

Repairing the Past: Preparing the Future: *Towards Muslim Unity*

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Introduction

The most damaging and long lasting division among the Islamic Community continues to be the Sunni-Shi'ah schism, which has greatly intensified in bloodshed over the past decade and become entangled with regional and global geo-political agendas. The historical tensions between Sunni and Shi'ah Muslims arose in the 1st century AH under the Umayyad rulers, and were later aggravated in the early 16th century CE by the forcible conversion of Iran to Ja'fari Shi'ism under the Safavid Shahs and resulting Ottoman-Safavid rivalry. The Iranian revolution in 1979 marked a watershed in the reassertion of Muslim identity worldwide. Recent events in Iraq, Iran, Pakistan, Lebanon, the Gulf and Arabia have coalesced along regional linkages and dividing lines marking the intensified renewal of this ancient schism.

The chief obstacle against mutual understanding remains the burden of crystallized attitudes inherited from the past. Shi'ah and Sunnis have both *used* and *abused* the past. Especially at the widespread level of popular religious attitudes and observances, this painful schism continues to operate with its own inevitably fatal logic. Deep psychic and emotional wounds arising from their disagreements were cemented in place by centuries of polemic still festering unresolved in the heart of the Muslim mind. What is needed to heal this ancient schism and to facilitate the concerted oneness of Muslims world-wide belonging to differing legal, ideological and doctrinal orientations?

Our remarks today fall into three parts. § We begin by reviewing the present strategic and political reality of the Middle East and the exploitation of this ancient schism by internal and

external actors. § Next we attempt to briefly portray the contrasting Sunni and Shi'ah worldviews, their foundational myths and self-definition motivating their communal large-group identity. § Finally we offer several basic suggestions for pursuing realistic strategies for unity that may help repair the past and open a path to a more humane and dignified future.

- I. Currently a new dimension of the Sunni-Shi'ah dynamic is being played out today for high stakes, with major shifts underway in the politics and regimes of central Islamic lands. On December 30th 2006 onlookers at the hanging of Saddam Hussein taunted him by chanting the name of Muhammad Baqir al-Sadr [Muqtada's uncle and father-in-law], a leading Iraqi intellectual and religious scholar who, along with his sister Aminah bint al-Huda, was killed by the Baathist regime in 1980.¹ We are now witnessing the emergence of previously marginalized communities and constrained regional powers. The Arab Shi'ah communities of Iraq and Lebanon (representing majority or plurality populations within mosaic states) are reasserting their primacy and legitimacy as they reach for power after long years of social marginalization and political exclusion at the hands of ruling majorities. The Baghdad government is controlled by Shi'ah parties organized into the *United Iraqi Alliance*. A chief motivation for continuing violence and instability in Iraq is that Sunni militants cannot reconcile themselves to the loss of their former privileges and dominance under Baathist patronage. Hizbullah now demands greater political power in Lebanon's government and precipitated a national crisis with popular street protests that was only defused when they achieved a larger share of ministerial power. Nor should one overlook that the oil-rich province of al-Hasa in eastern Saudi Arabia is home to Shi'ite Arabs, or that Bahrain has a Shi'ah majority and Kuwait a Shi'ite minority. A major feature of these transformations underway is the emergence of new social and political groups for leadership: the Pasdaran ruling clique in Iran, Hasan Nasrallah in Lebanon, and in Iraq 'Abdul Aziz al-Hakim & SCIRI and Muqtada al-Sadr & *Jaysh al-Mahdi*.

Today Iran (whose people are 80% Persian & Azeri-Turkish Shi'ah, yet whose Kurdish, Turkomen and Baluchi populations are Sunni) is emerging as a leading regional presence confronting the U.S. and making the conservative pro-American Sunni Arab regimes of Egypt, Saudi Arabia and Jordan uneasy. The American colossus has sought to exploit their anxieties to its own advantage by playing upon fears of rising Shi'ah dominance undermining Arab regime legitimacy. But the dream of an American-orchestrated transformation of the oil-rich Middle East has turned into a Neo-Conservative's nightmare of rising Shi'ite radicalism. George Bush's invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq proved counterproductive by spurring Iran and other countries to speed up their development of nuclear power in hopes of deterring penetration by outside actors pursuing alien agendas. The U.S. promoted idea of a *Shi'ite Crescent* to be countered by a pro-American *Sunni Arc* has not made much headway.

