
Caliphate and Imamate

One of the most enduring sources of conflict among Muslims is the question of power and authority after the Prophet Muḥammad. This anthology of classical Arabic texts, presented in a new English translation, offers a comprehensive overview of the early history of the caliphate and medieval Muslim scholarly discussions on the subject. Composed between the eleventh and thirteenth centuries, these texts succinctly present competing views on the prerequisites of legitimate leadership and authority in the Islamic tradition. This volume offers an engaging introduction to the diverse writings of influential scholars representing six classical Islamic schools of theology: Sunnism, Zaydism, Twelver Shī'ism, Mu'tazilism, Ibāḍism, and Ismā'īlism.

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Caliphate and Imamate
An Anthology of Medieval Muslim
Texts on Political Theology

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Note on the Translation

The translation of the medieval theological works included in this volume, which were composed in classical Arabic, posed several challenges. The complexity of both the prose and the content frequently led us to choose a clearer and more idiomatic English translation over a more direct but awkward alternative. We have offered annotations and paraphrased sentences where an author’s argument would otherwise be comprehensible only to an expert of medieval Islamic thought. Our intention was to make these classical texts accessible to non-specialists of Islamic studies. For citations of the Quran, we used *The Qur’an: A New Translation* by M. A. S. Abdel Haleem.

Frequently, authors and copyists followed the names of venerated personalities with added invocations. It was also convention to praise God whenever He was mentioned. The following invocations do not appear in the English translation on account of space and stylistic considerations:

- after the mention of God: “Glorified is He” (*subhānahu*), “Exalted is He” (*ta’ālā*), “Mighty and Majestic is He” (*‘azza wa jalla*)
- after a prophet or an imam: “peace be upon him” (*‘alayhi al-salām*)
- after a Companion of the Prophet Muḥammad: “may God be pleased with him” (*radī Allāh ‘anhu*)
- after a deceased scholar: “may God have mercy upon him” (*raḥimahu Allāh*)

The authors refer to God by various names – standard epithets – recognized in the Islamic tradition as divine attributes. When references to God’s names are not directly relevant to an author’s argument, we simply refer to the divine as God, Lord, or the Almighty. The Prophet

Note on the Translation

Muḥammad similarly possesses numerous honorific titles. He is most commonly referred to as “the Prophet” (*al-nabī*) and “God’s Messenger” (*rasūl Allāh*). We have opted simply to refer to him as “the Prophet” even when the text occasionally uses another title.

We have chosen simply to add an “-s” to theological schools with irregular plural forms in the Arabic (Sunnīs, Shīʿīs, Muʿtazilīs, Khārijīs for *ahl al-sunna*, *shīʿa*, *muʿtazila*, *khawārij*). We have also avoided use of the suffix “-ite” inconsistently applied for some schools in English works (Shīʿī, Khārijī, Muʿtazilī for Shiʿite, Khārijite, Muʿtazilite).

Transliteration is based on the guidelines of the third edition of Brill’s *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, with the exception of Arabic terms and place names that commonly appear in English print (Quran, hadith, Medina, etc.), in which diacritics are omitted. Dates appear in the Islamic *hijrī* calendar (AH), followed by the Common Era date (CE).

Introduction

The foremost source of division in the Islamic community is the
imamate.

al-Shahrastānī¹

Muḥammad b. ʿAbd al-Karīm al-Shahrastānī (d. 548/1153) was a theologian and heresiographer whose work on the history and doctrines of religions is still widely consulted as a reference in the Muslim world. Of the many theological disputes he catalogued among the major schools of Islam, al-Shahrastānī considered the subject of religio-political authority, otherwise known as the imamate (*imāma*) or the caliphate (*khilāfa*), the most enduring point of divergence.

When the Prophet Muḥammad died in 11/632, his disciples, referred to in Muslim literature as “Companions” (*ṣaḥāba*), did not immediately agree on the appropriate person to succeed him in authority. According to historical reports about the period, the Companions considered Muḥammad to have been God’s final prophet, so they rejected the possibility of another being sent to succeed him. Thus, when pseudo-prophets appeared in a few remote regions of the Arabian Peninsula after Muḥammad’s death, the Companions dismissed them as false claimants to prophetic authority. Instead, they assumed that one of Muḥammad’s Companions would serve as the Muslim community’s new leader and as the emir (ruler) of the polity that had emerged in Medina and had expanded to encompass most of Arabia. But despite the shared assumption

¹ Muḥammad b. ʿAbd al-Karīm al-Shahrastānī, *Muslim Sects and Divisions: The Section on Muslim Sects in Kitāb al-Milal wa ʿl-Niḥal*, tr. A. K. Kazi and J. G. Flynn (London: Kegan Paul International, 1984), 19 (with a slight modification to the translation).

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that Muḥammad's successor would be someone close to him, members of the community disagreed on the best candidate.

Within days of the Prophet's death, the residents of Medina had fragmented into three political blocs. One party represented members of the Arab tribes of Medina, collectively known as the Anṣār (lit. Helpers, Allies). Another supported the ascendancy of the Muhājirūn, emigrants from Mecca who were also members of the tribe of Quraysh. The last group was aligned with Muḥammad's clan, the Hashimids (*banū Hāshim*).

