

Home > History of Shi'ism: From the Advent of Islam up to the End of Minor Occultation > Part 4: The Shi'ah and 'Alawi Uprisings > Lesson 16: The Shi'ah and 'Alawi Uprisings during the Period of 'Abbasid Caliphate > Lesson 16: Questions

Lesson 16: The Shi'ah and 'Alawi Uprisings during the Period of 'Abbasid Caliphate

The uprisings during the period of the 'Abbasid caliphate up to the first half of the fourth century AH can be divided into two—the well-organized and programmed Zaydiyyah uprisings and the earlier unplanned and sporadic uprisings.

The Uprisings of the Zaydis

The Zaydis who constituted a large portion of the Shi'ah population during the first, second and three centuries AH and regarded the right to caliphate and Imamate as belonging to the descendants of Fatimah ('a) and the 'Abbasids as usurpers, staged well-organized, cohesive and preplanned uprisings some of which had led to the establishment of governments in places such as Tabaristan, Maghrib and Yemen.

The Zaydis regarded Muhammad Nafs az-Zakiyyah and Ibrahim as among the Zaydi Imams because Yahya ibn Zayd had designated them as his successors. It is here that close relationship emerged between the Zaydis and the descendants of Zayd, on the one hand, and the offspring of Imam al-Hasan ('a), the so-called Banu al-Hasan, on the other.

Ibrahim ibn 'Abd Allah, who was his brother's successor, Muhammad Nafs az-Zakiyyah and hoisted the banner of revolution against the 'Abbasids in Basrah, introduced another son of Zayd, 'Isa, as his successor. 'Isa fled after the assassination of Ibrahim and died in secrecy during the caliphate of the 'Abbasid caliph Mahdi.¹

After the death of Muhammad Nafs az-Zakiyyah and Ibrahim, the Zaydis failed to agree on the leadership of a particular person and they were always looking for a brave and pugnacious Imam from the descendants of Fatimah ('a) who could lead them. But until 301 AH they were not able to agree on the identity of the Imam until such time that Hasan ibn 'Ali al-Hasani, known as Atrush, staged an

uprising in Khurasan in that year, went to the regions of Gilan and Mazandaran, and succeeded in settling the task of the Zaydis.²

It is for this reason that the ‘Abbasids were harsh against the Zaydis and were trying to eliminate the individuals who were capable of leading them, particularly the descendants of Zayd among them. To this end, the ‘Abbasids hired spies and set up rewards for the capture of such individuals.³ For instance, when ‘Isa ibn Zayd passed away secretly, Harun arrested and imprisoned his son, Ahmad ibn ‘Isa merely on the basis of suspicion.⁴

Of course, the distinguished men among the Banu al-Hasan who were regarded as leaders of uprisings did not follow the Zaydi way and *modus operandi* and were not much attached to Zaydiyyah fundamental beliefs. For this reason, when conditions during battles became unfavorable and defeat seemed probable, the Zaydis would abandon their leaders in the battle arena and ending their uprisings in failure (similar to what happened to Yahya ibn ‘Abd Allah).

Idris, Yahya’s brother, was the only one among them who was able to achieve relative victory⁵ and that was because he fled to Africa which was far from the ‘Abbasids’ reach. He campaigned against the Abbasids there and succeeded in forming a government.⁶

Among the leaders of the uprisings who did not accept the fundamentals of the Zaydi belief and follow the way and method of the *Ahl al-Bayt* (‘a) was Yahya ibn ‘Abd Allah, brother of Muhammad Nafs az-Zakiyyah, who went to Khurasan after Muhammad’s defeat and from there he headed toward the land of Daylam— present day Gilan and Mazandaran—but the ruler there, who was not a Muslim yet, wanted to arrest Yahya and turn him over to the agents of Harun on account of his threats.

