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The Illegitimacy of Yazid's Caliphate

Some misguided traditionalists and historians have attempted to portray Yazid's caliphate and government as legitimate according to Islam. They have endeavored to demonstrate that the people pledged allegiance to Yazid ibn Mu'awiyah.

By doing so, they try to make Yazid's government appear acceptable. At the same time, they try to show Imam al-Husayn's (as) uprising against Yazid to be an illegitimate rebellion that was against the common will of the people. In this section, we substantiate the falsity of these claims, but first we mention some of the statements made in support of Yazid.

Abu Bakr ibn al-'Arabi writes, "The allegiance paid to Yazid was legally concluded, because one man paid allegiance to him, even though that one man was his father, Mu'awiyah ibn Abu Sufiyan."¹

Muhibb al-Din Khatib writes, "Yazid was just, vigilant and perseverant in prayer. He used to perform good deeds. He always enforced the Prophet's (S) *Sunnah* and was very attached to it."²

Ibn al-'Arabi also writes, "Anyone who went to war against al-Husayn did so with the emphatic recommendation of his ancestor the Prophet (S). They say that the Prophet (S) said, 'Kill by the sword anyone who wants to sow discord and division in the Islamic community [*ummah*], no matter whom it may be'."³

Ibn Khaldun has said, "Al-Husayn was killed by his grandfather's sword."⁴

Muhammad Abu al-Yasr 'Abidin, the Mufti of Sham, says, "The Allegiance paid to Yazid was legal and legitimate. Therefore, whoever rebelled against him was an insurgent."⁵

Abul Khayr Shafi'i Qazvini writes, "Yazid was an *imam* and a supreme religious jurisprudent [*mujtahid*]."⁶

We will now survey and discuss the legitimacy of Yazid's claim to the caliphate.

Evidence regarding the illegitimacy of Yazid's caliphate

Supporters of Bani Umayyah and Yazid's partisans among some Islamic sects have been persistent in trying to portray the issue of Imam al-Husayn's (as) uprising against Yazid as a rebellion against a legitimate Muslim caliph whose allegiance and caliphate was concluded in a correct and unflawed manner.

By this means, they have striven to depict Imam al-Husayn (as) as an insurgent who rebelled against the "rightful Imam" of the time. They have asserted that Yazid only intended to protect his legitimately acquired position when he brutally massacred Imam al-Husayn (as) and all his companions at Karbala.

In fact, however, the reality is quite the opposite. The real *imam* and caliph was Imam al-Husayn (as). His Imamate and caliphate were sanctioned by Allah and the Holy Prophet (S). It was actually Yazid who secured the caliphate by means of usurpation and extortion.

Yazid ibn Mu'awiyah's caliphate, in fact, lacked any legitimacy. Therefore, Imam al-Husayn's (as) uprising against Yazid was not only legitimate and rational, but also an obligatory and binding duty upon Imam al-Husayn (as) as well. Evidence for these assertions follows:

1. The Imamate of Husayn ibn 'Ali (as)

In a sound and well-established *hadith* recounted by successive witnesses among the Sunnis, the Holy Prophet (S) explicitly mentioned the Twelve Imams who would come after him and introduced them as the rightful caliphs.

Jabir ibn Samrah recounts, "I heard the Holy Prophet (S) saying, 'As long as the Twelve Caliphs govern, Islam will always be honored.' Then, he said something I did not understand clearly. I asked my father, 'What has the Prophet just said?' My father answered, 'They will all belong to the tribe of Quraysh'."⁷

On his own chain of transmission, Bukhari, too, quotes from Jabir ibn Samrah that the Holy Prophet (S) said, "They will be twelve *Amirs* (leaders). Then he said something that I did not hear properly. My father said, 'They will all belong to the tribe of Quraysh'."⁸

With recourse to the *Hadith al-Thaqalayn*, we understand that these twelve people are of the Prophet's (S) Household. With attention to the *Hadith Ghadir al-Khumm*, we come to know that the first of them is 'Ali ibn Abi Talib (as). All the *hadiths* mentioned above were quoted from the Holy Prophet (S) during the same period of time and can therefore be used to interpret each other, especially when it is born in mind that, according to other *hadiths*, the names of these twelve people were explicitly mentioned by the Holy Prophet (S).