[The results of a survey of Arab public opinion reported by *al-Arabiya*, conducted with the British YouGov organization in December 2006, surveying 3113 people from various Arab countries, showed that: 81% of Arab respondents support Iran's position on the nuclear issue, while only 14% opposed the Iranian nuclear program; and 87% favored GCC states getting nuclear capabilities. The surveyed Arabs do not really seem to be buying the "Iranian threat" or "Shia threat" narratives: only 33% named Iran as a threat to the region, while 74% continued to support Hezbollah.]

Recall the former U.S. policy of 'dual containment' that sought to bottle up Iran and Iraq within a strategic blank-hole in the midst of the MidEast? A new center is taking shape that will be dominated by the large Shi'ah majority states of Iraq and Iran. Transformations underway will have reverberations for decades to come. Though born in blood and the pain of history, these groups may represent the future. Thus, what is taking place in Iraq, Iran and Lebanon marks the true "birthpangs" of a radically altered Middle East. Today's

conflicts across the Middle East revolve around the question of whether broader visions of identity will succeed and usher in models of political and economic power-sharing and nation-building, thus promoting genuinely positive development. Or if the post-colonial rentier-state model coupled with the abuse of ethnic, religious and doctrinal bias will be enabled to ensure continued division and stagnation. Ultimately, the question must be faced squarely whether Muslims today have the intelligence, courage, sincerity and creative commitment to healing the aching wound that sundered the community when God's Messenger Muhammad died.

- II. It would be beneficial if today's thinking Muslims had a better critical grasp of the overall worldview of both communities, but this requires one to be more objective about oneself and the group one was born into. What are the opposing 'inner histories' of the larger Muslim Community reflected in each group's particular self-understanding? The inescapable divergence between these two branches of Islam lies in their differing attitudes toward the *Sahabah* the Companions and associates of God's Messenger Muhammad (S):
- Any criticism, fault finding or questioning of motives aimed at any one of the Prophet's leading Companions who played a significant role in the events of the early Muslim Community is actively discouraged and condemned by the majority Sunnis, who strongly encouraged later Muslims **not** to look too closely at controversial events and incidents involving the leading Companions in the years following the Prophet's death. [In his letter to the Basran tradent Musaddad b. Musarhad al-Asadi (d.228/843) spelling out true doctrine, Ahmad Ibn Hanbal warns him: "...beware disputation with those holding errant doctrines, and refrain from discussing the shortcomings of the Prophet's Companions S², rather narrate their surpassing merits/*fada'il* and abstain from discussing what broke out between them /*al-imsak 'an ma shajara baynahum*.""] This stress on abstention from disputes

emanating from the Sunni-Shi'ah schism reflects the politico-theological Murji'ah position characteristic of proto-Sunni orthodoxy.

- In contrast, the Shi'ah have frequently analyzed the motives and actions of leading Companions, condemning certain among them as committing serious errors and thus leading the Community astray. Most Shi'i authorities later held that the majority of Companions had erred or committed a 'grave offence' / *fisq*, while some more uncompromising Shi'ah held that most Companions had strayed into 'unfaith' / *kufr*, by their intentionally ignoring or thwarting the Prophet's explicit designation of 'Ali to succeed him as leader of the Muslims and supporting instead the succession of Abu Bakr. The Shi'ah portrayal of leading individuals and key events in the early Community's history appears single-mindedly aimed to convey the most negative and damaging interpretations of their role in deflecting the Prophet's true intention to promote the succession and rule of his Family (*Ahl al-Bayt*), at times concentrating in an overwhelming manner on their demerits and defects rather than their 'surpassing merits' (*fada'il*).