At the time, Yahya was compelled to seek the protection of Fadhl Barmaki, Harun’s vizier. Fadhl also offered him protection, but instead of protection and security, he was imprisoned in Baghdad until his death.⁷ He was one of the students trained by Imam as-Sadiq (‘a) and whenever narrating a *hadith* from the Imam, he would say: “My dear Ja’far ibn Muhammad thus said...”⁸

Finally, since he was following the way and method of the *Ahl al-Bayt* (‘a) in terms of jurisprudence {*fiqh*}, the Zaydis opposed him and distanced themselves from him. So, he was forced to surrender himself to Fadhl ibn Yahya, Harun’s vizier.⁹

The Uprising of Muhammad Nafs az-Zakiyyah

The zenith of the ‘Alawi uprising was during the second century AH. One of the most noted of these uprisings was during the time of the ‘Abbasid caliph Mansur which was led by Muhammad Nafs az-Zakiyyah. His activity had started prior to the victory of the ‘Abbasids and with the exception of Imam as-Sadiq (‘a), the Banu Hashim generally pledged allegiance to him.

Even the Sunni scholars and jurists such as Abu Hanifah, Muhammad ibn ‘Ajlan, the jurist of Medina,

Abu Bakr ibn Abi Sabrah, ‘Abd Allah ibn Ja‘far, Hashim ibn ‘Urwah, ‘Abd Allah ibn ‘Umar, Wasil ibn ‘Ata’, ‘Amru ibn ‘Ubayd, among others swore allegiance to him, attributing to him the transmitted Prophetic sayings about the uprising of al-Mahdi (‘a).¹⁰

But his uprising during the period of the ‘Abbasids was defeated because it was launched prematurely. In Basrah his brother Ibrahim’s uprising also ended in failure due to the treachery of the Zaydis, but his brothers were scattered and this state of affairs continued up to the time of Harun. Idris ibn ‘Abd Allah fled to Maghrib and he was accepted there by the people.

Yet, he was in the end poisoned by the agents of Harun. After him, his followers installed his young child to replace him naming him “Idris ath-Thani”. For sometime, the government of the Idrisis flourished in North Africa. Yahya, another one of Muhammad’s brother, went to Tabaristan after his death.

Yet another one of Muhammad’s brother named Musa ibn ‘Abd Allah fled to the north of Iraq and Mesopotamia. Muhammad Nafs az-Zakiyyah’s sons, named ‘Ali, ‘Abd Allah and Hasan, went to Egypt, India and Yemen, respectively, and were for some time the source of concern for the ‘Abbasid caliphate.¹¹

The Uprising of Ibn Tabataba’i al-Hasani

After the death of Harun and the conflict over the issue of succession between his two sons, Amin and Ma’mun, the Shi‘ah taking advantage of this opportunity staged more uprisings with the uprisings of the ‘Alawis reaching their climax at this time. During that period, the whole of Iraq (with the exception of Baghdad), Hijaz, Yemen, and south of Iran were detached from the ‘Abbasid control owing to the existence of competent military commanders such as Abu’s-Saraya on the side of the ‘Alawis.¹²

The army of Abu’s-Saraya shattered every contingent they encountered and overrun every city they visited. It is said that in the battle fought by Abu’s-Saraya two hundred thousand soldiers of the ‘Abbasid caliph were killed although the interval between the day of the uprising and the day when he was beheaded was not more than 10 months.

Even in Basrah which was the demographic concentration of the Uthmanis, the ‘Alawis earned support such that Zayd an-Nar staged an uprising in the mentioned city. In Mecca and the districts of Hijaz, Muhammad ibn Ja‘far known as Dibaj who was called “*Amir al-Mu’minin*” {Commander of the Faithful} staged an uprising. In Yemen Ibrahim ibn Musa ibn Ja‘far revolted against the ‘Abbasid caliph.

Muhammad ibn Sulayman ibn Dawud ibn Hasan rose up in Medina. In Wasit where most of the people inclined toward the ‘Uthmanis, there was the uprising of Ja‘far ibn Zayd ibn ‘Ali as well as that of Husayn ibn Ibrahim ibn Hasan ibn ‘Ali.