In the book "*Fara'id al-Samtayn*", Hamawayni recounts on his own chain of transmission from Ibn 'Abbas that a Jewish person named Na'thal was granted an audience by the Holy Prophet (S). Na'thal

asked him, “O Muhammad! I will ask you a number of questions about certain issues that have remained hidden in my heart for a long time. If you answer them all, I will believe in you.”

The Holy Prophet (S) said to him, “Ask O Aba ‘Amarah!” One of the questions which the Jew asked was this, “Inform me about who will be the inheritor and executor of your will after your death? I am asking this question because there has never been a prophet who died and did not leave behind an administrator for himself.

Indeed, our Prophet, Musa ibn ‘Imran left Yusha‘ ibn Nun to be his administrator.” The Holy Prophet (S) answered, “Verily, ‘Ali ibn Abi Talib is my inheritor and the administrator of my will. After him, I will be succeeded by my descendants al-Hasan and al-Husayn; and after these two, there will come nine Imams one after another (in successive order) from the loins of al-Husayn.” Na‘thal said, “O Muhammad! Mention their names to me.”

The Holy Prophet (S) said, “After al-Husayn, his son ‘Ali ibn al-Husayn, then Muhammad ibn ‘Ali, then his son Ja‘far ibn Muhammad, then his son Musa ibn Ja‘far, then his son ‘Ali ibn Musa, and after him his son Muhammad ibn ‘Ali, and after him his son ‘Ali ibn Muhammad, and then Hasan ibn ‘Ali and his son, the final and ultimate proof of Allah upon mankind, Muhammad Mahdi ibn al-Hasan will be the last Imam. These are the twelve people who will succeed me.”⁹

These twelve people have also been clearly mentioned in other *hadiths*.¹⁰

In another *hadith*, the Holy Prophet (S) has said,

الحسن والحسين إماما أمتي بعد أبيهما.

“Al-Hasan and al-Husayn are the two Imams of my Islamic community [*ummah*] after their father.”¹¹

Therefore, if Imam al-Husayn (as) is the rightful *imam* and caliph nominated and appointed by the Holy Prophet (S) himself, it follows that Yazid’s caliphate is illegitimate and invalid.

2. Imam al-Husayn’s (as) infallibility

Imam al-Husayn (as) is one of the people included in the ‘Verse of Purification’ [*Ayah al-Tathir*] of the Holy Qur’an. Therefore, he is free of any sort of sin, error or forgetfulness. Imam al-Husayn (as) cannot commit any sort of wrongdoing because he has been purified of sin by the Almighty Allah.

On his chain of transmission, Muslim quotes ‘A’ishah recounting, “One morning Allah’s Prophet (S) left my house carrying a piece of cloth made from raw wool on his shoulders. Al-Hasan ibn ‘Ali, al-Husayn, Fatimah and ‘Ali all came to join the Prophet (S) in the order mentioned. Then, he recited this verse,

﴿ إِنَّمَا يَرِيدُ اللَّهُ لِيُذْهِبَ عَنْكُمُ الرِّجْسَ أَهْلَ الْبَيْتِ وَيُطَهِّرَكُمْ تَطْهِيرًا ﴾

“Allah only desires to keep away uncleanness from you, O people of the house, and to purify you a thorough purifying.”^{12 13}

If, as reported in these *hadith* from Sunni sources, Imam al-Husayn (as) is purified of sin, or infallible, it follows that his uprising is correct and justified. It also implies that the government of Yazid was not credible.^f

3. Allah’s Prophet (S) is pleased with al-Husayn (as)

On his own chain of transmission, Tabarani narrates from Rib‘i ibn Harash that Imam ‘Ali (as) said, “I visited the Holy Prophet (S) one day while he had spread a piece of cloth on the ground. The Prophet, Fatimah, al-Hasan, al-Husayn and I sat together on that piece of cloth. Then, the Holy Prophet (S) picked up the corners of the cloth and spread it over all of us. After that, he said,

«اللَّهُمَّ ارْضَ عَنْهُمْ كَمَا أَنَا رَاضٍ عَنْهُمْ.»