In the wake of the Prophet's death, leading representatives of the Anṣār and the Muhājirūn met at a portico (*saqīfa*) to discuss the issue of succession. It is unclear what exactly the Medinese desired from this meeting. Before the Prophet had arrived in Medina, the heads of the local tribes had governed the affairs of their own city. The Anṣār may have intended to appoint an emir to manage the city once again. They may have assumed that the Muhājirūn would return to Mecca. Would Muḥammad's successor be a religious authority or a political leader who managed the territories that Muḥammad had acquired as a conqueror of the Arabian Peninsula? The Anṣār may have considered both of these positions to be independent of their need for a local emir in Medina. The Anṣār wanted one of their chiefs, Sa'd b. 'Ubāda (d. 13 or 14/634–636), or another respected Medinese nobleman to govern their affairs, whereas the Muhājirūn held that the community needed a single sovereign to lead all Muslims. In their view, the Anṣār could not select their own emir and leave the Meccans to select another for Mecca. According to the Muhājirūn, the Prophet's successor had to be a Qurashī (i.e., a member of the tribe of Quraysh). According to Sunnī historiography, the most senior among the Muhājirūn was Muḥammad's father-in-law, Abū Bakr (r. 11–13/632–634), who was revered as one of the earliest converts in the community. The Anṣār capitulated once they realized that their own candidates could not win against the Muhājirūn's claims to seniority and precedence. Abū Bakr left the meeting as the community's next leader. Wilferd Madelung provides a detailed chronicle of the political conflicts that subsequently ensued between the Companions.²

The third bloc, consisting of the Hashimids and their devotees, lacked a representative to advocate its views at the crucial meeting under the portico. The meeting had been precipitous and had occurred as

² See Wilferd Madelung, *The Succession to Muḥammad: A Study of the Early Caliphate* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996).

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Muḥammad's close kin were preparing his body for its final rites and keeping to their homes in mourning. According to Shī'ī historiography, the Prophet's close family members were the most obvious candidates to succeed him as authorities in the community. Again, it is unclear what type of authority was envisaged. Although the Hashimids were also members of the tribe of Quraysh, they came to possess greater social capital in Muslim society because of their close kinship with the Prophet. The Prophet and, later, Muslim jurists recognized certain legal privileges and dispensations that were unique to the Hashimids on account of their noble status.³ The Hashimids and a few other Companions reportedly held that the Prophet's son-in-law and cousin, 'Alī b. Abī Ṭalīb, was the most fit to succeed Muḥammad. After the accession of Abū Bakr, members of this bloc reportedly withheld their oaths of fealty to him for close to six months. Some Sunnī scholars, desiring to diminish the gravity of the conflict, have argued that 'Alī and his partisans were dissatisfied only with their exclusion from the accession process. In agreement with Sunnī orthodoxy, they maintain that 'Alī did not consider himself a superior candidate to Abū Bakr. By contrast, Shī'īs cite many reports according to which 'Alī protested the appointment of Abū Bakr and argued that authority over the community was rightfully his.

Abū Bakr appointed another prominent Muhājir and father-in-law of Muḥammad, 'Umar b. al-Khaṭṭāb (r. 13–23/634–644), to succeed him as caliph (*khalīfā*). After 'Umar, a son-in-law of Muḥammad named 'Uthmān b. Affān (r. 23–35/644–656) became the community's third caliph. When 'Uthmān was assassinated, 'Alī (r. 35–40/656–661) finally became caliph under circumstances that alienated him from a few prominent Muhājirūn. 'Alī had been part of the electoral council (*shūrā*) that had previously appointed 'Uthmān. At this council, 'Alī had reportedly come close to becoming caliph, so when opposition to 'Uthmān intensified before the latter's death, both 'Uthmān and the protestors requested 'Alī's intervention to resolve the impasse between them. Those who were not members of the tribe of Quraysh, like the Medinese Anṣār and those who had converted after the Prophet's death, also came to trust 'Alī as someone who was sympathetic to their grievances. Madelung describes him as representing the interests of Hashimids and the Anṣār when he

³ Nebil Husayn, "Aḥkām Concerning the *Ahl al-Bayt*," *Islamic Law and Society* 27 (2020), 145–184.

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became caliph, in contrast to his predecessors, who had favored members of the tribe of Quraysh.

It should be noted that most of the relatives of the three previous caliphs fought 'Alī in bloody civil wars or refrained from lending him their support in these conflicts. His policies as caliph alienated some of his own soldiers, who eventually revolted against him and condemned him as a misguided imam. 'Alī's years as caliph were plagued with battles against rebels. Military conflict had required him to build an Iraqi coalition of soldiers of varying tribal identities and political sympathies. One faction included pious Quran reciters from Kufa who earned a reputation for being radical in matters of religion and inflexible in their outlook on the world. This group initially supported 'Alī at the Battle of the Camel, but parted ways with him sometime after he agreed to arbitration (*taḥkīm*) to conclude the Battle of Šiffin. They fought him in the Battle of Nahrawān, and a survivor of this battle, Ibn Muljam, eventually assassinated 'Alī.