In Mada’in Muhammad ibn Isma‘il ibn Muhammad launched a rebellion. In sum, there was no place (in the Muslim territories) where the ‘Alawis by their own initiatives or at the request of the people did not

revolt against the ‘Abbasids. It went to the extent that the people of Mesopotamia and Sham, who were known for having cooperation with the Umayyads and the descendants of Marwan, gathered around Muhammad ibn Muhammad al-‘Alawi, the intimate friend of Abu’s–Saraya, and in a letter to him they wrote that they have been waiting for his envoy to deliver his message.¹³

The Uprising of Hasan ibn Zayd

In the year 250 AH during the caliphate of Musta‘in, an ‘Abbasid caliph, Hasan ibn Zayd, who was formerly residing in Rey, went to the districts of Tabaristan, called on the people to seek the pleasure of Prophet Muhammad’s (‘a) progeny, took control of the regions in Tabaristan and Jurjan after a series of skirmishes,¹⁴ and founded the government of the ‘Alawis in Tabaristan which lasted up to 345 AH.¹⁵

Throughout his two decades of rule, Hasan ibn Zayd overran the regions of Rey, Zanjan and Qazwin many times. During the same year of his uprising, he dispatched one of the ‘Alawis named Muhammad ibn Ja‘far to Rey who after sometime was captured by the Tahiris.¹⁶ In 251 AH he sent Husayn Ahmad al-‘Alawi who rose up in Qazwin and expelled the agents of the Tahiris.¹⁷

Similarly, Hasan ibn Zayd’s brother, Husayn ibn Zayd overran the regions of Larijan and Qasran, north of present day Tehran, and earned the allegiance of the people there for his brother.¹⁸ As Tabari says regarding the events in 50 AH, “In addition to the government in Tabaristan, the government of the region of Rey extending roughly as far as Hamedan was under the control of Hasan ibn Zayd.”¹⁹

As such, in addition to the northern regions of Iran which were near the sphere of influence of Hasan ibn Zayd and in which uprisings took place in his name, the ‘Alawis in Iraq,²⁰ Sham²¹ and Egypt²² found courage too, gathering the people around them and staging uprisings, until such time that in 270 AH Hasan ibn Zayd passed away.

After his death his brother, Muhammad ibn Zayd succeeded him and ruled Saman until 287 AH. Finally, in that year (287 AH) he attained martyrdom in a battle between him and Muhammad ibn Harun, a Samanide commander.²³

In 287 AH, after the martyrdom of Muhammad ibn Zayd, Nasir Kabir known as Atrush in the region of Gilan and Daylam rose up in the midst of the people, calling them to Islam and ruled there for 14 years²⁴ until such time that he went to Tabaristan in 301 AH and took control of government there.²⁵

The Uprising of Yahya ibn al-Husayn

In 288 AH Yahya ibn Husayn al-‘Alawi, known as “*Al-Hadi ila’l-Haqq*” {The Guide toward the Truth}, staged an uprising in Hijaz and the Zaydis gathered around him. On the same year he entered San‘a with the cooperation of Yemeni tribes, and was addressed as the Zaydi Imam.

Although he had skirmishes with Yemeni tribes, in the end he was able to take control of the region and

establish a government. Yet, in 298 AH he died from poisoning. He had been remembered as one of the greatest Zaydi figures. In terms of knowledge and learning, he also had an excellent station. As such, the Zaydi sect in Yemen became known with his name: “Hadawiyah”.²⁶

His sons were Zaydi Imams and rulers of Yemen.²⁷ The leadership and rule of Zaydiyyah in Yemen continued through the children and grandchildren of “Al-Hadi ila’l-Haqq” until 1382 AH when Arab republicanism in Yemen was established.

Lesson 16: Summary

The Zaydis during the first three centuries AH constituted a large number of the Shi’ah, and they staged regional uprisings which led to the formation of governments.

The leadership of the Zaydis was transferred from the line of Yahya ibn Zayd to the grandchildren of Imam al-Hasan (‘a). As such, they were always leading the uprisings in spite of the fact that they did not believe in the Zaydi fundamental beliefs.

One of the highlights of the ‘Alawi uprisings took place during the time of the ‘Abbasid caliph Mansur and was led by Muhammad Nafs az-Zakiyyah. The second one was during the time of Ma’mun when on account of the existence of military commanders such as Abu’s-Saraya, the ‘Alawis attained success after success. The third one was after 250 AH when the ‘Alawis of Tabaristan were able to set up a government, with which other ‘Alawis found courage to stage uprisings in various regions.