‘O Allah! Be pleased with these people in the same way that I am pleased with them!’¹⁴

Haythami has recounted this *hadith* in his book “*Majma‘ al-Zawa‘id*”. He says, “Tabarani has narrated this *hadith* in the book “*Al-Awsat*”. All the people mentioned on this chain of transmission are well known for transmitting authentic *hadith*, while ‘Ubayd ibn Tufayl, one of the transmitters mentioned on this channel, is reliable and trustworthy [thaqah].”¹⁵

We can understand from this *hadith* that the Holy Prophet (S) is pleased with Imam al-Husayn (as) and, as a result of this pleasure, makes a supplication in his favor. We also know that Allah, the High, certainly accepts the Holy Prophet’s (S) prayers and supplications; therefore, it follows that Allah is certainly pleased with Imam al-Husayn (as).

We can deduce that Imam al-Husayn’s uprising and revolt against Yazid was also a source of pleasure for Allah. This point casts more doubt upon the legitimacy of Yazid’s claim for caliphate.

4. al-Husayn (as), the master of the youths of Paradise

Abu Sa‘id recounts that the Holy Prophet (S) said,

«الحسن والحسين سيّدا شباب أهل الجنّة.»

“Al-Hasan and al-Husayn are the two leaders of the youths of paradise.”¹⁶

Al-Tirmidhi believes that this *hadith* is sound and correct, and al-Albani agrees with him.¹⁷

If Imam al-Husayn (as), according to the sayings of the Holy Prophet (S), is the master of the youths of Paradise, then it follows that all his actions and works in this world, including rising up against Yazid ibn Mu'awiyah, are pleasing to Allah. Again, the legitimacy of Yazid's caliphate becomes subject to question and doubt.

5. The continuity and stability of the Prophet's (S) mission depended heavily on al-Husayn's (as) uprising

On his own chain of transmission, al-Tirmidhi narrates from Ya'la ibn Marrah that the Holy Prophet (S) said,

«حسين منّي وأنا من حسين.»

“Al-Husayn is from me and I am from al-Husayn.”¹⁸

It is clear that Imam al-Husayn (as) comes from the Prophet (S) because he is the Holy Prophet's (S) grandson born from his daughter Fatimah (as). However, what is the meaning of the second part of the Prophet's (S) saying that he is from al-Husayn (as)?

We can positively assert through examination of the results of his uprising that Imam al-Husayn (as) revived the Prophet's (S) mission by rising up against Yazid. His martyrdom and the martyrdom of the youths of Bani Hashim and all his companions kept the true message of the Holy Prophet (S) alive.

The survival of the religion of Islam and the continuity of the Holy Prophet's (S) mission were secured by Imam al-Husayn's (as) uprising. Therefore, it can be said that the Holy Prophet's (S) characteristics is dependent on Imam al-Husayn's (as).

Al-Tirmidhi considered the previously mentioned *hadith* of the Prophet (S) to be good [*hasan*].¹⁹ After recounting this *hadith*, Hakim al-Neyshaburi has also presented its sound and correct chain of transmission [*sahih al-asnad*], and Dhahabi agrees with him.²⁰

In his book entitled “*Misbah al-Zajajah fi Zawa'id ibn Majah*”, Busayri says that the chain of transmission of this *hadith* is good [*hasan*] and the transmitters recounting it are all honest and trustworthy [*thaqah*].²¹

After narrating this *hadith*, Haythami says that its chain of transmission is good [*hasan*].²²

6. Peace treaty with Imam al-Hasan and the caliphate

The conditions that Mu'awiyah ibn Abi Sufiyan accepted in the peace agreement he signed with Imam al-Hasan al-Mujtaba (as) are worthy of careful thought and consideration.

Mu'awiyah had mentioned certain conditions in his proposal for peace, and Imam al-Hasan (as) added other conditions.²³ Among the items that were agreed upon was a stipulation that Imam al-Hasan (as) would cede the caliphate to Mu'awiyah on the condition that, when Mu'awiyah died, the caliphate would be handed back to Imam al-Hasan (as).