When 'Alī was killed, most of his partisans offered fealty to his adult sons. His eldest, al-Ḥasan b. 'Alī (d. 50/670), briefly ruled as caliph before surrendering to a formidable adversary who had also waged war against his father and emerged as the most militarily powerful claimant to political authority in the community. This new ruler, Mu'āwiya b. Abī Sufyān (d. 60/680), was the chief of a clan, the Umayyads, that had historically feuded with the Hashimids for primacy in the Arabian Peninsula in the pre-Islamic period. According to authors sympathetic to the Hashimid cause, this ancient tribal feud continued into the Islamic era. Over the course of many years, multiple sons, kinsmen, and partisans of 'Alī revolted against the Umayyads but were systematically killed in the process. In these narratives, the Hashimids consistently display piety and virtue, whereas the Umayyads are depicted as power-hungry and sinful villains.⁴

Mu'āwiya is credited with transforming the early caliphate into a monarchy that relied on dynastic succession. The Umayyads ruled the Muslim empire for more than eighty years, successfully suppressing rebellions led by marginalized members of the community. Eventually, soldiers from Khorasan sympathetic to the Hashimids led a revolution that

⁴ See Aḥmad b. 'Alī al-Maqrīzī, *al-Maqrīzī's "Book of Contention and Strife Concerning the Relations between the Banū Umayya and the Banū Hāshim,"* tr. C. E. Bosworth (Manchester: University of Manchester, 1981).

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topped the Umayyads in 749–750 and placed a branch of the Hashimid clan, the Abbasids (*banū al-Abbās*), in power.⁵ The power of the Abbasid caliphs waxed and waned over the next five centuries. Some managed the affairs of state as authoritarian monarchs, whereas others served only as figureheads, subservient to the warlords and military commanders who had dislodged the previous caliph. Throughout the middle and late Abbasid periods, regional dynasties such as the Buyids and Seljuks played increasingly prominent roles in running the affairs of the state. The Abbasid empire finally collapsed with the Mongol conquest of Baghdad in 656/1258.

If one may speak of formative, classical, and later periods of Islamic thought, the “classical” period spans roughly from the middle of the third/ninth to the seventh/thirteenth century, with the “formative” period preceding and “later” Islamic thought succeeding it. The fall of the Abbasid empire thus coincides with the beginning of the later period of Islamic thought. This period is characterized by a scholarly motivation to preserve, elucidate, and debate the scholarly texts and opinions of the formative and classical periods. In the preceding centuries, Muslims had engaged in a complex process of identifying and negotiating the boundaries of orthodoxy, but by the later period, clear theological and legal schools had come into existence. These schools possessed well-known institutions of learning where primary texts were taught and subjected to glosses and commentaries that also became part of school curricula. Although one cannot always draw a direct correlation between early political blocs and schools that emerged later, the central role that theories of religio-political authority played in the process of differentiation should not be underestimated. For this reason, we shall discuss briefly some of the political blocs that existed in the formative period before identifying the theological schools of the classical period.⁶ With the exception of two Sunnī schools (the Ḥanbalī and the Māturīdī) whose views on the imamate resembled those of other Sunnī schools,

⁵ On early Abbasid political history, see Hugh Kennedy, *The Early Abbasid Caliphate: A Political History* (Beckenham: Croom Helm, 1981).

⁶ For overviews of early Muslim political thought, see Gerhard Bowering (ed.), *Islamic Political Thought: An Introduction* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2015); Gerhard Bowering, *The Princeton Encyclopedia of Islamic Political Thought* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2012). Also see Josef van Ess’ informative article “Political Ideas in Early Islamic Religious Thought,” *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies* 28 (2001), 151–164.

The Formative Period (40–240/661–854)

each classical theological school is represented in this collection of treatises on the imamate.⁷

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Historical events that occurred during the lifetime of the Prophet and under the rule of the first four caliphs played a significant role in subsequent disputes on the imamate. The political blocs that were active in the second/eighth and third/ninth centuries appealed to the alleged words and actions of the Prophet, the early caliphs, and their contemporaries to legitimize their own identities and doctrines. There was a tendency for each faction to lionize certain historical figures and to portray others negatively. Medieval Muslim historians and modern academics have grappled with partisan literature in various ways when discussing the genesis of the various political blocs or examining the accuracy of certain historical claims. This introduction will forgo the attempt to delve into details regarding the origins and development of the political blocs. For the benefit of the reader, we provide only a brief description of these blocs as they appear to have existed near the end of the formative period.

The ‘Uthmānīs

The ‘Uthmānīs endorsed the succession of the first three caliphs in Islamic history – Abū Bakr, ‘Umar, and ‘Uthmān – but were hostile to ‘Alī and did not consider him to have been a legitimate caliph. The ‘Uthmānīs were considered the party (*shī‘a*) of ‘Uthmān in contrast to the party of ‘Alī. Zealous ‘Uthmānīs cursed ‘Alī as an enemy responsible for the deaths of ‘Uthmān and those who died fighting him in the Battle of the Camel and at Ṣiffīn. ‘Uthmānī sentiment appears to have been widespread in Basra, the Levant, and Egypt, in particular among the early partisans of hadith (*ahl al-ḥadīth*) from these regions.