Sunni Muslims firmly maintain that at the time of his death in Madinah on 13th *Rabi'u l-Awwal* 11H/8th June 632 CE, the Prophet Muhammad had not explicitly and unambiguously designated any one of his senior Companions nor any of his Family to succeed him as leader of the Muslims. Abu Bakr - the Prophet's right-hand man, close trusted associate of unsurpassed merit (*al-afdal*), and father of Muhammad's favorite wife - was chosen as the first *khalifah* / Caliph by the nearly unanimous consent of senior Companions. Any opposition to Abu Bakr's succession (e.g. by 'Ali, or by the Ansar) was short-lived and insignificant. In the Sunni vision of the Prophet's mission and of the activities and motives of his Companions who succeeded him, it is easy to detect a tendency to gloss over disputes and awkward disagreements in order to present a unified portrait of consensus, agreement and heroic cooperation.

One prominent feature of their approach is the effort to fix blame for specific disagreements and conflicts upon certain wicked individuals cast into the role of scapegoats absorbing all responsibility for causing dissension and strife amongst the united body of Companions during critical events, such as the murder of the third Caliph 'Uthman in 35/656, followed by the divisive battles of the Camel and then of Siffin fought by the fourth Caliph 'Ali against opponents who contested his authority (including the second Umayyad caliph Mu'awiyah b. Abi Sufyan). This chief feature found expression in a polemical portrait of external conspiracy and intrigue by evil-minded enemies sowing dissension within the united body of Muslims. This characteristic tendency of Sunni historical consciousness regarding the early schisms in the Muslim Community was early on exemplified by the writings of the pro-'Uthmanid (anti-Shi'ite) Kufan historian/*akhbari* of the early 'Abbasid period, Sayf b. 'Umar al-Tamimi (d.180/796), whose fiction depicting the evil machinations of Ibn Saba' were heavily promoted through being extensively cited by later historians including in the major history of Ibn Jarir al-Tabari (d.310 H). The dominant Sunni vision consistently glosses over or maintains uneasy silence about a number of divisive issues and painful incidents that might undermine or detract from the validity of Islam's outward success and power as the ideal religious, social and political order for all time until the end of time, and its triumphant spread thru N. Africa and Asia. Thus, Islam was established and disseminated correctly to the world in accordance with divine providence and the Prophet's mission discharged fully.

On the other hand, the minority Shi'ah displayed a clear tendency to analyze the motives and self-interests of key Companions and to assign blame or responsibility for the course of events the Muslim community experienced in the decades after the death of the Prophet. This Shi'ah depiction typically assumed a conspiracy theory of internal sabotage from inside the body of Muslims, an undermining from within manipulated by certain leading individuals and

factions opposed to their founding hero 'Ali b. Abi Talib: the Prophet's paternal cousin and son-in-law who had fathered five of Muhammad's grandchildren by his youngest daughter Fatimah. Abu Bakr, and his two caliphal successors 'Umar and 'Uthman, were viewed to have opened the door for the eventual re-emergence into power and authority of the Prophet's old enemies from the Makkan Quraysh, against whom the Muslims had fought bitterly from the battle of Badr until the Conquest of Makkah (2-8 H). Over time the Shi'ah built up and expanded their portrait of 'Ali and his descendants as divinely appointed & guided leaders of the Muslims, whose rights had been suppressed and ignored by the larger body of the Community. This image of their «*imam*» as a spiritual guide endowed with extraordinary knowledge of cosmic import became a permanent feature of Twelver Imami as well as Isma'ili Shi'ah beliefs, but not of the Zaydi Shi'ah doctrine of the imamate.

In stark contrast to the Sunni triumphalist worldview with its harmonizing portrait of heroic cooperation consummating a providential imperative in real time, the Shi'ah attitude toward the Companions is part of an encompassing apocalyptic worldview that posits the prevalence of evil and error among the wider community of Muslims. The naïve utopian expectation embraced by the early Shi'ah assumes that the just egalitarian order guaranteed by divine agency and originally promoted by Islam had become perverted by human agency, but that God shall nevertheless ensure the full restoration of this ideal by means of the return of their *Qa'im Mahdi*—who in certain respects was viewed as a 'second Muhammad' bearing the Prophet's patronym and name (Muhammad ibn 'Abdullah), and who was to appear at the End Time clad in the Prophet's very same relics of sword, banner, and chain-mail armor—whose long awaited return has continually been hoped for.