In the event that Imam al-Hasan (as) were not alive, the caliphate would be handed over to his brother Imam al-Husayn (as).²⁴

That is why as soon as Imam al-Husayn (as) heard that Mu'awiyah had died, he told 'Abd Allah ibn Zubayr, "I will never pay allegiance to Yazid, because after my brother, al-Hasan (as), the caliphate returns to me. Mu'awiyah did as he wanted, and swore to my brother that he would never hand the caliphate over to anyone of his children. He promised that if I were alive, the caliphate would return to me."²⁵

It has been clearly stated in many Sunni sources that Imam al-Hasan al-Mujtaba (as) put a condition on Mu'awiyah that he should not hand over the caliphate to anyone after he died.²⁶

This peace agreement and its conditions, which were agreed upon by both parties of the treaty, substantiate the illegitimacy of the succession of Yazid to the caliphate after his father's death.

7. Mu'awiyah himself was not the legitimate caliph

Sunni Islam accepts the legitimacy of the incoming caliph by relying on the oath of the previous caliph. However, the caliphate and Imamate of the previous caliph must indisputably be proven before his oath can be considered valid. In Mu'awiyah's case, this was not so. His caliphate was never proven legitimate, as the following information shows:

Firstly, Mu'awiyah gained control of the caliphate and predominance over the Islamic community by rebelling against the rightful Imam of the Muslims, Amir al-Mu'minin Imam 'Ali ibn Abi Talib (as). Therefore, Mu'awiyah's caliphate itself lacked legitimacy and was void of any reasonable religious or legal base.

Secondly, in Imam al-Hasan's (as) peace agreement, it was stated that the tax, revenue and tribute of Abjard must be handed over to Imam al-Hasan (as). This confirms that Imam al-Hasan (as) did not recognize Mu'awiyah as the rightful caliph of the Muslims. The reason is that the area of Abjard had

come under the fold of Islam peacefully, and had not been conquered by force or the strength of an army.

According to the Islamic law, the tax from this kind of place is exclusively reserved for the legitimate Imam of the Muslims. Therefore, Imam al-Hasan (as), who was the legitimate Imam of the Muslims, demanded this share and allotment in his agreement with Mu'awiyah.²⁷

Thirdly, one of the conditions that Imam al-Hasan (as) included in the peace pact was that Mu'awiyah would have to abstain from calling himself *amir al-mu'minin* (the Commander of the Faithful). This is a clear declaration from Imam al-Hasan (as) that he did not in reality support or endorse the legitimacy of the government of Mu'awiyah, the son of Abu Sufiyan.

8. The absence of allegiance for Yazid

Some have ventured to prove that the people paid allegiance to Yazid ibn Mu'awiyah, but upon study of historical accounts and reflection regarding the events that happened, one can easily see that this assertion is not true.

Firstly, in a letter to his governor of Medina, Yazid wrote, "You must secure the allegiance of individuals who enjoy special honor and status among the people by whatever means there are at your disposal; secure the allegiance of such people as al-Husayn ibn 'Ali, 'Abd Allah ibn 'Umar, 'Abd al-Rahman ibn Abi Bakr and 'Abd Allah ibn Zubayr.

If they refuse to pay allegiance, kill them."²⁸ Of course, it must be pointed out that allegiance that is paid reluctantly or out of coercion is not considered to be legitimate or valid at all.

Secondly, the people of Iraq had written a letter to Imam al-Husayn ibn 'Ali (as) in which they manifestly declared that they did not have an *imam* and were not going to pay allegiance to anyone save al-Husayn ibn 'Ali (as).²⁹

Thirdly, Shabrawi Shafi'i strongly opposes any defence of Yazid's caliphate by certain scholars. First, he quotes and recounts the reasons which have been put forward by Ghazzali and Ibn al-'Arabi as their legal bases and reasons for prohibiting cursing or reviling Yazid.

Then, he gives a detailed account of the overstatements of these two people regarding the issue of cursing Yazid. He says, "The statements of Ghazzali and Ibn al-'Arabi are false, because they are founded on the assumption that the allegiance paid to Yazid—Allah's curse be on him—was correct and sound, in spite of the fact that this view is opposed by historians."³⁰

The supporters of Imam al-Husayn's (as) uprising

Most Muslims, including the Sunnis, remember the historical epic of Imam al-Husayn (as) with unanimous honor and respect. In addition, after the event of Karbala, those who had either opposed the *Ahl al-Bayt* (as) or had taken a position of neutrality and non-alignment soon abandoned these positions and in the course of events, the majority of them announced their support for the *Ahl al-Bayt* (as) in various ways.

