

Understanding the stance of Imam Ali and those who opposed him at the battle of Siffin.

The battle of Siffin was fought in 37AH, in a period known as the first *fitna* (sedition), a period of civil war within the Muslim community. This battle saw Ali ibn Abi Talib, the caliph of the Muslim community fight against Muawiya bin Abi Sufyan, the governor of Syria. It ended in an arbitration which arguably had lasting impacts on the Muslim community. A discussion on this battle from Shia and Sunni perspectives was held by The Centre for Intra-Muslim on the 9th of January 2021. The Sunni presentation was carried out by Syed Naveed Shah, an Imam for over 10 years currently serving in Medina Mosque in Bradford, and the Shia presentation by Syed Jaafar Fadlallah, a faculty member at Al-Mahdi Institute and The Islamic Sharia Institute Beirut.

Syed Naveed's [presentation](#), which was a historical account of the events, outlined the events leading up to and including the battle of Siffin from Sunni sources. From his reading of these historical accounts, he concluded that Ali was appointed as caliph in a rightful manner and that Muawiya's uprising against him was unjustified.

Quoting Ibn Athir and Tabari, the Syed mentioned the legitimate, transparent, and popular nature of Ali being chosen as caliph by the people, despite Ali's aversion towards taking this position.¹ Muawiya however refused to accept Ali's position as the caliph and sought to avenge Uthman's death, which then led to Ali raising an army to restore order. At the brink of defeat in this battle, Muawiya's commander Amr al Aas ordered copies of the Quran to be mounted on spears, effectively pacifying a group within Ali's army who refused to fight the Quran. This led to an arbitration process, the outcome of which was removal of Ali as caliph and installing of Muawiya in his place. According to Syed Naveed, this process of arbitration was flawed and considered invalid by the mainstream Sunni view, with Ali still considered as the rightful caliph until his death.

Syed Fadlallah presented a summary of his detailed Arabic paper on the topic which can be found [here](#). He broached the subject by looking at historical sources to deduce the motives held by Ali and Muawiya leading up to the battle. These motives are important in trying to figure out which side was in line with Islamic values. He also briefly outlined the approaches that influence one's reading of this, and for that matter any historical event.

According to the Syed, adopting a historical-analytical approach to such events divorces one from reading them with a bias sectarian or otherwise, such as the simplistic reduction of the event being rooted in personal tribal grudges. From his reading of history, he deduced that Muawiya's interest was a personal one - that of establishing an independent state. To support his argument, he outlined instances where Muawiya attempted to do so, from the time of the previous caliphs², to the deception of scholars in Syria³, and the appointment of governors to assist him in this vision⁴. Ali's

¹ Muhammad al-Tabari, *Tarikh Al-Tabari*, vol. 3 (Beirut: Manshurat Muassat al-I'lami, 1879), 450; Ali Ibn Athir. *Al-Kamil Fi Al-Tarikh*, vol. 3 (Beirut: Dar Sadir, 1965), 190.

² According to Syed Fadlallah, Muawiya's nepotism started during the time of the second caliph Umar al Khattab, however Umar restricted him in doing so. He had a more freedom at the time of the third caliph Uthman. Ref: al-Tabari vol 3 (pp. 388), Bidaya wal-Nihaya vol 7 page 169

³ Such as him deceiving Shurahybil bin Samt, an influential figure in Syria, in opposing Ali. Ref Ibn Muzahim. (1962) *Waq'atu al Siffeen* (pp.44-47)

⁴ Such as his appointment of Amr al Aas as the governor of Egypt. Ref Ibn Muzahim (pp. 34-40)

stance on the other hand according to him was one that was rooted in justice which can be seen from his reluctance to take the position of caliphate and his aversion to causing bloodshed at all costs. However, the reason Ali raised an army was to maintain unity of the Muslim community, and the validity of the caliphate itself.

The discussion prompted further questions around the topic of *Khaṭa' Ijtihadī* (mistakes in interpretation); a notion which would see the wrongs of the companions reduced to a mere error in their judgement, whilst they still being considered worthy of reward due to their effort in the issue. This naturally led to the discussion as to whether Muawiya could be considered a rebel (*bāghi*), something considered a grave sin by some Muslim jurists⁵, to which the Sunni ulema in the discussion agreed that he, and for that matter anyone who revolted against Ali, would fall into the category of a rebel. The reverence of Muawiya amongst Sunnis was also discussed, to which some Sunni scholars present made the claim that this is a modern influence of Nasibis on the Sunni community.

Syed Fadlallah wrapped up the discussion quoting Quranic verses 2:134⁶ and 12:111⁷, which highlight the importance of taking lessons from such events in history as opposed to it merely being a point of difference.

⁵ Khalid El Fadl, The doctrinal foundations of the laws of rebellion. In *Rebellion and Violence in Islamic Law* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 32-61.

⁶ Quran 2:134: "That was a nation that has passed: for it there will be what it has earned, and for you there will be what you have earned, and you will not be questioned about what they used to do."

⁷ Quran 12:111 "There is certainly a moral in their accounts for those who possess intellect."