The actual utility of the *mahdi* dogma for the Shi'ah lies as much in this resolution of theologico-ideological dilemmas posed by defeat and exclusion from power, as in the

realm of individual religiousity, communal consciousness and solidarity for enduring persecution – the ‘*sigh of the oppressed*’. Shi’ah piety and theology exhibit deep imprints of the contradiction between their ideological-doctrinal and spiritual ideals, and the grim realities of their partisans’ disempowerment, persecution and political impotence at the hands of the ruling Umayyad and then ‘Abbasid dynasties. Love for Muhammad’s Family is the reverse side of Hate for those who were seen to have denied them their divinely-commissioned right to rule. By operating this spiritual reversal the Shi’ah have transformed outward humiliation, failure, and government-sponsored oppression into their minority’s inward exaltation as a mark of grace for the elect faithful. The very same energy when directed outwardly in order to transform society by attempts at socio-political reversal yields psycho-political movements draining inner spiritual transformation (Hizbullah, Pasdaran, *Jaysh al-Mahdi*).

Naturally, the simplified picture we have just described of these two opposing worldviews and quite different self-definitions, emphasizes their divergence and seeming irreconcilability. But history demonstrates significant examples to the contrary, attempts at convergence and conciliation that remind us not to take the generalized portraits as final or irrevocable, but indeed open to mitigation and harmonization in a number of crucial doctrinal points.

- III. What possible avenues may be pursued to overcome this bitter division and to heal the wounds of the past which have been so painfully re-opened in our time? The wise man from the North once said: *The present moment exists to repair the past and to prepare the future*. If Muslims today do not make sincere and creative efforts to stop abusing the past, then they will be condemned to suffer the same in the future.

The foremost avenue to halting the abuse of the past through zealous assertions of the absolute rightness of one’s particular doctrinal school and in-group, is the critical historical re-thinking of the past by leading individuals

positioned to re-shape the minds and hearts of their communities. Insights promoting more realistic and less judgemental understanding may be sought by properly comprehending how this schism came about historically. This means sensitively re-examining the foundational myths and world-views of different segments of the Ummah through mature informed critiques grounded on active self-awareness, accurate knowledge and conscience. Simplistic group-think that recycles dogmatic convictions expressing polemical hostility (*takfir* & *tafsiq*) has to be transformed by an appreciation for nuanced complexity and a willingness to take responsibility for errors of the past. The critique of historical fictions, scapegoating, and the inflation of Hadith narratives with *fada'il* reports promoted by the Umayyads could benefit from insights elaborated in western Islamic studies, especially those relevant to incidents in the *Sirah*.

In fact, the most significant movements toward convergence in the past were undertaken by Islamic thinkers and authorities more open to the reasoned tradition of rational inquiry with nuanced complexity and critical multi-level discourse, than to dogmatic Traditionalist self-affirmation of monolithic simplicities fueling bitter polemic dispute. This was evidenced in the past especially by the discussions of Sunni Mu'tazilite scholars with their Zaydi and Imami Shi'i counterparts during the 4th and 5th centuries H; and afterwards particularly by Shafi'i thinkers among Sunnis, and by the *usuli* school of al-Hillah among Twelver Shi'ah scholars. We may point to the divisive legacy of the biased work *al-Uthmaniyah* by the Mu'talazite al-Jahiz, which provoked a number of responses from both Mu'tazilite and Shi'ite thinkers over the centuries. Against this argumentative lobbying of grenades, we may invoke the reasoned and deliberative duel of ideas and historical reconsiderations evidenced by 'Abd al-Jabbar al-Hamadani's *Mughni*, and the response by his Twelver pupil al-Sharif al-Murtada in his *Shafi* (later recapitulated in large part by Ibn Abi l-Hadid in his *Sharh Nahj al-Balaghah*). Similarly with Qadi 'Abd al-Jabbar's Zaydi pupil Abu l-Qasim al-Busti's *al-Adillah fi l-Takfir wa l-Tafsiq*

evidencing a conscientious concern for suspension of divisive condemnation. Here one senses an almost impartial search for truth coupled with a respectful treatment of the other's position. The same cannot be said for Ibn Taymiyyah's *Minhaj al-Sunnah al-Nabawiyah*, written in rebuttal of 'Allamah Hilli's *Minhaj al-Karamah*. The famous twentieth century exchange recorded in Sharaf al-Din's *Murasalat* belongs with the former examples of reasoned respect.