1. 'Ubayd Allah ibn Hurr Ju'fi was one who had initially refused to help Imam al-Husayn (as). After the martyrdom of Imam al-Husayn (as), he became an intolerant opponent of Bani Umayyah's government. He composed songs of lamentation for the martyrs of Karbala and started calling on the people to rebel and rise up against the rule of Yazid.³¹

2. Zayd ibn Arqam was a man who had tried to dissuade Imam al-Husayn (as) from continuing on his course of action by appealing to the Imam (as) in a devout and mystical manner. In the end, he was persuaded to give up his opposition because of Imam al-Husayn's (as) legitimate and moral right. When he saw the captives of Karbala being taken to Sham and the heads severed from the dead bodies of the martyrs being carried on lances, when he observed the shameful way in which Ibn Ziyad was behaving towards the victims, when he saw how low the Muslims had sunk and how abject they had become, he was deeply moved by the sorrowful event.

He could not help breaking down and crying. He said "O people! From now on, you will be worse off than slaves. You have killed the son of Fatimah (as), and have made yourselves subjects of the son of Marjanah. I swear upon Allah! He will kill the best of you and enslave the worst among you. Woe on he who is content with abjectness and disgrace!"³²

3. Abu al-'Ala' Mu'arri says, "The brutal killing of al-Husayn (as) and the usurpation of the caliphate by Yazid was a wicked act of our age and our people."³³

4. Shaykh Muhammad 'Abduh is one who believes in supporting only a religious and just government. He maintains that opposing an unjust and tyrannical government is obligatory upon all Muslims. He considers Imam al-Husayn's (as) uprising against Yazid as opposition against an unjust usurper and oppressor.³⁴

5. 'Abd Allah 'Alayiki writes, "Al-Husayn (as) did not rise up against an *imam*. On the contrary, he revolted against a transgressor who had imposed himself upon the people or had been imposed upon them by his father. It is very likely that if this movement had been made by a person other than Imam al-Husayn (as), and against a person other than Yazid, the filthy propaganda apparatus of the rulers of that time would have easily and skillfully succeeded at distorting the lofty aims of the uprising. But al-Husayn (as) was a unique and different man; he had a very brilliant background and was famous among the Muslims. There was also much testimony given in his favor by the Holy Prophet (S). There were *hadiths*

recorded which foretold this uprising.

Now we have a scenario where al-Husayn (as) is on one side of event, and the wicked Yazid and the corrupt household of Bani Umayyah is on the opposite side. This sharp contrast made the movement of al-Husayn (as) shine like a bright star in a dark night so much so that even where the positions of opponents of al-Husayn's (as) uprising are mentioned in Sunni books, it is for the purpose of negating and condemning them.”³⁵

6. ‘Abbas Mahmud ‘Aqqad believes that it is unfair to analyze and evaluate Imam al-Husayn's (as) uprising using narrow human standards. He writes, “Al-Husayn's (as) exodus from Mecca towards Iraq is not a movement which can be judged according to ordinary standards because this uprising is among rare historical movements that involve the invitation of the people towards religion and political awareness. The only people who are capable of making such unique movements are those who have been created solely for such missions. Exposing oneself to danger in the way that al-Husayn (as) did, does not even occur to the minds of ordinary people... Rather, this is an unparalleled movement in the history of mankind which calls for unique and remarkable individuals...”³⁶

He criticizes orientalists for failing to understand the conditions surrounding Imam al-Husayn's (as) uprising. While protesting against their lack of perception, he states, “How good it would have been had the orientalists comprehended the issue of religious belief in the person of Imam al-Husayn (as). Orientalists have to be reminded that for Imam al-Husayn (as), Islam was not a temporal issue that could be compromised. Al-Husayn (as) was a person with the strongest faith in Islamic law. He was a man who believed that suspension of the limits set by Allah (cessation in the practice of Islamic laws) was the greatest of all calamities that would sooner or later befall not only him and His household, but the Arab nation and the Islamic community as whole...”³⁷

Yazid, Instigator of Imam al-Husayn's (as) Death

Yazid ibn Mu'awiyah was an Umayyad caliph who committed uncountable crimes during his short-lived reign. In the first year of his three-year rule, he issued orders that the Prophet's (S) grandchild, Imam al-Husayn (as), must be put to death along with all his companions. The method in which this objective was carried out was so abominable that it gave birth to countless subsequent uprisings against Yazid.