⁷ The *ahl al-ḥadīth*/Ḥanbalī, Māturīdī, and Ash‘arī schools all fall under the umbrella of Sunnism. Although we have selected two Ash‘arīs to represent Sunnism, the representatives of these other schools would likely agree with most of the views expressed by their co-religionists on the subject of the imamate. Abū Ya‘lā b. al-Farrā’ (d. 458/1066) best represents the views of the *ahl al-ḥadīth* and the Ḥanbalī tradition, but in his discussion of the imamate he closely follows al-Māwardī (d. 450/1058), a Shāfi‘ī. A careful study of the imamate in Sunnī thought would be necessary to detect subtle differences and major shifts that may have occurred over time. For the most comprehensive study to date, see Patricia Crone, *God’s Rule: Government and Islam* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004).

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By contrast, many transmitters of prophetic traditions from Kufa were considered pro-ʿAlid and close to Shīʿism in their reverence for ʿAlī. By the end of the formative period, however, ʿUthmānī transmitters of prophetic traditions took a more conciliatory approach to ʿAlī. While they did not condemn him outright, they denied that the Prophet’s teachings (his *sunna* preserved in hadith) endorsed ʿAlī’s caliphate. However, influential scholars such as Aḥmad b. Ḥanbal (d. 241/855) held that such evidence existed in favor of ʿAlī.

ʿUthmānī scholars of hadith interpreted reports about ʿAlī’s virtues to diminish their significance or rejected their authenticity altogether. Although ʿAlī’s character was rehabilitated so that he was no longer seen as culpable in the assassination of ʿUthmān, his close companions were still portrayed as misguided individuals who sought civil unrest. Whereas pro-ʿAlids argued that ʿAlī had been compelled to wage war against rebel Muslims during his caliphate – either because the rebels had posed an armed threat, necessitating self-defense on ʿAlī’s part, or because he had been commanded to do so by the Quran or the Prophet – ʿUthmānī hadith transmitters considered the wars that ʿAlī had waged as caliph undesirable and unnecessary. In later centuries, when Sunnīs such as Ibn Taymiyya (d. 728/1328) engaged in anti-Shīʿī polemics, they objected to pro-ʿAlid justifications of ʿAlī’s conduct.

Umayyads

The partisans of the Umayyads resembled the ʿUthmānīs in many ways. They revered the first three caliphs, considered ʿUthmān innocent of any wrongdoing in the events that led to his assassination, and blamed ʿAlī for the civil war that ensued after ʿUthmān’s death. The Umayyads publicly cursed ʿAlī as an enemy of God and rejected his claim to the caliphate. This bloc differed from the ʿUthmānīs in recognizing the Umayyad caliphs as the rightful rulers and imams of the community. Some early scholars of hadith in the Levant were proponents of the Umayyads. However, others were pro-ʿAlid or ʿUthmānī. The latter either actively opposed the Umayyads as tyrants or maintained a policy of quietism and mere toleration.

Hashimids

The earliest Muslims used the term *shīʿa* to refer to the partisans of certain caliphs, but it is the term’s use to identify partisans of ʿAlī (*shīʿat ʿAlī*)

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in particular that has endured. Partisans of the Hashimids revered the Prophet's kin as members of a noble clan with privileges and rights that distinguished them from others. By the middle of the second/eighth century, Hashimid partisans could be divided into two major genealogically defined branches: those supporting the claims of the Abbasids, descendants of al-ʿAbbās (d. 32/653), the Prophet's uncle, and those backing ʿAlī and his progeny, the ʿAlids. The members of these groups believed that their respective figureheads had inherited the imamate from the Prophet through kinship ties or that the imamate was restricted to the figurehead's family.

As centuries passed, pro-Hashimid and in particular pro-ʿAlid sentiment became a trans-sectarian phenomenon, prevalent in both Sunnism and Shīʿism. It was most prominent in Kufa, the capital city of ʿAlī's caliphate. If pro-ʿAlid sentiment is conceptualized on a spectrum, its mildest form was found among Muslims who believed that ʿAlī had rightfully waged war on rebels as caliph and rebellion against him had been an error. Most Sunnī scholars (who were not pro-ʿAlid) described those Companions who rebelled against ʿAlī as legitimately acting in accordance with their independent opinions (*ijtihād*).⁸ By contrast, pro-ʿAlids characterized ʿAlī's rivals at the Battle of Ṣiffīn, for example, as sinful and misguided.⁹ They considered the ʿUthmānīs and the Umayyads to be their antagonists. Many pro-ʿAlids expressed their devotion to ʿAlī by circulating reports about his merits. Thus, Kufan partisans of hadith earned a reputation of being pro-ʿAlid. Kufans also repeatedly supported ʿAlids and Shīʿīs who led political movements and insurrections. The most zealous pro-ʿAlids (apart from Shīʿīs) held ʿAlī to be the most virtuous Muslim after the Prophet, a doctrine known as *tafḍīl ʿAlī*. This was a Shīʿī doctrine that some Muʿtazilīs and other non-Shīʿīs occasionally supported. Here, pro-ʿAlid sentiment and Shīʿism must be distinguished from one another. Shīʿīs, in the formative period at the very least, made a claim that (non-Shīʿī) pro-ʿAlids did not: that ʿAlī was not only superior (*aḥḍal*) to his peers, but also had been most fit (*aṣlah*) for the caliphate. By contrast, pro-ʿAlid Sunnīs and Muʿtazilīs all accepted the succession of

⁸ In this context, independent reasoning refers to the Companions' efforts to reach a decision to the best of their abilities and in light of the teachings of the Quran and the Prophet.