Lesson 16: Questions

1. Describe the Zaydi uprisings.
2. What is the basis of the uprising of Muhammad Nafs az-Zakiyyah?
3. When did the uprising of Ibn Tabataba’i take place?
4. In what year did the uprising of the ‘Alawis of Tabaristan happen?

1. ‘Ali ibn al-Husayn Abu’l-Faraj al-Isfahani, *Maqatil at-Talibiyyin* (Qum: Mansurat ash-Sharif ar-Radi, 1416 AH), p. 345.

2. ‘Ali ibn al-Husayn Mas’udi, *Murawwij adh-Dhahab* (Beirut: Mansurat Mu’assasah al-A’lami Li’l-Matbu’at, 1411 AH), vol. 4, pp. 393, 394; Shahrastani, *Kitab al-Milal wa’n-Nihal* (Qum: Mansurat ash-Sharif ar-Radi, 1364 AHS), vol. 1, p. 139.

3. For example, after receiving the news of Ahmad ibn ‘Isa’s escape from prison, Harun (ar-Rashid) commissioned a certain person named Ibn Kurdiyyah to go to the districts of Kufah and Basrah, to feign Shi’ism, and distribute money among the Shi’ah and Zaydis so as to become informed of Ahmad ibn ‘Isa’s hiding place. He was able to identify this hiding place through much effort and distribution of large amounts of money, but in the end, Ahmad was not arrested. *Maqatil at-Talibiyyin*, pp. 492, 496.

4. *Ibid.*

5. Idris ibn ‘Abd Allah, brother of Muhammad Nafs az-Zakiyyah, participated in the uprising of Husayn ibn ‘Ali al-Hasani Shahid Fakh which took place during the time of the ‘Abbasid caliph Hadi. After Husayn’s defeat, he went to Egypt disguised among Hajj pilgrims (on their way back home) and from there he proceeded toward Maghrib. In Maghrib people gathered around him, and thus he acquired power and set up a government, but a certain person poisoned him at the order of the ‘Abbasid caliph Harun. Thereafter, people named his small child “Idris”. When Idris II grew up, he ruled there and the Idrisi rule in Maghrib lasted for about one century. Murawwij adh-Dhahab, vol. 3, p. 326.
6. Maqatil at-Talibiyyin, pp. 406–408.
7. Ibid., p. 393.
8. Ibid.
9. Ibid., pp. 392–393.
10. Ibid., pp. 251, 254–255, 347.
11. Murawwij adh-Dhahab, vol. 3, p. 326.
12. Ibn Wadhih, Tarikh al-Ya‘qubi, 1st edition (Qum: Manshurat ash-Sharif ar-Radi, 1414 AH), vol. 2, p. 445.
13. Maqatil at-Talibiyyin, pp. 435–436.
14. Abu Ja‘far Muhammad ibn Jarir ibn Rustam Tabari, Tarikh at-Tabari, 2nd edition (Beirut: Dar al-Kutub al-‘Ilmiyyah, 1408 AH), vol. 5, p. 364.
15. Jalal ad-Din ‘Abd ar-Rahman Suyuti, Tarikh al-Khulafa’ (Qum: Intisharat ash-Sharif ar-Radi, 1411 AH), p. 525.
16. Tarikh at-Tabari, vol. 5, p. 365.
17. Ibid.
18. Ibid.
19. Ibid.
20. Ibid., pp. 36, 395, 430.
21. Murawwij adh-Dhahab, p. 327.
22. Ibid., p. 326.
23. Maqatil at-Talibiyyin, p. 542.
24. Murawwij adh-Dhahab, p. 283.
25. Ibid., p. 327.
26. See ‘Ali Rabbani Gulpaygani, Firq va Madhahib-e Kalami, 1st edition (Qum: Markaz-e Jahani-ye ‘Ulum-e Islami, 1377 AHS), vol. 1, p. 134.
27. Tarikh al-Khulafa’, p. 525.

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