To this day, this despicable action has remained a legitimate cause for constant sorrow and protest, and many Sunni scholars have voiced strong objections against Yazid. Unfortunately though, some biased and extremist 'scholars' and their narrow minded followers have ventured to come to Yazid's defence and have fabricated writings in praise of Yazid to try to deceive readers about his dark and treacherous role in history.

We will now examine this issue in detail and provide historical evidence to bear witness to the fact that Yazid was the direct instigator of the martyrdom of Imam al-Husayn (as).

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1. Abu Bakr ibn al-‘Arabi, Al-‘Awasim min al-Qawahim, p. 222.
 2. Muhibb al-Din Khatib, Al-Khutut al-‘Aridah, p. 232.
 3. Al-‘Awasim min al-Qawahim, Abu Bakr ibn al-‘Arabi, p. 222.
 4. Manawi, Fayd al-Qadir, vol. 1, p. 265, vol. 5, p. 213; The Introduction of Ibn Khaldun, p. 181.
 5. Aghalit al-Muwarikhin, p. 120.
 6. Tarajum Rijal al-Gharnayn, Al-Sadis wa al-Sabi’, p. 6.
 7. Muslim, Al-Sahih, vol. 6, p. 3, Kitab al-Amarah.
 8. Sahih Bukhari, vol. 8, p. 127, Bab al-Istikhlaf.
 9. Hamawayni, Fara’id al-Samtayn, vol. 2, p. 132; Yanabi’ al-Mawaddah, vol. 3, pp. 281–282.
 10. Ibid.
 11. Hamawayni, Fara’id al-Samtayn, vol. 1, p. 55.
 12. Surat al-Ahzab 33:33.
 13. Muslim, Al-Sahih, vol. 7, p. 130.
 14. Majma’ al-Zawa’id, vol. 9, p. 169.
 15. Ibid.
 16. Ahmad ibn Hanbal, Al-Musnad, vol. 3, pp. 3, 62, 64, 82; Al-Tirmidhi, Sunan, vol. 5, p. 321; Al-Hakim al-Neysaburi, Al-Mustadrak ‘ala al-Sahihayn, vol. 3, pp. 154, 166–167.
 17. Al-Tirmidhi, Sunan, vol. 5, p. 321; Silsilah al-Ahadith al-Sahihah, vol. 2, p. 423, no. 796.
 18. Al-Tirmidhi, Sunan, vol. 5, p. 324.
 19. Ibid.
 20. Al-Hakim al-Neysaburi, Al-Mustadrak ‘ala al-Sahihayn, vol. 3, p. 177.
 21. Misbah al-Zajajah, vol. 1, p. 85.
 22. Majma’ al-Zawa’id, vol. 9, p. 181.
 23. Tarikh Tabari, vol. 4, p. 124.
 24. ‘Umdah al-Talib, p. 67.
 25. Ibn A’tham, Al-Futuh, vol. 5, p. 12.
 26. Ibn Abi al-Hadid, Sharh Nahj al-Balaghah, vol. 16, p. 22; Al-Futuh, vol. 4, p. 291; Mukhtasar Tarikh Damishq, vol. 13, p. 265.
 27. Futuh al-Buldan, p. 380.
 28. Al-Futuh, vol. 5, pp. 10–11; Tarikh Ya’qubi, vol. 2, p. 241.
 29. Al-Bidayah wa al-Nihayah, vol. 8, pp. 151–152.
 30. Al-Ithaf bi Hubb al-Ashraf, p. 68.
 31. Tarikh Tabari, vol. 5, pp. 469–470.
 32. Ibid., vol. 6, p. 262.
 33. Al-Mu’arri, Luzum ma la Yulzam, pp. 310–311.
 34. The Qur’anic Commentary of Al-Manar, vol. 1, p. 367.
 35. ‘Ala’ili, Al-Imam al-Husayn, pp. 33–34.
 36. ‘Iqad, Al-‘Abqariyyat al-Islamiyyah, vol. 2, p. 222.
 37. Ibid., vol. 2, p. 228.

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