⁹ For a study of Shīʿī interpretations of this battle, see Etan Kohlberg, *In Praise of the Few: Studies in Shiʿi Thought and History*, ed. Amin Ehteshami (Leiden: Brill, 2020), 85–109.

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the first three caliphs as lawful and held them to be the best candidates for the position when they were appointed. Depending on their sensibilities, pro-ʿAlids may have condemned ʿUthmān’s conduct in his final years or refrained from conclusively judging whether or not he was wrongfully killed. However, by the classical period, a rapprochement between all proto-Sunnīs culminated in ʿUthmān’s rehabilitation as a wrongfully murdered, pious caliph in Sunnism.

Some early Shīʿīs were described as *rāfiḍa*, proponents of *rafḍ* – the rejection of all non-ʿAlid authorities. The Rāfiḍa, active in Kufa, considered all of ʿAlī’s predecessors to have been illegitimate usurpers of religio-political authority. This negative assessment of Abū Bakr, ʿUmar, ʿUthmān, and other Companions who joined them in making claims to legal, religious, or political authority after the Prophet became a distinguishing characteristic of most Shīʿīs in the classical period.

Khārijīs

The Khārijīs (Ar. *khawārij*, “seceders”) diverged sharply from pro-ʿAlids in their assessment of ʿAlī’s character and legacy as caliph. The Battle of Ṣiffīn between the armies of ʿAlī and Muʿāwiya ended with no clear victory for either side. Instead, the two commanders agreed to halt hostilities and pursue arbitration. The arbitrators were to consider the question of whether ʿUthmān had been lawfully killed and who was best fit to judge and potentially punish his murderers.

Sometime after the Battle of Ṣiffīn, however, thousands of ʿAlī’s soldiers withdrew from his army and camped near a region known as Nuḥayla and Nahrawān, in Iraq. This faction became known as the Muḥakkimīs (*muḥakkima*), those who believed that arbitration (*taḥkīm*) in matters already adjudicated by God in the Quran was unlawful. They claimed that ʿAlī had violated this commandment by engaging in such arbitration with Muʿāwiya.

The Muḥakkimīs asked ʿAlī first to repent of his decision to accept arbitration and then to resume war with Muʿāwiya. When the two arbitrators failed to reach a conclusion that both parties could accept, ʿAlī agreed to launch another campaign against Muʿāwiya. However, the Muḥakkimīs argued that they would only rejoin ʿAlī’s army if he admitted to committing unbelief, which he refused.

After a few months, ʿAlī fought the Muḥakkimīs at the Battle of Nahrawān, which ended in his favor. In the decades that followed, those who were sympathetic to the Muḥakkimīs became known as Khārijīs

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in reference to the troops who had famously seceded from 'Alī's army. The Khārijīs mounted several insurrections against the Umayyads and the Abbasids. They gained a reputation for holding radically puritanical views on piety and sin. They held that a Muslim who committed a major sin was guilty of unbelief and needed to renew his or her faith. Muslims who refused to acknowledge their misdeeds were considered unbelievers. Radical Khārijī factions such as the Azāriqa became infamous for killing anyone (including women and children) who did not belong to the group in the course of their insurrections. It appears that by the end of the formative period, almost every Khārijī school mentioned in heresiographical works had disappeared. A notable exception is the Ibādī community, which claimed the early Muḥakkimīs as their predecessors but condemned members of other Khārijī schools as extremists.

The Khārijīs and later the Ibādīs considered Abū Bakr and 'Umar ideal caliphs and imams. Although they acknowledged that 'Uthmān and 'Alī had acceded to the caliphate legitimately, they argued that both had died as unbelievers because of their conduct. Since the Khārijīs and Ibādīs did not consider membership of the tribe of Quraysh a prerequisite for imams, they selected pious individuals of diverse tribal and ethnic backgrounds to serve as imams over the centuries. It should be noted that the Khārijīs differed from other groups by further theorizing that the faithful could function without a single caliph governing over their affairs. Rather, the faithful could appoint a person from among themselves to take on certain responsibilities when necessary, but otherwise the community could govern its own affairs without a leader.

Early Mu'tazilīs, Murji'īs, ahl al-ḥadīth, and the Companions

The members of the various blocs outlined above can be distinguished from one another on the basis of their views on legitimate religio-political authority. By the second/eighth century, one can also identify Muslims who tried to transcend these polarized identities. These groups include the Mu'tazilīs, Murji'īs, and partisans of hadith (*ahl al-ḥadīth*). Ultimately, debates turned to the subject of the righteousness of the Companions.