Let me mention several topics requiring more wide-ranging investigations and analysis by competent impartial scholars.

- The formation of the doctrine of Four Rightly-Guided Caliphs over the first three centuries H.
- The formation of the doctrines of the Imamate and of the Mahdi among both the Sunni and Shi'ah (note that the Mahdi figure was central to 1st century H Umayyad propaganda, as well as for Ibn Zubayr's anti-caliphate).
- Doctrinal issues connected with the topics of *takfir*, *tafsiq*, as well as *tawaqquf*.
- The impact of the Umayyad era with its massive forgery of Hadiths for consolidating proto-Sunni creed as well as Shi'ah dogma.
- Role of political rulers in fostering and supporting creedal doctrines.
- Formation of ritual observances and distinctive cultic institutions.
- Then there are cultural and psychic factors contrasting an individual's critical understanding grounded on accurate knowledge and conscience *vs.* group-mind reduction to lowest common motives with self-reassurance and prophylactic immunization warding off doubts and questions prompted by the opposing ideology.

The importance of symbolic acts and gestures addressing deeply ingrained attitudes and assumptions is of fundamental importance. This type of effort demands creative leadership with the courage and sincerity to risk engaging together with opposing blocs or communities. Sincere apologies or regrets aimed at mitigating the evil impact of violent deeds should be contemplated. This means undertaking coordinated practical activities across all sectors of society with the spectrum of religious, ethnic and class groupings at the local neighborhood level, the regional & national level, and the inter-nation sphere - activities which

cement mutual reliance and awareness of our common humanity and dissolve inherited hidebound attitudes promoting conflict. These activities must address urgent human needs and common interests (health, security, economic equity...), and require intensified support at the national and international levels, more funding and resources, and creative engagement by fostering non-governmental initiatives and intra-community enterprises. Involving individuals in local communities in common efforts that benefit all, without reference to doctrinal differences or political affiliations, may build bridges and heal splits. Educational programs designed to impart these values should be crafted and implemented in primary and secondary schools.

Exploiting both the treasures of our profound ethical, intellectual and spiritual heritage, as well as the proven utility and relevance of specific disciplines and practices drawn wisely and judiciously from contemporary modernity, may assist us in uplifting the level of awareness, discourse and action toward a higher more dispassionate plane. This mode of awareness, hope and concern to awaken venerable traditions of humane dignity rooted in individual conscience may also help integrate our own tradition with the requirements of our global age. For we need desperately to integrate our individual understanding with our communal dogmas and attitudes in an uplifting manner that raises the common consciousness. We must actively seek to forge a creative bridge conveying the best of the past into the reality of our present, in order to insure a brighter future.

A dispassionate search for harmony and mutual understanding may displace bitter assertions and hostile accusations fueling suspicion, distrust and hatred. Cooling water may be splashed over malicious sparks intended to fuel a conflagration, with initiatives taken by influential well-placed leaders commanding respect and authority in their community. Through such means the possibility of a new understanding informing the lived reality of a transformed Ummah might transpire, whereby the healing of the past

and the facilitating of a more humane future is achievable by hard patient work in the present.

Footnotes

- ¹ The Sadr family's lineage is traced through Ja'far al-Sadiq and his son Musa al-Kazim, the sixth and seventh Shi'ah imams respectively. This prominent Shi'ite learned family is named after Grand Ayatollah Sadr al-Din b. Salih of Qumm, a branch of the Sharaf al-Din family from Jabal 'Amil in southern Lebanon. The Sharaf al-Din family itself is a branch of the Nur al-Din family which traces its lineage to Musa al-Kazim. See official website www.alsader.com, which makes clear the close ideological and spiritual links between Iraqi and Lebanese Shi'ah.
- ³ Ibn al-Jawzi, *Manaqib al-Imam Ahmad Ibn Hanbal* (3rd pr. Beirut, Dar al-Afaq al-Jadidah, 1982) p. 166-171.