hasan ibn Ali and that he was unjust and did not keep his word is grossly offensive.