The Mu'tazilīs were one of the earliest factions to engage in dialectical theology (*'ilm al-kalām*). Mu'tazilīs could be pro-'Alid, 'Uthmānī, or nonaligned, depending on their school and region.¹⁰ Pro-'Alids

¹⁰ For an overview of Sunnī and Mu'tazilī views on the Prophet's Companions, see Kohlberg, *In Praise of the Few*, 7–50.

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considered 'Alī's opponents sinful, but held a nuanced position on their status. Since Mu'āwiya and his allies were unrepentant in their opposition to 'Alī, they were considered grave sinners (*fāsiqūn*, sing. *fāsiq*). By contrast, 'Ā'isha and other Companions who fought against 'Alī at the Battle of the Camel reportedly regretted their actions. Their repentance safeguarded their status as believers. Nonaligned Mu'tazilis refrained from identifying which Companions were responsible for the civil strife that occurred between them. Ambiguities prohibited these Mu'tazilis from identifying which party was responsible. The Mu'tazilis also endorsed the existence of a middle position (*al-manzila bayn al-manzilatayn*) between the unbeliever (*kāfir*) and the believer (*mu'min*). Such a person was a grave sinner who claimed to believe in the religious doctrines of monotheism, prophethood, and so on. It seems that Mu'tazilis of all political leanings accepted that some Companions could, in fact, be grave sinners whom God would punish.

Heresiographers referred to a group of theologians as the Murji'is or "those who deferred" judgment on the Companions' moral status. The Murji'is argued that a person's deeds, which include one's political career, did not determine membership to the Muslim community. One should not condemn a tyrant or an insurrectionist as an unbeliever; they were all equally Muslims on account of their declaration of faith in God and the Prophet. Some of the arguments of the Murji'is influenced later Sunnī views of the Companions, although Sunnīs generally came to assert a more forceful position, namely, that all of the Companions should be considered pious without exception.

The partisans of hadith (*ahl al-hadīth*) were a prominent faction that developed a culture of refraining from judging between Companions in their political conflicts out of respect for their status as people who had met the Prophet. For example, some members of this group held that any Muslim who had met the Prophet was to be considered a righteous person, a doctrine known as *'adālat al-ṣaḥāba* ("the uprightness of the Companions"). Narratives in which the Companions engaged in sinful behavior were to be rejected as slanderous or interpreted charitably to safeguard the Companions' reputation. In general, scholars of hadith would evaluate the expertise, trustworthiness, and piety of hadith transmitters to determine the reliability of their narrations, but they declared any Companion who transmitted hadith from the Prophet a reliable authority. Jurists representative of this tendency accepted the legal opinions of all Companions, even if these figures opposed one another politically.

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For these jurists, the legal opinions of the Prophet's wife 'Ā'isha and of 'Alī were both important precedents. Aḥmad b. Ḥanbal and other influential scholars of hadith in Sunnism represent this view.¹¹

Thus, one can identify three opinions among Muslims who wished to avoid partisanship between the Companions. On the one hand, nonaligned Mu'tazilīs were certain that some Companions would be punished in the hereafter for their misdeeds, but refrained from identifying them. On the other hand, Sunnī partisans of hadith eventually came to consider the integrity and righteousness of all Companions to be a matter of orthodoxy. This latter opinion developed from an earlier Murji'ī tendency to withhold judgment regarding the salvation of those Companions who had been entangled in the early civil strife that had plagued the community. They considered certain verses of the Quran (e.g., Q 9:100) and hadith reports about the merits of the Companions to be clear proofs that the Companions as a group had received promises of salvation from God and the Prophet. Although the Murji'īs took it as axiomatic that all Companions had once been pious, they were unsure whether one could trust claims about their misconduct after the Prophet's death. Thus, they chose to refrain from judging the authenticity of such claims and to leave the final judgment to God, reasoning that the reports could be false, or that even if they were true, God might still absolve straying Companions of their sins on account of their subsequent repentance for any misdeeds and their past years of service to the Prophet.

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Sunnism

In the formative period, the majority of Muslims who accepted the authority of all Companions and caliphs did not need to use any particular nomenclature to characterize their beliefs. Sunnīs asserted that they represented the views of this majority (*al-sawād al-a'zam*). Murji'īs and 'Uthmānīs were influential in these circles, but the contributions of pro-Umayyads and pro-'Alids were not ignored. Nonetheless, anyone who did not accept the authority of the Companions and caliphs would be suspected of heresy by scholars aligned with the majority. The three most important groups regarded as heretics were the Shī'īs, Khārījīs, and

¹¹ For the differences between Sunnī and Shī'ī views regarding the authority of the Companions, see Kohlberg, *In Praise of the Few*, 133–149.

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dialectical theologians (*mutakallimūn*, sing. *mutakallim*) who rejected the authority of influential partisans of hadith. Beyond these three groups, Muslims largely fell under the umbrella of Sunnism.

By the beginning of the third/ninth century, influential scholars of law and hadith such as al-Shāfi‘ī (d. 204/820) and Aḥmad b. Ḥanbal had started to advocate epistemologies that emphasized the authority of the Prophet Muḥammad over the views and practices of jurists and caliphs who had succeeded him. This was a shift away from the practice of previous generations of Muslims, which had recognized many figures after the Prophet as independent authorities in religious matters.¹² Arguably, this prioritization of the practice (*sunna*) of the Prophet over the practice of other potential authorities was a watershed moment in the development of Sunnism. It represented the triumph of hadith scholarship over the rationalist claim that the intellect (*‘aql*) sufficed as a tool to discover the truths of religion and law. In ethical, legal, and doctrinal debates, hadith scholars treated transmitted information from the Prophet as the paramount source of knowledge; meanwhile, “heretical” theologians were portrayed as skeptically denying the authenticity of such reports. This epistemic divide is exemplified by the inquisition led by the Abbasid caliph al-Ma’mūn (r. 198–218/813–833), who favored Mu‘tazilī and Jahmī methods of disputation and rational speculation.¹³ His inquisition targeted hadith scholars and others who represented the majority of Muslims (whom one might call “proto-Sunnīs”).

Opposing al-Ma’mūn were hadith scholars who considered theologians misguided in their speculation on matters pertaining to God or issues already discussed by the Prophet. Hadith scholars, following Aḥmad b. Ḥanbal, designated a righteous adherent of hadith as a person of the “prophetic practice” (*sunna*), distinct from hadith skeptics who engaged in speculation on religious matters. However, the Ḥanbalī or partisans of hadith (*ahl al-ḥadīth*) faction represented only one dimension of Sunnism. Sunnism encompassed those like al-Shāfi‘ī, who were not Mu‘tazilī, Shi‘ī, or Khārijī and also trusted hadith as the most authoritative source of prophetic teachings and practice.

Since Ḥanafīs, Shāfi‘īs, and Ḥanbalīs viewed one another as rivals, a rapprochement between them under the banner of Sunnism required

¹² See Harald Motzki, *The Origins of Islamic Jurisprudence: Meccan Fiqh before the Classical Schools* (Leiden: Brill, 2002); Joseph Schacht, *The Origins of Muhammadan Jurisprudence* (London: Oxford University Press, 1950).

¹³ On the Jahmīs, see *EP*, s.v. “Djahmiyya” (W. Montgomery Watt).

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many centuries. Early Ḥanbalīs criticized Ḥanafīs for relying on rational speculation in matters of law and theology. It should be noted that some hadith scholars condemned Abū Ḥanīfa (d. 150/767) and other Kufan jurists who supported the use of one's own personal opinion (*ra'y*) in resolving legal questions. Abū Ḥanīfa and his followers, like many other groups, flourished in the Iraqi city of Kufa. Even though Abū Ḥanīfa was not a Shī'ī, representatives of the majority, like him, were pro-ʿAlid to some extent. ʿUthmānīs and hadith scholars may have viewed Abū Ḥanīfa with contempt for his decisions to accept ʿAlī as a legitimate caliph and to utilize analogical reasoning (*qiyās*) and personal opinion in judgments instead of deferring to the opinions of Companions or hadith reports. Abū Ḥanīfa also refused to accept the legitimacy of the Umayyads. He reportedly showed support for the insurrection of Zayd b. ʿAlī, the eponym of the Zaydī school, when it began. When Ḥanafī jurists were employed by the Abbasid state, their opponents among the partisans of hadith condemned them as Murji'īs and rejecters of prophetic traditions.

Although the partisans of hadith criticized Ḥanafīs as proponents of personal opinion (*aṣḥāb al-ra'y*), one faction eventually accepted the limited use of analogical reasoning. Al-Shāfi'ī is a quintessential representative of this trend. He opposed the use of one's personal opinion in providing judgments. However, he propounded the theory of jurisprudence in his *Epistle (Risāla)* that became foundational for jurists committed to prioritizing the *sunna* of the Prophet.¹⁴ Al-Shāfi'ī's framework accepted analogical reasoning but still emphasized the *sunna*. Ḥanafī jurists and the partisans of hadith who followed al-Shāfi'ī appear to be the earliest members of the emerging sect known as Sunnism (*ahl al-sunna*).

The Ḥanafī theologian Abū Maṣū'ir al-Māturīdī (d. 333/944) and the Shāfi'ī theologian Abū ʿI-Ḥasan al-Ash'arī (d. 324/935–936) both claimed to represent the *ahl al-sunna* independently of one another.¹⁵ In the fourth/tenth century members of one faction did not recognize the claims of the other. The Seljuks, for example, were Ḥanafīs. When Toghriq Beg (r. 447–455/1055–1063) employed a zealous Ḥanafī as a vizier, the latter persecuted the Shāfi'īs of Khorasan. This vizier was

¹⁴ For an English translation of the *Risāla*, see Muḥammad b. Idrīs al-Shāfi'ī, *The Epistle on Legal Theory*, tr. Joseph E. Lowry (New York: New York University Press, 2013).

¹⁵ On al-Ash'arī, see Daniel Gimaret, *La doctrine d'al-Ash'arī* (Paris: Cerf, 1990); on al-Māturīdī, see Ulrich Rudolph, *Al-Māturīdī und die sunnitische Theologie in Samarqand* (Leiden: Brill, 1997) = *Al-Māturīdī and the Development of Sunni Theology in Samarqand*, tr. Rodrigo Adem (Leiden: Brill, 2014).

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succeeded by the famous Nizām al-Mulk (d. 485/1092), who attempted to reconcile the two schools. The Seljuks supported the vizier's move to build the famous network of schools known as the Nizāmiyya, which employed Shāfi'ī teachers who accepted Ḥanafīs as Sunnīs.¹⁶ Despite this development, the two factions still violently opposed one another in subsequent centuries.¹⁷ Aḥmad b. Ḥanbal represented those partisans of hadith who opposed al-Shāfi'ī's theorizing and considered the transmission and citation of prophetic traditions sufficient as legal evidence. This faction strongly rejected the use of analogical reasoning and was the last to engage in a rapprochement with other Sunnīs.

Although Sunnism developed to encompass many different legal and theological schools, all of these schools are unanimous in rejecting the doctrines of Shī'īs, Khārījīs, and other non-Sunnīs on the subject of the imamate. The members of each Sunni school hold that after the Prophet, religio-political authority was dispersed to the community in the form of the early Companions and the first four caliphs. For this reason, Sunnism can be fairly represented by a member of any of these schools, with only slight differences in the rigidity of their claims. To reflect these differences, we have selected two authors to represent Sunnism.

Many early partisans of hadith strictly adhered to precedence and tradition in their conception of the imamate. These scholars sought to reconstruct the views of the early Companions and to derive rules based on their conduct. They considered the first four caliphs to have been ideal rulers, and they expected all subsequent leaders to emulate their example. Nonetheless, when illegitimate rulers came to power, many partisans of hadith considered rebellion unlawful. They reasoned that civil unrest caused more harm to the public good than tyranny.¹⁸ Aḥmad b. Ḥanbal, for example, did not support rebellion against al-Ma'mūn despite the latter's heretical beliefs. He held that Muslims were obliged to respect the temporal authority of heretical caliphs while disagreeing with their religious views.

As the rule of warlords became normative in the Abbasid state, Sunnīs began to consider the caliphate in more pragmatic terms. The rise of the

¹⁶ For more on the Nizāmiyya, see George Makdisi, *The Rise of Colleges: Institutions of Learning in Islam and the West* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1981).

¹⁷ Wilferd Madelung, "The Spread of Māturīdism and the Turks," in *Religious Schools and Sects in Medieval Islam* (London: Variorum Reprints, 1985), 11.109–168.

¹⁸ On the topic of rebellion, see Khaled Abou El Fadl, *Rebellion and Violence in Islamic Law* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001).

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Buyids and Seljuks encouraged scholars to tolerate warlords as the community's de facto rulers. Although they came to power through conquest or coup, the famous Shāfi'ī political theorist al-Māwardī (d. 450/1058) considered warlords to represent a type of delegated vizierate (*wizārat al-tafwīd*). A warlord derived his legitimacy from a legitimate caliph who publicly acknowledged his authority and appointed him to administer the affairs of the empire on his behalf. Since the Buyids and Seljuks who ruled Baghdad nominally paid allegiance to the Abbasids, al-Māwardī reasoned that it was their right to be obeyed.

Other scholars were willing to speculate on matters of authority in a way that provided more latitude to legitimate such rulers. For them, a ruler did not need to resemble the first four caliphs or pledge allegiance to a symbolic Abbasid caliph to be legitimate. 'Abd al-Malik al-Juwaynī (d. 478/1085), whose work is included in this volume, argued that anyone with the requisite skills to administer the affairs of the community could potentially rule. So long as rulers secured the community from existential threats, permitted Muslims to fulfill their religious obligations, and consulted scholars of religion on religious matters, they were legitimate. Al-Juwaynī held that warlords were not only the community's de facto rulers, but also its rulers de jure. In later centuries, the term "sultan" (*sulṭān*) was more commonly used to describe such rulers, rather than imam, caliph, or "king" (*malik*).

On the question of the imamate, despite their many differences, Sunnīs collectively agreed on a few core doctrines. First, an imam is not appointed to the position by means of a designation (*naṣṣ*) from God. God does not select imams that the community is obliged to follow one after another. Second, the historical development of the early caliphate was legitimate, and the first four caliphs had all been righteous rulers.¹⁹ Third, the necessity of the office cannot be deduced from rational proofs. Rather, a designated body within the community elects caliphs to facilitate the application of the revealed law (*sharī'a/shar'*). Since the Prophet commanded the community to uphold the revealed law, the community needs

¹⁹ As noted above, 'Uthmānīs did not accept 'Alī as a legitimate caliph. His subsequent inclusion was due to pro-'Alids and hadith scholars such as Aḥmad b. Ḥanbal who sought to rehabilitate his image. The doctrine that there were four rightly guided caliphs (*tarbī'*) rather than three was thus an innovation of the early third/ninth century. See *EP*, s.v. "Imāma" (W. Madelung) and "'Uthmāniyya" (Patricia Crone). For a more recent study, see Nebil Husayn, "The Rehabilitation of 'Alī in Sunnī *Ḥadīth* and Historiography," *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society* 29.4 (2019), 565–583.